

Classic Poetry Series

Zbigniew Herbert
- poems -

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Zbigniew Herbert(29 October 1924 – 28 July 1998)

a Polish poet, essayist, drama writer, author of plays, and moralist. A member of the Polish resistance movement, Home Army (AK), during World War II, he is one of the best known and the most translated post-war Polish writers. While he was first published in the 1950's (a volume titled *String of light* was issued in 1956), soon after he voluntarily ceased submitting most of his works to official Polish government publications. He resumed publication in the 1980's, initially in the underground press.

He was a distant relative of the 17th century poet George Herbert.

Herbert was educated as an economist and a lawyer. Herbert was one of the main poets of the Polish opposition to communism. Starting in 1986, he lived in Paris, where he cooperated with the journal *Zeszyty Literackie*. He came back to Poland in 1992. On 1 July 2007 the Polish Government instituted 2008 as the Year of Zbigniew Herbert.

Biography

1924–1956

The Herberts probably had some English roots and they came to Galicia from Vienna. The poet's father, Bolesław (half-blooded Armenian), was a soldier in the Polish Legions during World War I and a defender of Lwów; he was a lawyer and worked as a bank manager. Herbert's grandfather was an English language teacher. Zbigniew's mother, Maria, came from the Kaniaków family.

Before the war Zbigniew Herbert attended the Państwowe VIII Gimnazjum i Liceum im. Króla Kazimierza Wielkiego we Lwowie (during the Soviet occupation the name was changed to High School nr 14). After the German and Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation of Lwów, he continued his studies at the secret meetings organized by the Polish underground, where he graduated and passed the A-level exam (matura) in January 1944. At the same time, (following the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939) he probably got involved in conspiratorial action with the AK. During the occupation, he worked as a feeder of lice in the Rudolf Weigl Institute that produced anti-typhus vaccines; he also worked as a salesman in a shop with metal articles. After his A-level exam, he began Polish Philology studies at the secret University of Jan Kazimierz in Lwów but had to break them off as a result of moving to Kraków (spring 1944, before the invasion of the Soviet Red Army in Lwów). Lwów after the war became a Ukrainian Soviet

city, no longer within Polish borders. Its previous Polish population had been expelled. The loss of his beloved hometown, and the following feeling of being uprooted, were important motifs in his later works.

At first, he lived in Proszowice, near Kraków (May 1944 - January 1945). Herbert studied Economics in Kraków and attended lectures at the Jagiellonian University and at the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1947, after three years of study, he got his Trade Academy diploma. He lived in Sopot (from 1948), where his parents moved in 1946. He worked different jobs; in the Polish National Bank (NBP) in Gdynia (1 March – 30 June 1948), as a sub-editor of the journal *Przełom*; Kupiecki, and in Gdańsk department of the Polish Writers' Union (ZLP). He met Halina Misiołkowska there (their relationship lasted until 1957). In 1948 he became a member-candidate of the ZLP but resigned in 1951; however, he joined the union again in 1955.

While living in Sopot, he continued his Law studies at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, where he received a Master of Law. In the same year he was carried on the list on the second year of Philosophy at NCU in Toruń, where he was inter alia a student of his later master, Henryk Elzenberg. In 1949 Herbert moved to Toruń, and worked in the District Museum and in primary school as a teacher.

In Autumn 1951 the poet moved to the University of Warsaw, where he continued studying Philosophy for some time. At first, he lived alone in very poor conditions in suburban Warsaw, Brwinów, but then (December 1952 - January 1957), he lived in Warsaw itself on Wiejska Street in a room rented by 12 people. Subsequently, Herbert moved to an official flat on Aleje Jerozolimskie.

He tried to live from his writing. However since he did not follow the official socialist style of literature and was unwilling to write political propaganda this proved to be unsuccessful. He published theatrical and musical criticisms and reports from exhibits which ignored the criteria of socialist art. In 1948 the weekly magazine *Tygodnik Wyrzeka* published his cycle *Poetyka dla Laików* (Poetry for Lay People). Herbert also published a few of his reviews in the journal *Słowo Powszechne* in 1949 under his real name and a year later under a pen name, Patryk. The same happened with his publishing in *Tygodnik Powszechny*. In 1952 *Przełom Powszechny*, published a few of his reviews under a pen name – Bolesław Hertyński.

He published under the pen name Stefan Martha in *Dziś i Jutro*, the PAX Association magazine (1950–1953). These periodicals represented a different styles of Catholicism. Pax sought to 'collaborate' with the communist

government, while Tygodnik Powszechny took a more oppositional stance (it was legal but its circulation was limited). Herbert definitely finished his cooperation with PAX in 1953. Przegląd Powszechny was closed and Tygodnik Powszechny was transferred to PAX after it refused to publish an obituary of Joseph Stalin's death. In this situation Herbert decided that his cooperation with PAX was impossible.

During this time, he also earned money from biographies and librarian registrations. From January until July 1952, he was a salaried blood donor. He also had to undertake a job not connected with writing again. He worked as a timekeeper in Inwalidzka Spółdzielnia Emerytów Nauczycieli 'Wspólna Sprawa' (from 1 October 1953 till 15 January 1954), and also as a senior assistant in Centralne Biuro Studiów i Projektów Przemysłu Torfowego Projekt Torf (19 January – 31 November). Thanks to the help of Stefan Kisielewski, Herbert worked as a manager of the office of the Chief Management in the Union of Socialist Composers (ZKP) from September 1956 till March 1957.

1956–1981

The year 1956 in Poland marked the end of Stalinism and as a result also of social realism as the only and obligatory style in art and literature. This enabled Herbert's debut as a poet. Thanks to this, his material position also improved. In 1957 supported by Jerzy Zawieyski he received a small studio to live in (in Warsaw) one of the flats distributed for young writers by the Polish Union of Writers (ZLP). He also was granted a scholarship (100 USD) that allowed him to go on his first trip abroad.

Herbert was attached to his homeland, but at the same time was deeply disgusted by all effects (political, economical, cultural etc.) of the communist rules enforced by the Soviet Union on Poland (arguably the best artistic expression of this disgust is contained in his poem "The power of taste"). Therefore a will to escape from this gloomy reality and see "a better world" was one of important driving forces behind his passion for traveling. Even though he spent a great deal of time abroad he never wanted to choose the life of an émigré. Despite administrative difficulties imposed by the communist regime with regard to longer stays abroad he always tried to extend his Polish passport while abroad so that the possibility of coming back home was always open. His first lively impressions from his trips and reflections triggered by the direct contact with the cultural heritage of the Western Europe were enclosed in the essay "The Barbarian in the Garden" (Barbarzyńca w Ogrodzie, 1962). He also says in his poem The Prayer of Mr. Cogito – The Traveller (Modlitwa Pana Cogito – podróżnika) travelling allowed him to get to know better the world

beautiful and of such variety”.

Herbert's trips cost as little as possible, as a poet's finances (from not stable sources: prizes, honorariums for the readings etc.) were very limited. This way of life contributed to his weak health condition in the future; however, He traveled through Vienna to France (May 1958 – January 1959), he visited England (January – March 1959), Italy (June – July 1959) and then France again. He came to Poland in May 1960. The result of that journey was the essay *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie* (The Barbarian in the Garden).

In Autumn 1960 Herbert travelled to England and Scotland. In December 1963 he went to Paris. In January 1964 he was given the Kościelski Prize in the Polish Library in Paris, which allowed him to extend his stay in the West. In 1964 he spent the Summer in Italy (July – August) and in Greece (October 1964). Then he came back to France and at the end of that year he returned to Poland.

From 1965 till 1968 he was a member of the editorial team at the monthly magazine *Poetry*. In 1965/66 he was a literary manager of the Juliusz Osterwa Theatre in Gorzów Wielkopolski.

In October 1965 he was awarded with The Lenau Prize, and he went Vienna to receive it. This period also marks a growing international esteem for Herbert as a man of culture. He becomes a member of Academy of Arts in West Berlin and Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. He stayed in Austria till spring 1966.

