

MACIEJ NOWAK

ORDERING THE WORLD.
THE AIMS OF ART IN ZBIGNIEW HERBERT'S LETTERS

I suggest a new way of reading Zbigniew Herbert's letters to various addressees, where these letters will not be just auxiliary materials but will occupy a central place as an autonomous object of exploration. The relationship between Herbert's poetry and letters is axiological, the nature of which connects the two spheres of his literary output. In my opinion, writing letters favors an attitude of confirming values, thereby becoming a kind of communication which is axiologically exceptionally strongly marked.¹

A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WORLD

In the middle of the Stalinist night Herbert tells his Muse about one of the brighter episodes of the reality of that time: "Yesterday I spent the day with Jerzy Z., whom *Nowa Kultura* [*New Culture*, a Communist cultural weekly] asked to write a feature article about the Kraków trial. We went to the Museum. [...] It is a completely different world, a tale of such legendary times when art did mean something—and it is so much needed now" (HHM, 66).²

Dr. hab. MACIEJ NOWAK—The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Faculty of Humanities, Center for Research on Religious Literature; e-mail: maciej.nowak@kul.lublin.pl

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¹ I am referring here to my article "Spór i dialog poetów. Herbert i Miłosz w świetle korespondencji" (Poets' dispute and dialogue. Herbert and Miłosz in the light of their letters), *Pamiętnik Literacki* no. 2 (2009): 54–55.

² I use the following abbreviations: HE—Zbigniew HERBERT, Henryk ELZENBERG, *Korespondencja* (*Letters*) (Warsaw: Zeszyty Literackie, 2002); HHM—Zbigniew HERBERT, *Listy do Muzy. Prawdziwa historia nieskończonej miłości* (*Letters to the Muse. A True Story of an Unfinished Love*) (Gdynia: Małgorzata Marchlewska Wydawnictwo, 2000); HZ—Zbigniew HERBERT, Jerzy

I quote the whole paragraph from the letter dated 31st January 1952 in order not to pass over the circumstances in which that visit to the gallery (of the National Museum?) took place. In this way, the situational advantages³ of the event may be revealed—those of contact with works of art. However, first let us define those circumstances precisely. The subject of the article was probably to be the trial of the Armia Podziemna (Underground Army). It took place on the 16th, 18th and 20th of January 1951 before the Military District Court in Kraków. Altogether, ten people were tried, including two priests: Zbigniew Gadomski and Piotr Oborski.⁴ The action could have been preparation for the famous so-called trial of the Kraków Curia that took place at the end of 1952 and beginning of 1953. With this hint, Herbert laconically indicates his and his companion's state of mind, and also points to the topical social-political context of the walk that ended in the gallery. The works they saw at the gallery were painfully contrasted with the world that was seen just outside the windows, as well as much further beyond. For behind those barely sketched circumstances there was hidden the gloomy reality of the height of the Stalinist era about which Herbert was able to speak only a lot later.⁵ And the shape it appeared in to the contemporary inhabitants of the capital is described in Leopold Tyrmand's *Dziennik 1954*, one of whose important protagonists is Herbert himself.⁶

ZAWIEYSKI, *Korespondencja 1949–1967 (Letters 1949–1967)* (Warsaw: Więzi, 2002); HM—Zbigniew HERBERT, Czesław MIŁOSZ, *Korespondencja (Letters)* (Warsaw: Zeszyty Literackie, 2006); HKR—Zbigniew HERBERT, *Korespondencja rodzinna (Family Letters)* (Lublin: Gaudium, 2008); CzH—Józef CZAPSKI, Zbigniew HERBERT, “Listy” (Letters), *Zeszyty Literackie / Cahiers Littéraires* 2009, no. 1. After the abbreviation I give the date and the page number. I quote the poetical works from the edition: Zbigniew HERBERT, *Wiersze zebrane (Collected Poems)* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2008).

³ I am referring here to Andrzej Stoff's conception presented in the article “Wartości sytuacyjne dzieła literackiego” (Situational values of a literary work), in *Studia z teorii literatury i poetyki historycznej (Studies in Theory of Literature and Historical Poetics)* (Lublin: TN KUL, 1997).