Herbert travels across Germany, and then stays longer in France (June 1966 – September 1967). Then he arrives again to Germany, visiting Holland and Belgium. On 29 March 1968 he marries Katarzyna Dzieduszycka in a Polish consulate in France. At the end of April, the Herberts returned to Berlin. In the summer of 1968, Herbert visited the USA (invited by the Poetry Center). He went to New York, California, The Great Canyon, New Mexico, New Orleans, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles. At that time, the translation of his works was published in the USA, which made Herbert one of the most popular contemporary poet in the English literary circles. While traveling across the country he gave several talks in New York, Berkley and Los Angeles. After visiting the USA, Herbert went back to Berlin, where he lived until September 1970 (with some short breaks to Poland and a holiday in Italy). In 1969, he took part in *Dei Duo Mundi – The Festival of Two Worlds*. From September 1970 to June 1971, the Herberts again stay in the USA, where the poet gave lectures as a visiting professor at California State University, Los Angeles.

From Autumn 1971 to Spring 1973, not having his own flat, he lived in Artur

Herbert's flat in Warsaw. In 1972 he became a member of the board of the Polish Literary Association (ZLP). At that time he got involved in pro-democracy actions initiated by writer circles - he was one of the signatories of 'List 17' ('Letter of 17') which supported civil rights of the members of an openly anti-communist organization The Movement (Ruch). He was also an organizer of protests against censorship. In 1972 he joined Pen Club. In 1973 he received the Herder's Prize in Vienna. The summer of that year he spent together with Magdalena and Zbigniew Czajkowski in Greece. He came back to Poland in Autumn 1973. He spent the academic year of 1973/74 giving lectures at the University of Gdansk. In 1974, he worded the 'Letter of 15' ('List 15') which was about the laws of the Polish Community in the Soviet Union. In December 1975, he signed 'Letter of 59' ('Memoria 59') against the changes in the Constitution of the People's Republic of Poland forced by the communist party introducing mostly declarations of eternal loyalty of Poland to the Soviet Union. In 1974 he settled at Promenade's Street in Warsaw.

From 1975 to 1981 Herbert lived abroad, mainly in Germany, Austria and Italy.

1981-1998

Herbert came back to Poland at the beginning of 1981 - in the short period of the legal existence of Solidarity, the only independent mass organization in the Soviet bloc. At that time he joined the editorial team of the underground journal Zapis (Record). At the time of the martial law he supported the opposition personally, under his own name - he attended the secret meetings and published in 'second circulation'. His writings have become the manifesto of freedom, the expression of the resistance and the poet himself has become the symbol of uncompromised objection, especially for the young people. Przemysław Gintrowski played a huge role in presenting Herbert to the contemporary audience. Together with Jacek Kaczmarski and Zbigniew Szajkiński, he composed the music to the poet's writings and performed it on stage. Herbert himself wasn't pleased with these doings at the beginning; however, later he accepted them and joked that he 'writes lyrics for Gintrowski'.

In 1986 Herbert moved to Paris. In 1989 he joined the Polish Writers' Association (Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich) . A year later he became a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1991, receiving the Jerusalem Prize gave Herbert another reason to travel to Israel for a while.

In 1992 the seriously ill poet returned to Warsaw. The fierce anticommunist journalism of Tygodnik Solidarność (1994, # 41) and supporting the statement of the editorial office of Arka magazine about the decommunisation of

the elites stoked the controversy among Herbert's opposition friends. He praised the Cold War anti-communist spy Colonel Ryszard Kukliński in an open letter to then president Lech Wałęsa in 1994, and later also expressed support for the Chechen Džojchar Dudajev. He also organized the financial aid for Chechnya. This wasn't his only initiative. Earlier in an open letter to U.S. President George H. W. Bush he criticized the indifference towards the situation of Kurds. What is more, he supported the investigation of Liga Republikańska (Republican League) in the case of assassination of Stanisław Pyjas and advocated revealing the UB (Office of Security) files from 1956. In 1994 in the interview for *Tygodnik Solidarność*; he criticized not only the Round Table Agreement and the politics of the Third Polish Republic (III Rzeczpospolita), but also accused some prominent public figures, such as Czesław Miłosz and Adam Michnik as being personally responsible for the country's difficulties. These controversial opinions prompted counter-polemics that would continue even after Herbert's death. This conflict has its roots in different judgments on the communist regime in Poland at the time of the People's Republic of Poland.

In 1993 Herbert became a member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1994, already in a wheelchair, he traveled on a very personal trip to Holland for a tulip festival in Nieuwe Kerk. The last years of his life he spent in bed fighting with severe asthma. Despite that he never stopped working – *Epilog burzy* (Epilogue to a Storm) was published shortly before his death.

Zbigniew Herbert died on 28 July 1998, in Warsaw. He was buried in Powązki Cemetery. President Aleksander Kwaśniewski sought posthumously to honor Herbert with the Order of the White Eagle, but his widow Katarzyna declined to accept the honor. On 3 May 2007, Herbert was posthumously invested with the Order of the White Eagle by President Lech Kaczyński; Herbert's widow Katarzyna and sister Halina Herbert-Łebrowska accepted the Order.

Writing

Poetry

The first poems by Zbigniew Herbert were published in *Dziś i jutro* (#37, 1950). Poems entitled: *Napis* (Inscription), *Pożegnanie wrzeźnia* and *Złoty radek* were printed however, without the permission of the author. The real debut occurred at the end of the same year with the publishing of the poem without the title (*Palce wrzeciona dźwięków...*) in *Tygodnik Powszechny* (#51). Until 1955 the poet

published some of his works in that newspaper; however, kept out of the literary environment. Not having a chance for his own volume of poems, he decided to publish 22 poems in the anthology of modern catholic poetry ...każdej chwili wybierać muszę... (Warsaw, 1954).

Herbert was introduced to the bigger audience in *Premiera pięciu poetów* (The debut of five poets) in magazine *Życie Literackie* (#51, December 1955). He was presented together with other young poets, such as Miron Białoszewski, Bohdan Drozdowski, Stanisław Czycz and Jerzy Harasymowicz. In 1956 he published his debut book of poetry *Struna światła* (String of Light) and year later another one *Hermes, pies i gwiazda* (Hermes, Dog and Star). A relatively late debut of Herbert made him belong to the modern generation in literature which appeared after 1956, whereas biographically he belonged to the same generation as Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński and Tadeusz Różewicz.

Another two books of poetry: *Studium przedmiotu* (Study of the Object) and *Napis* (Inscription) were published in 1961 and 1969. In 1974 the main character from another book of poetry *Pan Cogito* (Mr. Cogito) appeared in the Polish culture. The character of Pan Cogito appeared also in the later works of the author. The poet always liked to use the lyric of role (in which the lyrical persona cannot be identified with the author), multistage irony – the character introduced for good favored the game conducted by the author, between him and the reader.

In 1983 the Literary Institute in Paris published another book of poetry by Herbert entitled *Raport z oblęonego Miasta i inne wiersze* (Report from a Besieged City and Other Poems). In Poland it was reprinted by the underground publishing houses. The time and the circumstances favored the literal understanding of the poem's title. Despite the fact that the title provoked such understanding, it led to the simplification in interpreting the poem. Another book of poems *Elegia na odejście* (Elegy for the Departure) (1990) was published also in Paris. In 1992, back in Poland, Herbert published *Rovigo* (Wrocław). Finally, the last work of the poet *Epilog burzy* (Epilogue to a Storm) came out shortly before his death.

Herbert often used elements of mythology, medieval heroes and works of art in his writing, which attracted the attention of the critics. Those elements, however, didn't mean the dead parts of literary convention. Herbert uses the mechanism of special demythologization - he tries to get rid of any cultural layers (if possible) and reach the prototypes, face the antique heroes. In his literary output the past is not treated as something distant or closed – revived characters and events

allow making an attempt at understanding not only history but also the current moment. The past is a measure of the present.

In Herbert's poetry there is no consistent historiosophic conception. Quite the opposite – there is a clear reluctance towards systems which clarify everything, which explain a course of events as an inevitable logic of history. Everything what can be said about history is a result of a simple observation – namely, that history is (at least it used to be so far) the area where evil is rife, which is accompanied by a handful of indomitable people constantly opposed to it. An individual is not able to change the course of history; however, he is obliged to put up hopeless resistance despite everything. The ethical base of Herbert's artistic work constitutes the conviction that justice of a particular matter and actions taken in its defense; do not depend on a chance of victory. This pathetic message is accompanied by ironic consciousness of the fact that it is delivered in not a very heroic period – a period in which a potential hero is exposed not so much to martyrdom as to ridiculousness. The characteristic of the contemporary world is the fuzzy borderline between good and evil, the degeneration of language, which deprives words of their clear-cut nature, and common debasement of values. Contemporary evil is not demonic and cannot be easily defined. The hero, being aware of his own ridiculousness, provokes critical situations not only for preserving faithfulness of the message but also in order to provoke and force evil to reveal its real nature.

Yet, the tough assessment of the present does not mean idealizing history. The last war experiences have put an end to the naïve perception of the past. The exposé's suspicion arises because visions of history are created usually by the winners' chroniclers. Therefore, what is under the fresco *Przemiany Liwiusza* (Transformations of Livy) should be analyzed diligently. The monumental picture of the ancient heroes can be false, or in other way – it can be based on judging criteria, which should not be acknowledged uncritically. Possibly, the vanquished are those who are entitled to our solidarity.

According to Herbert, the field of history being maybe the easiest one to make observations is not the only one in which evil reveals itself. The presence of evil entails the question of life's meaning and order, which means that also of presence of God in the world. The history of literature has not yet settled a dispute over the sacred in Herbert's poetry. In his earliest volumes one can notice two completely different images of God, once he is almighty, cold, perfect and remote and next time powerless by his coming down from heaven *Kapłan* (Priest), *Rozmyślenia Pana Cogito o odkupieniu* (Mr. Cogito's Reflections on Redemption). The first God is rather disliked – as all abstractions – indeed; everything that is valued in this poetry is small, tangible

and close. After all, it is nothing else but senses, especially the most unerring touch, which give us the most reliable support in everyday life. Moreover, in this poetry, one has never reconciled oneself to the collapse of the sacred, as well as to the world of chaos. Against everything, being loyal – even to dead God – make sense. For want of no other refuge, we are supposed to seek power in us to save the world from chaos and nothingness Napis (Inscription).

In his later works, there is less such pagan declarations, yet the need for reconciliation is being articulated more and more clearly. Compared to the poems from *Epilog Burzy* (Epilogue to the Storm) and his previous works, *Puste Niebo* *Pana Cogito* collected not very favourable critics' opinions.

Poetic Style

In his works he presented the 'reflection-intellectual' perspective, with stress on human beings and their dignity, to the background of history, where people are almost irrelevant cogs in the machine of fate. He often used elements of Mediterranean culture in his works.

"Herbert's steadily detached, ironic and historically minded style represents, I suppose, a form of classicism. But it is a one-sided classicism (....) In a way, Herbert's poetry is typical of the whole Polish attitude to their position within the communist bloc; independent, brilliant, ironic, wary, a bit contemptuous, pained." - A. Alvarez, *Under Pressure* (1965)

"If the key to contemporary Polish poetry is the selective experience of the last decades, Herbert is perhaps the most skillful in expressing it and can be called a poet of historical irony. He achieves a sort of precarious equilibrium by endowing the patterns of civilization with meanings, in spite of all its horrors." - Czesław Miłosz, *Postwar Polish Poetry* (3rd ed., 1983)

"There is little doubt that at this writing Zbigniew Herbert is the most admired and respected poet now living in Poland. (...) Polish readers have always revered poets who succeed in defining the nation's spiritual dilemma; what is exceptional in Herbert is that his popularity at home is matched by a wide acclaim abroad." - Stanisław Barańczak, *A Fugitive from Utopia* (1987)

In modern poetry, Herbert advocated semantic transparency. In a talk given at a conference organized by the journal "Odra" he said:

"So not having pretensions to infallibility, but stating only my predilections, I would like to say that in contemporary poetry the poems that appeal to me the

most are those in which I discern something I would call a quality of semantic transparency (a term borrowed from Husserl's logic). This semantic transparency is the characteristic of a sign consisting in this: that during the time when the sign is used, attention is directed towards the object denoted, and the sign itself does not hold the attention. The word is a window onto reality."

Essays

Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie (Barbarian in the Garden), the result of Herbert's first trip abroad, was portrayed in 1962. It is composed of essays, which describe particular places and things that have been seen by the poet, as well as two historical essays – the story about Albigensians and the persecution of the templar order. The journey takes place in two dimensions simultaneously – it is both contemporary travel and time travel. The last one starts with prehistory, in the Lascaux caves, lasts over the age of Greek and Roman antiquity, the days of Gothic cathedrals, Renaissance painting and sentimental gardens. The journey becomes fascinating because the traveler shares with his readers the knowledge of the less and more serious history of the places, items and people portrayed in the essays. Even Herbert defined it as not only a journey to the places, but also to books.

In *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie* there are two historical essays. The Albigensian history and the collapse of the Knights Templars absorbed Herbert not because of its peculiarity, but quite the opposite, namely because of its ubiquity in history. Therefore, both of the themes are described by the poet with proper respect to historical detail and towards the drama of the individuals being involved, thereby timeless crime mechanisms have been revealed.

Another collection of essays, *Martwa natura z wędzidłem* (Still Life with a Bridle), portrayed in 1993, is devoted to seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Just as in *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie*, here widely accepted assessments have no impact on the author's personal preferences. Among Dutch painters, the one who fascinates Herbert the most is hardly known Torrentius, whose work *Martwa natura z wędzidłem* is the only one to be preserved. In this particular volume of essays the figure of traveler is less noticeable than in the previous one. Yet, people still arouse Herbert's interest – not only painters, also those who were buying and often ordering their works – since Dutch painting is typical of a certain civilization and is not possible to exist in any other place or time.

Although written much more earlier than *Martwa natura z wędzidłem*, the last volume of essays *Labirynt nad morzem*

(Labyrinth on the Sea-Shore) was portrayed only after the poet's death. Herbert handed in this volume to the Czytelnik publishing house already in 1968, however some time later withdrew it. *Labirynt nad morzem* consists mainly of essays devoted to ancient Greek culture and history, as well as in a lesser degree to the Etruscans and the Roman legionnaires from Hadrian's Wall. This time however, the traveler seems not to be seeking his own ways – he copes with the monuments of culture – the Acropolis of Athens or Knossos. Yet, when referring to the history of Greece, Herbert draws out the episodes which take up not too many pages in textbooks, and wrecks view patterns. He shows how Pericles' policy in the case of Samos became the beginning of the end of not only the Greek cities union but also of Athenian democracy. The assessments of history are reviewed in the same way as the one postulated in the poetry – by changing the perspective, rejecting the winners' point of view. That is in *Labirynt nad morzem* where the above rule was given the most visibly.

Dramas

All Herbert's dramas originated relatively early. The first four dramas were written between the years 1956 and 1961, and only the last one, the monodrama *Listy naszych czytelników* (Letters from Our Readers), in 1972. Some of these works were created as radio plays, or later, adapted for radio. We can observe this in their structure as tension is produced mainly by means of sound (main characters' voices, sounds in the background, or silence); some other theatrical measures appear to a minimum degree. Even the poet used the term "drama for voices".

Jaskinia filozofów (Cave of Philosophers), probably the most valued among all Herbert's dramas, and *Rekonstrukcja poety* (The Reconstruction of the Poet) refer to antiquity. The plot of *Jaskinia filozofów* is set in an Athenian prison cell, where the main character, Socrates, waits for his death sentence. Conversations held with his students, wife and warder let him conduct an examination of his life; however, this is not the only theme brought up in the drama. Socrates could easily escape if he wants, as the death penalty was to be token. Those by whom he was sentenced, presume that he will escape and they saw to it that he had such a possibility. Yet, the philosopher does not reconcile himself to the hypocrisy of freedom without actual freedom – he goes to extremes and finally resigns himself to death. *Rekonstrukcja poety* refers to Homer. The author of great epics, being already blind, alters his view into something vital and worthy of interest – no more battle's clamor, but now detail, something which is considered to be the most personal and fragile.

The remaining three dramas refer to more contemporary themes. The way of

showing the ordinariness and triviality of situation, in which evil reveals itself, is extremely convincing. One can crave the other room so much as to wish a neighbour's death or even to contribute to it *Drugi pokój* (The Other Room). One can be deprived of everything that matters a lot in life, as a result of inhuman regulations and human stupidity. *Listy naszych czytelników* (Letters From Our Readers). In a small normal town, among respectable people, even murder can happen. The murder which no one is able to explain, and which no one had attempted to stop (*Lalek*).