⁴ Rev. Daniel WOJCIECHOWSKI, “Więzień i duszpasterz więźniów PRL: Ks. Zbigniew Gadomski (1921–1993)” (A prisoner and prisoners' chaplain: Rev. Zbigniew Gadomski (1921–1993)) <http://www.naszdziennik.pl/index.php?dat=20071020&typ=my&id=my15.txt>.

⁵ I would like to stress two interviews the poet gave in the 1980s, that play a key role in this aspect: “Płynię się zawsze pod prąd, z prądem płyną śmiecie” (One always swims against the current, only rubbish floats downstream), given to Adam Michnik and “Wypluć z siebie wszystko” (To spew out everything), given to Jacek Trznadel in *Herbert nieznan. Rozmowy (The Unknown Herbert. Conversations)* (Warsaw: Zeszyty Literackie, 2008).

⁶ Tyrmand's testimony about “Virgil in the hell of sympathy” that is so well-known today and is, in a way, the foundation of the “hagiographical” legend of Zbigniew Herbert, appeared for the first time in issue 14 of *Tygodnik Powszechny* in 1957. We find a humorous commentary to this publication in a letter written by Bolesław Herbert, the poet's father: “I think that if Tyrmand had

In the passage quoted from a letter to Misiólkowa, a few paragraphs earlier, words are said that directly define the sender's mood: "I walk along the streets with the bad face of one who wants to spoil the party, who wants to have alert eyes till the end" (HHM, 64). Eyes open wide are to see the end of the phenomena transpiring under the surface, ones he had grave misgivings about. Eschatological intuitions of this kind also penetrated the poet's lyrical expressions, among others the "catastrophic" poem "To Marcus Aurelius" written not long previously and sent to Henryk Elzenberg⁷: "Hear its roar / The unrelenting stream of elements / will drown your prose / until the world's four walls go down."⁸ The poem read along with his biography may serve as an example of the transformation that the dread of the social situation underwent—the dread of the actual situation experienced every day, during a walk in Warsaw streets, that was transformed into a universal dread, both existential and historiosophical. The sensation of growing fear constitutes a broader context into which praise of the objects seen at the museum is inscribed.

Herbert does it first of all by valorizing time in different ways: we are given an insight into at least two of its dimensions—the present and the past. Those "legendary times" are the dimension of the non-physical, but also non-historical, time evoked by works of art. I understand these words as a phrase of the language of poetical axiology. It signals the situational valor of that visit to the gallery and of the contact with the works of art. Without detailed research we are not able to find out what paintings were on display at the National Museum at the beginning of 1951. However, it is absolutely certain that they were not the indisputable masterpieces like the ones that the author of *Still life with a snaffle* saw a bit later many times at galleries in Europe and the United States. But they were not paintings and statues produced to order like those that the Communist authorities used for propaganda. And even the works that one could see then aroused a very strong feeling in the future connoisseur of the Louvre and Rijksmuseum collections. This constituting of the situational valor was accompanied by outer circumstances. In

developed the idea of the «sickly parents» a little further and supplemented it with giving his bank account—our society's well-known dedication would have allowed you to survive a few years without gainful employment" (HKR, April 1957, 55).

⁷ The poem was attached to the letter of the 16th of December 1951 (HE, 18–19).

⁸ Zbigniew HERBERT, "To Marcus Aurelius," in IDEM, *Selected Poems*, trans. by Czesław Miłosz and Peter D. Scott, with an introduction by A. Alvarez (Hammonsworth: Penguin, 1968), <https://roundhousepoetrycircle.wordpress.com/2016/05/06/to-marcus-aurelius/>.