Awards and Prizes

According to a note made by the secret police (SB) agent in the Polish Union of Writers (*Związek Literatów Polskich*) Herbert was a candidate for the 1968 Nobel Prize in Literature along with another Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz. This information was provided by the Nobel committee secretary who was visiting Poland at that time. A historian from the *Instytut Pamięi Narodowej* Rafał Sierchuża speculates that the communist government in Poland may have made active attempts to prevent them from receiving the prize, due to their anti-communist opinions.

Nagroda Pierścienia i tytułu Księstwa (Polish Student Union) (1961)

Kościelskis Foundation Prize (Genewa) (1963)

The Alfred Jurzykowski Prize (1965)

Nikolaus Lenau Prize (1965)

Austrian State Prize for European Literature (1965)

Herder Prize (Austria) (1973)

Petrarca-Preis (Germany) (1979)

Struga Prize (1981)

'Solidarity' Prize (1984)

Nagroda Poetycka im. Sępa Szarzyńskiego (1984)

International Literary Prize of the Arts Council of Wales (1984)

The Hungarian Foundation of Prince Gabor Bethlem Prize (1987)

The Bruno Schulz Prize (American Foundation of Polish – Jewish Studies and American Pen Club) (1988)

Nagroda Pen Clubu im. komandora K. Szczęsnego (1989)

Jan Parandowski Polish PEN Club Prize (1990)

Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society (1991)

Vilenica Prize (Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Słoweńskich) (1991)

Nagroda im. Kazimierza Wyki (1993)

Nagroda Krytyków Niemieckich for the best book of the year (Martwa Natura z Wędzidłem | Still Life with Bridle) (1994)

The Ingersoll Foundation's T. S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing (1995)

Nagroda Miasta Münster

A Ballad That We Do Not Perish

Those who sailed at dawn
but will never return
left their trace on a wave--

a shell fell to the bottom of the sea
beautiful as lips turned to stone

those who walked on a sandy road
but could not reach the shuttered windows
though they already saw the roofs--

they have found shelter in a bell of air

but those who leave behind only
a room grown cold a few books
an empty inkwell white paper--

in truth they have not completely died
their whisper travels through thickets of wallpaper
their level head still lives in the ceiling

their paradise was made of air
of water lime and earth an angel of wind
will pulverize the body in its hand
they will be
carried over the meadows of this world

Zbigniew Herbert

A Description Of The King

The king's beard on which sauces and ovations
fell until it became heavy as an axe
appears suddenly in a dream to a man condemned to die
and on a candlestick of flesh shines alone in the dark.

One hand for tearing meat is huge as a whole province
through which a ploughman inches forward a corvette lingers
The hand wielding the sceptre has withered from distinction
has grown grey from old age like an ancient coin

In the hour-glass of the heart sand trickles lazily
Feet taken off with boots stand in a corner
on guard when at night stiiffening on the throne
the king heirlessly forfeits his third dimension

Zbigniew Herbert

A Halt

We halted in a town the host
ordered the table to be moved to the garden the first star
shone out and faded we were breaking bread
crickets were heard in the twilight loosestrife
a cry but a cry of a child otherwise the bustle
of insects of men a thick scent of earth
those who were sitting with their backs to the wall
saw violet now - the gallows hill
on the wall the dense ivy of executions

we were eating much
as is usual when nobody pays

Zbigniew Herbert

A Knocker

There are those who grow
gardens in their heads
paths lead from their hair
to sunny and white cities

it's easy for them to write
they close their eyes
immediately schools of images
stream down their foreheads

my imagination
is a piece of board
my sole instrument
is a wooden stick

I strike the board
it answer me
yes--yes
no--no

for others the green bell of a tree
the blue bell of water
I have a knocker
from unprotected gardens

I thump on the board
and it prompts me
with the moralists dry poem
yes--yes
no--no

Zbigniew Herbert

A Russian Tale

The tsar our little father had grown old, very old. Now he could not even strangle a dove with his own hands. Sitting on his throne he was golden and frigid. Only his beard grew, down to the floor and farther.

Then someone else ruled, it was not known who. Curious folk peeped into the palace windows but Krivonosov screened the windows with gibbets. Thus only the hanged saw anything.

In the end the tsar our little father died for good. The bells rang and rang, yet they did not bring his body out. Our tsar had grown into the throne. The legs of the throne had become all mixed up with the legs of the tsar. His arm and the armrest were one. It was impossible to tear him loose. And to bury the tsar along with the golden throne - what a shame.

Zbigniew Herbert

About Troy

1

Troy O Troy
an archeologist
will sift your ashes through his fingers
yet a fire occurred greater than that of the Iliad
for seven strings--

too few strings
one needs a chorus
a sea of laments
and thunder of mountains
rain of stone

--how to lead
people away from the ruins
how to lead
the chorus from poems--

thinks the faultless poet
respectably mute
as a pillar of salt
--The song will escape unharmed
It escaped
with flaming wing
into a pure sky

The moon rises over the ruins
Troy O Troy
The city is silent

The poet struggles with his own shadow
The poet cries like a bird in the void

The moon repeats its landscape
gentle metal in smoldering ash

2

They walked along ravines of former streets
as if on a red sea of cinders

and wind lifted the red dust
faithfully painted the sunset of the city

They walked along ravines of former streets
they breathed on the frozen dawn in vain

they said: long years will pass
before the first house stands here

they walked along ravines of former streets
they thought they would find some traces

a cripple plays
on a harmonica
about the braids of a willow
about a girl

the poet is silent
rain falls

Zbigniew Herbert

An Answer

This will be a night in deep snow
which has the power to muffle steps
in deep shadow transforming
bodies to two puddles of darkness
we lie holding our breath
and even the slightest whisper of thought

if we are not tracked down by wolves
and the man in a Russian sheepskin who swings
quick-firing death on his chest
we must spring and run
in the clapping of short dry salvos
to that other longed-for shore

the earth is the same everywhere
wisdom teaches everywhere the man
weeps with white tears
mothers rock their children
the moon rises
and builds a white house for us

this will be night after hard reality
a conspiracy of the imagination
it has a taste of bread and lightness of vodka
but the choice to remain here
is confirmed by every dream about palm trees

the dream is interrupted suddenly by the arrival of three
tall men of rubber and iron
they will check your name your fear
order you to go downstairs
they won't allow you to take anything
but the compassionate face of the janitor

Hellenic Roman Medieval
East Indian Elizabethan Italian
perhaps above all French
a bit of Weimar and Versailles
we carry so many homelands
on the shoulders of a single earth

but the only one guarded
by the most singular number
is here where they will trample you into the ground
or with boldly ringing spade
make a large pit for your longing

Zbigniew Herbert

Architecture

Over a delicate arch--
an eyebrow of stone--

on the unruffled forehead
of a wall

in joyful and open windows
where there are faces instead of geraniums

where rigorous rectangles
border a dreaming perspective

where a stream awakened by an ornament
flows on a quiet field of surfaces

movement meets stillness a line meets a shout
trembling uncertainty simple clarity

you are there
architecture
art of fantasy and stone

there you reside beauty
over an arch
light as a sigh

on a wall
pale from altitude

and a window
tearful with a pane of glass

a fugitive from apparent forms
I proclaim your motionless dance

Zbigniew Herbert

Daedalus And Icarus

Daedalus says:

Go on sonny but remember that you are walking and not flying
the wings are just an ornament and you are stepping on a meadow
that warm gust is just the humid earth of summer
and that cold one is a brook
the sky is full of leaves and small animals

Icarus says:

The eyes like two stones return straight to earth
and see a farmer who knocks asunder oily till
a grub which wiggles in a furrow
bad grub which cuts the bond of a plant with the earth

Daedalus says:

Sonny this is not true The Cosmos is merely light
and earth is a bowl of shadows Look as here colors play
dust rises from above the sea smoke rises to the sky
of noblest atoms a rainbow sets itself now

Icarus says:

Arms hurt father from this beating at vacuum
legs are getting numb and miss thorns and sharp stones
I cannot keep looking at the sun as you do father
I sunken whole in the dark rays of the earth

Description of the catastrophe:

Now Icarus falls down head first
the last frame of him is a glimpse of a heal childlike small
being swallowed by the devouring sea
Up above the father cries out the name
which no longer belongs to a neck or a head
but only to a remembrance

Commentary:

He was so young did not understand that wings are just a metaphor
a bit of wax and feathers and a contempt for the laws of gravitation
I cannot hold a body at an elevation of a great many feet
The essence of the matter is in having our hearts
which are coursed by heavy blood
fill with air
and this very thing Icarus did not want to accept

let us pray

Zbigniew Herbert

Elegy Of Fortinbras

To C. M.

Now that we're alone we can talk prince man to man
though you lie on the stairs and see more than a dead ant
nothing but black sun with broken rays
I could never think of your hands without smiling
and now that they lie on the stone like fallen nests
they are as defenceless as before The end is exactly this
The hands lie apart The sword lies apart The head apart
and the knight's feet in soft slippers

You will have a soldier's funeral without having been a soldier
they only ritual I am acquainted with a little
There will be no candles no singing only cannon-fuses and bursts
crepe dragged on the pavement helmets boots artillery horses drums
drums I know nothing exquisite
those will be my manoeuvres before I start to rule
one has to take the city by the neck and shake it a bit

Anyhow you had to perish Hamlet you were not for life
you believed in crystal notions not in human clay
always twitching as if asleep you hunted chimeras
wolfishly you crunched the air only to vomit
you knew no human thing you did not know even how to breathe

Now you have peace Hamlet you accomplished what you had to
and you have peace The rest is not silence but belongs to me
you chose the easier part an elegant thrust
but what is heroic death compared with eternal watching
with a cold apple in one's hand on a narrow chair
with a view on the ant-ill and clock' dial

Adieu prince I have tasks a sewer project
and a decree on prostitutes and beggars
I must also elaborate a better system of prisons
since as you justly said Denmark is a prison
I go to my affairs This night is born
a star named Hamlet We shall never meet
what I shall leave will not be worth a tragedy

It is not for us to greet each other or bid farewell we live on archipelagos
and that water these words what can they do what can they do prince

Zbigniew Herbert

Episode

We walk by the sea-shore
holding firmly in our hands
the two ends of an antique dialogue
—do you love me?
—I love you

with furrowed eyebrows
I summarize all wisdom
of the two testaments
astrologers prophets
philosophers of the gardens
and cloistered philosophers

and it sounds about like this:
—don't cry
—be brave
—look how everybody

you pout your lips and say
—you should be a clergyman
and fed up you walk off
nobody loves moralists

what should I say on the shore of
a small dead sea

slowly the water fills
the shapes of feet which have vanished

Zbigniew Herbert

First The Dog

to Laika

So first the faithful dog will go
and after it a pig or ass
through the black grass will beat a track
along it will the first man steal
who with iron hand will smother
on his glass brow a drop of fear

so first the dog honest mongrel
which has never abandoned us
dreaming of earthly lamps and bones
will fall asleep in its whirling kennel
its warm blood boiling drying away

but we behind the dog and second
dog which guides us on a leash
we with the astronauts' white cane
awkwardly we bump into stars
we see nothing we hear nothing
we beat with our fists on the dark ether
on all the wavelengths is a whining

everything we can carry on board
through the cinders of dark worlds
name of man scent of apple
acorn of sound quarter of colour
should all be saved for our return
so we can find the route in an instant
when the blind dog leading us
barks at the earth as at the moon

Zbigniew Herbert

From The Top Of The Stairs

Of course
those who are standing at the top of the stairs
know
they know everything

with us it's different
sweepers of squares
hostages of a better future
those at the top of the stairs
appear to us rarely
with a hushing finger always at the mouth

we are patient
our wives darn the sunday shirts
we talk of food rations
soccer prices of shoes
while on saturday we tilt the head backward
and drink

we aren't those
who clench their fists
brandish chains
talk and ask questions
in a fever of excitement
urging to rebel
incessantly talking and asking questions

here is their fairy tale -
we will dash at the stairs
and capture them by storm
the heads of those who were standing at the top
will roll down the stairs
and at last we will gaze
at what can be seen from those heights
what future
what emptiness

we don't desire the view
of rolling heads

we know how easily heads grow back
and at the top there will always remain
one or three
while at the bottom it is black from brooms and shovels

sometimes we dream
those at the top of the stairs
come down
that is to us
and as we are chewing bread over the newspaper
they say

- now let's talk
man to man
what the posters shout out isn't true
we carry the truth in tightly locked lips
it is cruel and much too heavy
so we bear the burden by ourselves
we aren't happy
we would gladly stay
here

these are dreams of course
they can come true
or not come true
so we will
continue to cultivate
our square of dirt
square of stone

with a light head
a cigarette behind the ear
and not a drop of hope in the heart

Zbigniew Herbert

Home

A home above the year's seasons
home of children animals and apples
a square of empty space
under an absent star

home was the telescope of childhood
the skin of emotion
a sister's cheek
branch of a tree

the cheek was extinguished by flame
the branch crossed out by a shell
over the powdery ash of the nest
a song of homeless infantry

home is the die of emotion
home is the cube of childhood

the wing of a burned sister

leaf of a dead tree

Zbigniew Herbert

How We Were Introduced

—for perfidious protectors

I was playing in the street
no one paid attention to me
as I made forms out of sand
mumbling Rimbaud under my breath

once an elderly gentleman overheard it
—little boy you are a poet
just now we are organizing
a grass-roots literary movement

he stroked my dirty head
gave me a large lollypop
and even bought clothes
in the protective coloring of youth

I didn't have such a splendid suit
since first communion
short trousers and a wide
sailor's collar

black patent leather shoes with a buckle
white knee-high socks
the elderly gentleman took me by the hand
and led the way to the ball

other boys were there
also in short trousers
carefully shaven
shuffling their feet

—well boys now it's time to play
why are you standing in the corners
asked the elderly gentleman
—make a circle holding hands

but we didn't want tag
or blindman's buff

we had enough of the elderly gentleman
we were very hungry

so we were seated promptly
around a large table
given lemonade
and pieces of cake

now disguised as adults
with deep voices
the boys got up they praised us
or slapped us on our hands

we didn't hear anything
didn't feel anything
staring with great eyes
at the piece of cake
that kept melting
in our hot hands
and this sweet taste the first in our lives
disappeared inside our dark sleeves

Zbigniew Herbert

I Would Like To Describe

I would like to describe the simplest emotion
joy or sadness
but not as others do
reaching for shafts of rain or sun

I would like to describe a light
which is being born in me
but I know it does not resemble
any star
for it is not so bright
not so pure
and is uncertain

I would like to describe courage
without dragging behind me a dusty lion
and also anxiety
without shaking a glass full of water

to put it another way
I would give all metaphors
in return for one word
drawn out of my breast like a rib
for one word
contained within the boundaries
of my skin

but apparently this is not possible

and just to say -- I love
I run around like mad
picking up handfuls of birds
and my tenderness
which after all is not made of water
asks the water for a face

and anger
different from fire
borrows from it
a loquacious tongue

so is blurred
so is blurred
in me
what white-haired gentleman
separated once and for all
and said
this in the subject
this is the object

we fall asleep
with one hand under our head
and with the other in a mound of planets

our feet abandon us
and taste the earth
with their tiny roots
which next morning
we tear out painfully

Zbigniew Herbert

In A City

In an eastern city where I won't return
there is a winged stone light and huge
lightning strikes this winged stone
I close my eyes to remember
in my city where I won't return
there is heavy and nourishing water
the one who gives you a cup of this water
gives you the faith you will still return
in my faraway city that has gone
from all maps of the world there is bread that can nourish
throughout life black as the faith you will see again
stone bread water and the presence of towers at dawn

Zbigniew Herbert

Lament

<i>To the memory of my mother</i>

And now she has over her head brown clouds of roots
a slim lily of salt on the temples beads of sand
while she sails on the bottom of a boat through foaming nebulas

a mile beyond us where the river turns
visible-invisible as the light on a wave
truly she isn't different-abandoned like all of us

Zbigniew Herbert

Mr. Cogito And The Imagination

Mr. Cogito never trusted
tricks of the imagination

the piano at the top of the Alps
played false concerts for him

he didn't appreciate labyrinths
the Sphinx filled him with loathing

he lived in a house with no basement
without mirrors of dialectics

jungles of tangled images
were not his home

he would rarely soar
on the wings of metaphor
and then he fell like Icarus
into the embrace of the Great Mother

he adored tautologies
explanations
idem per idem

that a bird is a bird
slavery means slavery
a knife is a knife
death remains death

he loved
the flat horizon
a straight line
the gravity of the earth

Zbigniew Herbert

Nothing Special

nothing special
boards paint
nails paste
paper string

mr artist
builds a world
not from atoms
but from remnants

forest of arden
from umbrella
ionian sea
from parkers quink

just as long as
his look is wise
just as long as
his hand is sure -

and presto the world -

hooks of flowers
on needles of grass
clouds of wire
drawn out by the wind

Zbigniew Herbert

Objects

Inanimate objects are always correct and cannot, unfortunately, be reproached with anything. I have never observed a chair shift from one foot to another, or a bed rear on its hind legs. And tables, even when they are tired, will not dare to bend their knees. I suspect that objects do this from pedagogical considerations, to reprove us constantly for our instability.