this case, they were not the values of a particular object—we have no information on this topic—but of a certain class of work. More generally, they may be defined as a class of work that did not meet the requirements of socialist realism, ones that were in a certain undefined opposition to normative communist esthetics. The valor owes its existence, then, to the contrast that appeared between the objects the poet saw and their political, social and ideological background. I would not like to overrate the meaning of this fragment of the correspondence; however, it reveals a significant feature of Herbert's axiological imagination. The area of aggressive ugliness and violence became in it a place where he lived for the present—a space of exile, whose topography is sketched in many of his poems. On the other hand, that “completely different world” sounding with “a tale of such legendary times when art did mean something” was something which he missed and a place of numerous returns. It is not difficult to perceive a reflection of the Platonic conception of beauty as an anamnesis in this approach. Hans-Georg Gadamer presented it in the following way: “Due to beauty one can remember the true world for a longer time.”⁹ Many years later Herbert will describe all that complex of emotions and thoughts in a letter to Miłosz as one of the indispensable elements of the poetic attitude, among which he also counted the “vision of paradise lost” (HM, 17.02.1966, 57) that is included in the significant spiritual qualities characteristic of a poet. Herbert travelled in Europe with the deep wound that the communist esthetics had inflicted upon him. Hence his pure rapture over an Umbrian town is disturbed by a memory of a flagship achievement from the first years of the Polish People's Republic: “[...] so I am in Spoleto, in the heart of Umbria” he wrote to his parents, “not far from Rome. It is so dreadfully beautiful here that I am afraid to move energetically for the fear of everything going apart like a dream and so that I would not wake up in the middle of the Marszałkowska Residence District” (HKR, 23.06.1959, 102).¹⁰ The negative memory of the vulgar reality

⁹ *Aktualność piękna. Sztuka jako gra, symbol i święto (The relevance of the beautiful: art as play, symbol and festival)*, translated into Polish by Krystyna Krzemieniowa (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 1993), p. 19. I think that Herbert would also like the way Gadamer developed Plato's concept: [...] the essence of the beautiful does not lie in some realm simply opposed to reality. On the contrary, we learn that however unexpected our encounter with beauty may be, it gives us an assurance that the truth does not lie far off and is inaccessible to us, but can be encountered in the disorder of reality with all its imperfections, evils, errors, extremes, and fateful confusions. The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real” (p. 20).

¹⁰ From the same place and at the same time he sent a postcard to Miłosz: “Dear Czesław, so here I am in Italy, which means I'm on my knees, at the roots. It is unconsciously beautiful here and I am walking all swollen with happiness” (HM, 1959, 15).

whose promoters were communists in the Polish People's Republic caused Herbert's disgust, interwoven with the fear of—as he put it in a letter to Czesław Miłosz—“mess and surrealism” (HM, 08.06.1960, 19), that is, the everyday life of the “middle” Gomułka. However, for the poet ugliness did not have only a geopolitical identity: we remember that in a later poem-letter to Adam Zagajewski apocalyptic blocks push against both sides of the iron curtain: “They crossed the horizon, unavoidably coming closer / to capture your and my cathedral / Ugly residential blocks of flats from Chernobyl Nowa Huta Düsseldorf” (“A postcard to Adam Zagajewski”). Art seen by Herbert, as seen from the reception side, broadly keeps the memory of a “different world” with “times” construed in an axiologically different way, when creative hustle and bustle “did mean something.” Contacts with works of art that the correspondent tells his addressees about are not repeated escapes, but they have the meaning of confirmation in the constant universe of values.

MANN AND SCALES IN MODERN ART

Placing valuable works in the conventional past tense and confronting this “legendary” period with the unsatisfying present also returns in Herbert's other texts, in the fragments of his letters that he devoted to the masters that he valued. He devotes a whole letter to an analysis of one of them, Thomas Mann; the letter deserves the name of an epistolographic mini-essay, with the fictional title “Mann and Us, the Contemporary Ones.” It starts with a short piece of information about the great emotions generated by the passing away of the author of *The Magic Mountain*. Herbert compares them to the impression made on him a few years earlier by the death of Mahatma Gandhi. Next, the sender synthetically explains his own understanding of the “situational” valor that contact with a great man has, a man who “shares the experiences of history with us”: “We know that an example of a living man, that is of someone who [...] reads the same dailies and eats the same bread—is more evocative and obliging than an example of ten Shakespeares” (HZ, 17.08.1955, 105).¹¹

¹¹ A year earlier the poet spoke of his rapture that a repeated reading of *Buddenbrooks* evoked (HHM, 03.11.1954, 94). As an already recognized author he published an appeal for publishing a collected edition of Mann's works (“For publishing Thomas Mann's collected works,” in *The Gordian Knot and Other Scattered Writings 1948–1998*, collected, edited and provided with notes by Paweł Kądziała (Warsaw: Więzi, 2001), 503). Mann also returns in the text *A Poet Towards the Present Day* that is key to Herbert's identity discourse (“The Knot,” 44–45) and other texts.