Zbigniew Herbert

Our Fear

Our fear
does not wear a night shirt
does not have owl's eyes
does not lift a casket lid
does not extinguish a candle

does not have a dead man's face either

our fear
is a scrap of paper
found in a pocket
'warn Wójcik
the place on Długa Street is hot'

our fear
does not rise on the wings of the tempest
does not sit on a church tower
it is down-to-earth

it has the shape
of a bundle made in haste
with warm clothing
provisions
and arms

our fear
does not have the face of a dead man
the dead are gentle to us
we carry them on our shoulders
sleep under the same blanket

close their eyes
adjust their lips
pick a dry spot
and bury them

not too deep
not too shallow

Zbigniew Herbert

Pebble

The pebble
is a perfect creature

equal to itself
mindful of its limits

filled exactly
with a pebbly meaning

with a scent that does not remind one of anything
does not frighten anything away does not arouse desire

its ardour and coldness
are just and full of dignity

I feel a heavy remorse
when I hold it in my hand
and its noble body
is permeated by false warmth

--Pebbles cannot be tamed
to the end they will look at us
with a calm and very clear eye

Zbigniew Herbert

Prayer Of Pan Cogito – Traveller

Lord

Thank you for creating the world beautiful and of such variety
And also for allowing me in your inexhaustible goodness
To visit places which were not the scene of my daily torments

- for lying at night near a well in a square in Tarquinia while the swaying
bronze declared from the tower your wrath and forgiveness

and a little donkey on the island of Corcyra sang to me from
its incredible bellowing lungs the landscape's melancholy

and in the very ugly city of Manchester I came across
very good and sensible people

nature reiterated her wise tautologies the forest was
forest the sea was sea and rock was rock

stars orbited and things were as they should be – Jovis omnia plena

- forgive me thinking only of myself when the life of
others cruel and irreversible turned round me like the huge
astrological clock in the church at Beauvais

for being too cowardly and stupid because I did not understand
so many things

and also forgive me for not fighting for the happiness of
poor and vanquished nations and for seeing only moonrise and museums
- thank you for the works created to glorify you which
have shared with me part of their mystery so that in gross conceit

I concluded that Duccio Van Eyck Bellini painted for me too

and likewise the Acropolis which I had never fully understood
patiently revealed to me its mutilated flesh

- I pray that you do not forget to reward the white-haired old
man who brought me fruit from his garden in the bay of the island of Ithaca

and also the teacher Miss Hellen on the isle of Mull whose hospitality was Greek or Christian and who ordered light to be placed in the window facing Holy Iona so that human lights might greet one another

and furthermore all those who had shown me the way and said kato kyrie kato

and that you should have in your care the Mother from Spoleto Spiridion from Paxos and the good student from Berlin who got me out of a tight spot and later, when I unexpectedly ran into him in Arizona, drove me to Grand Canyon which is like a hundred thousand cathedrals standing on their heads

- grant O Lord that I may forget my foolish and very weary persecutors when the sun sets into the vast uncharted Ionian sea

that I may comprehend other men other tongues other suffering and that I be not stubborn because my limitations are without limits

and above all that I be humble, that is, one who sees one who drinks at the spring

thank you O Lord for creating a world very beautiful and varied

and if this is Your temptation I am tempted for ever and without forgiveness

Zbigniew Herbert

Report From Paradise

In paradise the work week is fixed at thirty hours
salaries are higher prices steadily go down
manual labour is not tiring (because of reduced gravity)
chopping wood is no harder than typing
the social system is stable and the rulers are wise
really in paradise one is better off than in whatever country

At first it was to have been different
luminous circles choirs and degrees of abstraction
but they were not able to separate exactly
the soul from the flesh and so it would come here
with a drop of fat a thread of muscle
it was necessary to face the consequences
to mix a grain of the absolute with a grain of clay
one more departure from doctrine the last departure
only John foresaw it: you will be resurrected in the flesh

not many behold God
he is only for those of 100 per cent pneuma
the rest listen to communiqués about miracles and floods
some day God will be seen by all
when it will happen nobody knows

As it is now every Saturday at noon
sirens sweetly bellow
and from the factories go the heavenly proletarians
awkwardly under their arms they carry their wings like violins

Zbigniew Herbert

Report From The Besieged City

Too old to carry arms and fight like the others -

they graciously gave me the inferior role of chronicler
I record - I don't know for whom - the history of the siege

I am supposed to be exact but I don't know when the invasion began
two hundred years ago in December in September perhaps yesterday at dawn
everyone here suffers from a loss of the sense of time

all we have left is the place the attachment to the place
we still rule over the ruins of temples spectres of gardens and houses
if we lose the ruins nothing will be left

I write as I can in the rhythm of interminable weeks
monday: empty storehouses a rat became the unit of currency
tuesday: the mayor murdered by unknown assailants
wednesday: negotiations for a cease-fire the enemy has imprisoned our
messengers

we don't know where they are held that is the place of torture
thursday: after a stormy meeting a majority of voices rejected
the motion of the spice merchants for unconditional surrender
friday: the beginning of the plague saturday: our invincible defender
N.N. committed suicide sunday: no more water we drove back
an attack at the eastern gate called the Gate of the Alliance

all of this is monotonous I know it can't move anyone

I avoid any commentary I keep a tight hold on my emotions I write about the
facts

only they it seems are appreciated in foreign markets
yet with a certain pride I would like to inform the world
that thanks to the war we have raised a new species of children
our children don't like fairy tales they play at killing
awake and asleep they dream of soup of bread and bones
just like dogs and cats

in the evening I like to wander near the outposts of the city
along the frontier of our uncertain freedom.
I look at the swarms of soldiers below their lights

I listen to the noise of drums barbarian shrieks
truly it is inconceivable the City is still defending itself
the siege has lasted a long time the enemies must take turns
nothing unites them except the desire for our extermination
Goths the Tartars Swedes troops of the Emperor regiments of the Transfiguration

who can count them
the colours of their banners change like the forest on the horizon
from delicate bird's yellow in spring through green through red to winter's black

and so in the evening released from facts I can think
about distant ancient matters for example our
friends beyond the sea I know they sincerely sympathize
they send us flour lard sacks of comfort and good advice
they don't even know their fathers betrayed us
our former allies at the time of the second Apocalypse
their sons are blameless they deserve our gratitude therefore we are grateful
they have not experienced a siege as long as eternity
those struck by misfortune are always alone
the defenders of the Dalai Lama the Kurds the Afghan mountaineers

now as I write these words the advocates of conciliation
have won the upper hand over the party of inflexibles
a normal hesitation of moods fate still hangs in the balance

cemeteries grow larger the number of defenders is smaller
yet the defence continues it will continue to the end
and if the City falls but a single man escapes
he will carry the City within himself on the roads of exile
he will be the City

we look in the face of hunger the face of fire face of death
worst of all - the face of betrayal
and only our dreams have not been humiliated

Zbigniew Herbert

Rovigo

ROVIGO STATION. Unclear associations. A drama of Goethe
or something from Byron. I traveled through Rovigo
n times and exactly at the nth time I understood
that in my inner geography it is a special
place although it certainly yields
to Florence. I never touched it with my living foot
and Rovigo was always approaching or fleeing behind
At the time I was filled with love for the Altichiera
at the Oratory of San Giorgio in Padua and for Ferrara
which I loved because it reminded me
of the pillaged city of my fathers. I lived stretched
between the past and the present moment
many times crucified by a place and a time
And yet happy firmly trusting
the sacrifice will not be wasted
Rovigo wasn't distinguished by anything particular it was
a masterpiece of mediocrity straight streets plain houses
only before or after the city (depending on the train's direction)
a mountain suddenly rose from the plain -sliced open by a red quarry
like an Easter Ham surrounded by kale
besides that nothing to amuse sadden dazzle the eye
And yet it was a city of blood and stone – just like the others
a city in which yesterday somebody died someone went mad
someone coughed hopelessly throughout the night
ACCOMPANIED BY WHICH BELLS DO YOU APPEAR ROVIGO
Reduced to a station to a comma a crossed letter
nothing but a station – arrivi – partenze
and why do I think about you Rovigo Rovigo

Zbigniew Herbert

The Ardennes Forest

Cup your hands to scoop up sleep
as you would draw a grain of water
and the forest will come: a green cloud
a birch trunk like a chord of light
and a thousand eyelids fluttering
with forgotten leafy speech
then you will recall the white morning
when you waited for the opening of the gates

you know this land is opened by a bird
that sleeps in a tree and the tree in the earth
but here is a spring of new questions
underfoot the currents of bad roots
look at the pattern on the bark where
a chord of music tightens
the lute player who presses the frets
so the silent resounds

push away leaves: a wild strawberry
dew on a leaf the comb of grass
further a wing of a yellow damselfly
and an ant burying its sister
a wild pear sweetly ripens
above the treacheries of belladonnas
without waiting for greater rewards
sit under the tree

cup your hands to draw up memory
of the dead names dried grain
again the forest: a charred cloud
forehead branded by black light
and a thousand lids pressed
tightly on motionless eyeballs
a tree and the air broken
betrayed faith of empty shelters

that other forest is for us is for you
the dead also ask for fairy tales
for a handful of herbs water of memories

therefore by needles by rustling
and faint threads of fragrances--
no matter that a branch stops you
a shadow leads you through winding passages--
you will find and open
our Ardennes Forest

Zbigniew Herbert

The Envoy Of Mr Cogito

Go where those others went to the dark boundary
for the golden fleece of nothingness your last prize

go upright among those who are on their knees
among those with their backs turned and those toppled in the dust

you were saved not in order to live
you have little time you must give testimony

be courageous when the mind deceives you be courageous
in the final account only this is important

and let your helpless Anger be like the sea
whenever you hear the voice of the insulted and beaten

let your sister Scorn not leave you
for the informers executioners cowards - they will win
they will go to your funeral with relief will throw a lump of earth
the woodborer will write your smoothed-over biography

and do not forgive truly it is not in your power
to forgive in the name of those betrayed at dawn

beware however of unnecessary pride
keep looking at your clown's face in the mirror
repeat: I was called - weren't there better ones than I

beware of dryness of heart love the morning spring
the bird with an unknown name the winter oak
light on a wall the splendour of the sky
they don't need your warm breath
they are there to say: no one will console you

be vigilant - when the light on the mountains gives the sign- arise and go
as long as blood turns in the breast your dark star

repeat old incantations of humanity fables and legends
because this is how you will attain the good you will not attain
repeat great words repeat them stubbornly

like those crossing the desert who perished in the sand

and they will reward you with what they have at hand
with the whip of laughter with murder on a garbage heap

go because only in this way you will be admitted to the company of cold skulls
to the company of your ancestors: Gilgamesh Hector Roland
the defenders of the kingdom without limit and the city of ashes

Be faithful Go

Zbigniew Herbert

The Fable About A Nail

For lack of a nail the kingdom has fallen
—according to the wisdom of nursery schools—but in our kingdom
there have been no nails for a long time there aren't and won't be
either the small ones for hanging a picture
on a wall or large ones for closing a coffin

but despite this or maybe because of it
the kingdom persists and is even admired by others
how can one live without a nail paper or string
bricks oxygen freedom and whatever else
obviously one can since the kingdom lasts and lasts

people live in homes in our country not in caves
factories smoke on the steppe a train runs through the tundra
and a ship bleats on the cold ocean
there is an army and police an official seal hymn and flag
in appearance everything like anywhere in the world

but only in appearance for our kingdom
is not a creation of nature or a human creation
seemingly permanent built on the bones of mammoths
in reality it is weak as if brought to a stop
between act and thought being and nonbeing

what is real—a leaf and a stone—falls
but spectres live long obstinately despite
the rising and setting of the sun revolutions of heavenly bodies
on the shamed earth fall the tears of objects

Zbigniew Herbert

The Monster Of Mr Cogito

1

Lucky Saint George
from his knight's saddle
could exactly evaluate
the strength and movements of the dragon

the first principle of strategy
is to assess the enemy accurately

Mr Cogito
is in a worse position
he sits in the low
saddle of a valley
covered with thick fog

through fog it is impossible to perceive
fiery eyes
greedy claws
jaws

through fog
one sees only
the shimmering of nothingness

the monster of Mr Cogito
has no measurements
it is difficult to describe
escapes definition

it is like an immense depression
spread out over the country

it can't be pierced
with a pen

with an argument
or spear

were it not for its suffocating weight
and the death it sends down
one would think
it is the hallucination
of a sick imagination
but it exists
for certain it exists

like carbon monoxide it fills
houses temples markets

poisons wells
destroys the structures of the mind
covers bread with mould

the proof of the existence of the monster
is its victims

it is not direct proof
but sufficient

2

reasonable people say
we can live together
with the monster

we only have to avoid
sudden movements
sudden speech

if there is a threat assume
the form of a rock or a leaf

listen to wise Nature
recommending mimicry

that we breathe shallowly
pretend we aren't there

Mr Cogito however

does not want a life of make-believe
he would like to fight
with the monster
on firm ground

so he walks out at dawn
into a sleepy suburb
carefully equipped
with a long sharp object

he calls to the monster
on the empty streets
he offends the monster
provokes the monster

like a bold skirmisher
of an army that doesn't exist

he calls -
come out contemptible coward

through the fog
one sees only
the huge snout of nothingness

Mr Cogito wants to enter
the uneven battle
it ought to happen
possibly soon

before there is
a fall from inertia
an ordinary death without glory
suffocation from formlessness

Zbigniew Herbert

The Power Of Taste

It didn't require great character at all
our refusal disagreement and resistance
we had a shred of necessary courage
but fundamentally it was a matter of taste
Yes taste
in which there are fibers of soul the cartilage of
conscience
Who knows if we had been better and more
attractively tempted
sent rose-skinned women thin as a wafer
or fantastic creatures from the paintings of
Hieronymus Bosch
but what kind of hell was there at this time
a wet pit the murderers' alley the barrack
called a palace of justice
a home-brewed Mephisto in a Lenin jacket
sent Aurora's grandchildren on into the field
boys with potato faces
very ugly girls with red hands

.....

So æsthetics can be helpful in life
one should not neglect the study of beauty
Before we declare our consent we must carefully
examine
the shape of the architecture the rhythm of the drums

official colors the despicable ritual of funerals
Our eyes and refused obedience
the princes of our senses proudly chose exile

Zbigniew Herbert

The Rain

When my older brother
came back from war
he had on his forehead a little silver star
and under the star
an abyss

a splinter of shrapnel
hit him at Verdun
or perhaps at Grünwald
(he'd forgotten the details)

he used to talk much
in many languages
but he liked most of all
the language of history

until losing breath
he commanded his dead pals to run
Roland Kowaski Hannibal

he shouted
that this was the last crusade
that Carthage soon would fall
and then sobbing confessed
that Napoleon did not like him

we looked at him
getting paler and paler
abandoned by his senses
he turned slowly into a monument

into musical shells of ears
entered a stone forest

and the skin of his face
was secured
with the blind dry
buttons of eyes

nothing was left him
but touch

what stories
he told with his hands
in the right he had romances
in the left soldier's memories

they took my brother
and carried him out of town
he returns every fall
slim and very quiet
he does not want to come in
he knocks at the window for me

we walk together in the streets
and he recites to me
improbable tales
touching my face
with blind fingers of rain

Zbigniew Herbert

The Return Of The Proconsul

I've decided to return to the emperor's court
once more I shall see if it's possible to live there
I could stay here in this remote province
under the full sweet leaves of sycamores
under the rule of sickly nepotists

when I return I don't intend to commend myself
I shall applaud in measured portions
smile in ounces frown discreetly
for that they will not give me a golden chain
this iron one will suffice

I've decided to return tomorrow or the next day
I cannot live among vineyards nothing here is mine
trees have no roots houses no foundations the rain is glassy flowers smell of wax
a dry cloud rattles against the empty sky
so I shall return tomorrow the next day in any case I shall return

I must come to terms with my face again
with my lower lip so it knows how to check scorn
with my eyes so they remain ideally empty
and with that miserable chin the hare of my face
which trembles when the chief of guards walks in

of one thing I am sure I will not drink wine with him
when he brings his goblet nearer I will lower my eyes
and pretend I'm picking bits of food from between my teeth
besides the emperor likes courage of convictions
to a certain extent to a certain reasonable extent
he is after all a man like everyone
and already tired by all those tricks with poison
he cannot drink his fill incessant chess
this left cup is for Drusus from the right one pretend to sip
then drink only water never lose sight of Tacitus

take a walk in the garden and return when the corpse has been removed
I've decided to return to the emperor's court
I really hope that things will work out somehow

The Tongue

Inadvertently I passed the border of her teeth and swallowed her agile tongue. It lives inside me now, like a Japanese fish. It brushes against my heart and my diaphragm as if against the walls of an aquarium. It stirs silt from the bottom.

She whom I deprived of a voice stares at me with big eyes and waits for a word.

Yet I do not know which tongue to use when speaking to her – the stolen one or the one which melts in my mouth from an excess of heavy goodness.

Zbigniew Herbert

The Trial

During his great speech the prosecutor
kept piercing me with his yellow index finger
I'm afraid I didn't appear self-assured
unintentionally I put on a mask of fear and depravity
like a rat caught in a trap an informer a fratricide
the reporters were dancing a war dance
slowly I burned at a stake of magnesia

all of this took place in a small stifling room
the floor creaked plaster fell from the ceiling
I counted knots in the boards holes in the wall faces
the faces were alike almost identical
policemen the tribunal witnesses the audience
they belonged to the party of those without any pity
and even my defender smiling pleasantly
was an honorary member of the firing squad

in the first row sat an old fat woman
dressed up as my mother with a theatrical gesture she raised
a handkerchief to her dirty eyes but didn't cry
it must have lasted a long time I don't know even how long
the red blood of the sunset was rising in the gowns of the judges

the real trial went on in my cells
they certainly knew the verdict earlier
after a short rebellion they capitulated and started to die one after the other
I looked in amazement at my wax fingers

I didn't speak the last word and yet
for so many years I was composing the final speech
to God to the court of the world to the conscience
to the dead rather than the living
roused to my feet by the guards
I managed only to blink and then
the room burst out in healthy laughter
my adoptive mother laughed also
the gavel banged and this really was the end

but what happened after that – death by a noose

or perhaps a punishment generously chained to a dungeon
I'm afraid there is a third dark solution
beyond the limits of time the senses and reason

therefore when I wake I don't open my eyes
I clench my fingers don't lift my head
breathe lightly because truly I don't know
how many minutes of air I still have left

Zbigniew Herbert

Three Poems By Heart

I

I can't find the title
of a memory about you
with a hand torn from darkness
I step on fragments of faces

soft friendly profiles
frozen into a hard contour

circling above my head
empty as a forehead of air
a man's silhouette of black paper

II

living--despite
living--against
I reproach myself for the sin of forgetfulness

you left an embrace like a superfluous sweater
a look like a question

our hands won't transmit the shape of your hands
we squander them touching ordinary things

calm as a mirror
not mildewed with breath
the eyes will send back the question

every day I renew my sight
every day my touch grows
tickled by the proximity of so many things

life bubbles over like blood
Shadows gently melt
let us not allow the dead to be killed--

perhaps a cloud will transmit remembrance--

a worn profile of Roman coins

III

the women on our street
were plain and good
they patiently carried from the markets
bouquets of nourishing vegetables

the children on our street
scourge of cats

the pigeons--

softly gray

a Poet's statue was in the park
children would roll their hoops
and colorful shouts
birds sat on the Poet's hand
read his silence

on summer evenings wives
waited patiently for lips
smelling of familiar tobacco

women could not answer
their children: will he return
when the city was setting
they put the fire out with hands
pressing their eyes

the children on our street
had a difficult death
pigeons fell lightly
like shot down air

now the lips of the Poet
form an empty horizon
birds children and wives cannot live
in the city's funereal shells
in cold eiderdowns of ashes

the city stands over water
smooth as the memory of a mirror
it reflects in the water from the bottom

and flies to a high star
where a distant fire is burning
like a page of the *Iliad*

Zbigniew Herbert

To My Bones

In my sleep it rips through
my meagre skin
throws off the red bandage of the flesh
and goes strolling through the room
my monument a little incomplete

one can be prodigal
with tears and blood
what will endure here the longest
must be thoughtfully provided for

better (than with a priest's dry finger
to the rains which drip from a cloud of sand)
to give one's monument to the academe

they will prop it up in a glass display case
and in Latin they will pray before
the little altar made from an os frontalis

they will reckon the bones and surfaces
they will not forget not overlook

happily I will give my color of eyes
pattern of nails and curve of eyelids
I the perfectly objective
made from white crystals of anatomy

can for thoughts
heart cage
bony pile
and two shins

you my little monument not quite complete

Zbigniew Herbert

Wasp

When the honey, fruit and flowery tablecloth were whisked from the table in one sweep, it flew off with a start. Entangled in the suffocating smoke of the curtains, it buzzed for a long time. At last it reached the window. It beat its weakening body repeatedly against the cold, solid air of the pane. In the last flutter of its wings drowns the faith that the body's unrest can awaken a wind carrying us to longed-for worlds.

You who stood under the window of your beloved, who saw your happiness in a shop window—do you know how to take away the sting of this death?

Zbigniew Herbert

What Our Dead Do

Jan came this morning
—I dreamt of my father
he says

he was riding in an oak coffin
I walked next to the hearse
and father turned to me:

you dressed me nicely
and the funeral is very beautiful
at this time of year so many flowers
it must have cost a lot

don't worry about it father
—I say—let people see
we loved you
that we spared nothing

 six men in black livery
 walk nicely at our sides

father thought for a while
and said—the key to the desk
is in the silver inkwell
there is still some money
in the second drawer on the left

with this money—I say—
we will buy you a gravestone
a large one of black marble

it isn't necessary—says father—
better give it to the poor

 six men in black livery
 walk nicely at our sides
 they carry burning lanterns

again he seemed to be thinking

—take care of the flowers in the garden
cover them for the winter
I don't want them to be wasted

you are the oldest—he says—
from a little felt bag behind the painting
take out the cuff links with real pearls
let them bring you luck
my mother gave them to me
when I finished high school
then he didn't say anything
he must have entered a deeper sleep

this is how our dead
look after us
they warn us through dreams
bring back lost money
hunt for jobs
whisper the numbers of lottery tickets
or when they can't do this
knock with their fingers on the windows

and out of gratitude
we imagine immortality for them
snug as the burrow of a mouse

Zbigniew Herbert

Why The Classics

1

in the fourth book of the Peloponnesian War
Thucydides tells among other things
the story of his unsuccessful expedition
among long speeches of chiefs
battles sieges plague
dense net of intrigues of diplomatic endeavours
the episode is like a pin
in a forest
the Greek colony Amphipolis
fell into the hands of Brasidos
because Thucydides was late with relief
for this he paid his native city
with lifelong exile
exiles of all times
know what price that is

2

generals of the most recent wars
if a similar affair happens to them
whine on their knees before posterity
praise their heroism and innocence
they accuse their subordinates
envious colleagues
unfavourable winds
Thucydides says only
that he had seven ships
it was winter
and he sailed quickly

3

if art for its subject
will have a broken jar
a small broken soul
with a great self-pity
what will remain after us
will it be lovers' weeping
in a small dirty hotel
when wall-paper dawns