The departure of someone like this causes involuntary devaluations of esthetic hierarchies: “With this death all scales in contemporary art have been reduced” (ibid.). The death of that contemporary “great poet” causes a severe gap in the axiological dimension. Works, separated from their author, are devoid of the power given to them by the testimony of life. Writing in this way to Zawieyski, Herbert, in a way, tries to take the position of a continuator of Mann’s attitude: “I have always thought about him as a perfect man” (106), he goes on, perceiving himself in the role of an orphaned pupil and confessor. Deprived of support, he acutely feels the work of a valued author moving into the past. It is no accident that the epistolographer paid attention to the connection between the author’s life and the life of his works. As long as there is a relationship of entailment between them, they keep the status of an obliging testimony and appeal. At the moment of the author’s death a process starts that I would call bibliofication—they become a new component of tradition, while at the same time, to a certain degree, modifying it according to the rule described by T.S. Eliot in his well-known essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”¹² The physical departure of the author of *Doctor Faustus* initiates the process in which his works pass into that “legendary” period of history that the objects seen at the museum evoked. It is not the distance in time that matters here, but it is the differences seen on the scale of values. They again express a contrast, this time between Mann’s “masterpieces conceived in peace and prudence” and “the jargon of the dailies, humiliation and a useful lie”, with which modern men of letters are occupied (HZ, 17.08.1955, 106). This opposition makes one think of the famous question from a different, much later poetic letter, whose addressee was Ryszard Krynicki: “so is it worth lowering the sacred speech / to the gibberish going from the podium to the newspapers’ black foam” (“Do Ryszarda Krynickiego—list” [To Ryszard Krynicki—a letter]). The sacrally valorized poetic speech is here sharply juxtaposed with the discourse of manipulation symbolized by the party podium and the daily.¹³ A confrontation between the idea of festive speech that has a Romantic provenance and the attributes of modernity acquires topical

¹² [1917], the Polish translation by H. Pręcłowska, in Thomas S. ELIOT, *Kto to jest klasyk i inne eseje (Who is a Classic and Other Essays)* (Kraków: Znak, 1998), 26.

¹³ The phrase “the newspapers’ black foam” was built by contaminating the idiomatic expression “bić pianę” (“blow something out of proportion”) and the image of the black type used for printing. In the letter to Zawieyski we have the metonymical “jargon of the dailies”. Both these phrases are connected by a decidedly negative appraisal of the daily press.

meanings: it is one of the variants of modernist antinomy of art and mass culture. Traces of this antinomy may be found in many works of twentieth century literature, philosophy and sociology. Its most recent variant is signaled by the discussions about art on the Internet. It is no accident that in the poem dedicated to Krynicki the lyrical legislators of the modernistic formation, Rilke and Eliot, appear. In the dialogs that Herbert has by means of letters he also speaks approvingly about Claudel, Eluard, Leśmian and Czechowicz.

THAT'S—A CHRONICLER

Works, their authors, the heroes of the past were not taken out of their original historical context by Herbert. The laborious studies that Herbert carried on rather served opposite aims—they were to reconstruct the context. The aim was, in a way, maximalist, reaching far beyond the ambition of antiquarian lore. Erudition was to support empathy. Giving his attention to the past ages Herbert came close to the attitude sketched by Norwid in his “methodological” poem “The Historian.” In the traditional work of a student of the past – among others, making an “inventory” and a “description”—Norwid saw only an initial stage of the task. To deserve the name of “chronicler” he should reconstruct the starting conditions, in which the experience took place:

But... if he gave back to a sage, to a man, to a woman
That fear with which their forefather trembled
Looking at the first comet
When it stood over the globe for the first time:
.....
that's a chronicler!¹⁴

Thus, a chronicler gets to the original existential situation, much richer in meanings than a professional description. By restoring the situation, both that sensation of the world of ages ago and the one that is somehow more profound, more important to us today, may be revealed. The author of “Telling the Fortunes” and “My Ancestors’ Hands” seems to be like the chronicler from the poem by Norwid; going to Lascaux Cave he calls it “underground

¹⁴ Cyprian NORWID, *Vade-mecum*, ed. Józef Fert (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1990), 168.

Sistine Chapel of our forefathers.”¹⁵ The past tense for Herbert was not a tense definitively perfective—closed and dead. Assuming the attitude of a “chronicler” he was able, through layers of the past, to dig through to ever living contents, to show—using Gadamer’s language—the relevance of the beautiful.¹⁶ For this reason, art was not for Herbert the way to escape history, as in the way it was for Elzenberg, his master in philosophical thinking. Works of the past allow one—according to the author of “The Old Masters”—to understand history as they are an integral part of it. They are a hieroglyph recorded by an esthetic genius and passion, as well as by political circumstances and pressures of economy. Hence, counting the poet among nostalgic conservatives would be unjust. He would not feel comfortable wearing a pedantic antiquarian’s frock coat. This is why, defending Europe against Miłosz’s momentary aversion to it as expressed in the essay mentioned in a letter,¹⁷ he confesses: “Not for all the world would I like to pretend to be Parandowski. On the other hand, I cannot bring myself to do *Mutual reckoning* (the brilliant sketch fell into my heart like a stone)” (HM, 28.07.1964, 45). This respected expert on ancient culture, the author of *The Olympic Discus*, is a symbol here of the attitude of a little secondary school erudition characterized by a rigid respect for the past, deprived of a critical reflection. It could not enrapture enough the writer studying myths to—as he told Elzenberg—“formulate things that are important to me when doing it” (HE, 04.04.1954, 70).

THE AIMS OF THE WORK—THE AUTHOR’S INTENTIONS

Art allows one to look into the world of the ideal; it is a carrier of the memory of paradise, or perhaps of paradises, to which, however, there is no return. Contemplating it on the one hand,¹⁸ and devoting oneself to creating

¹⁵ Zbigniew HERBERT, *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie* (*A Barbarian in the Garden*) (Warsaw: Zeszyty Literackie, 2004), 9.

¹⁶ In connection with this Gadamer wrote about the art of earlier ages coming down to us “filtered through time and transmitted through a tradition that both preserves it and transforms it in a living way” (Hans-Georg GADAMER, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. by Nicholas Walker, ed. and with introduction by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 71).

¹⁷ I mean here Miłosz’s essay “Dwustronne porachunki” (*Mutual reckoning*), *Kultura* no 6 (1964).

¹⁸ According to the author of *The Book*: “A perfect recipient is also an artist, and a rare one too. It is someone who can reconstruct in himself an aria, the coloring of a painting or a poem,

it on the other, are ways of opposing the ugliness that fills one with super-esthetic horror. Valuable works from the past times are for Herbert arranged into a canon and formulate an appeal; a canon understood as a series of esthetic and ethical values; an appeal comprehended as faithfulness not so much to the very works, as to the values incarnated by them and—by way of esthetic experience—felt.¹⁹ But does creativity, the fruit of “staring humbly at objects and further” (HZ, 23.12.1966, 144), lead exclusively to—even if it is understood most nobly—anamnesis: remembering-recollecting “a paradise lost,” “a different world,” “legendary times”? Certainly not. However, this meaning of art-creativity, associated with the duty to be faithful, never disappears from the field of vision of Herbert, who ponders the aims of art. Let us change the perspective, from receiving to creating—this duty is also felt by the subject whose identity is defined not so much by his competent communing with other people’s works, as the authorship of his own works. “Today I am in a good mood since I have written a poem; I did not go to the office, but I wrote a poem. I think it should be like this” (HHM, 10.11.1956, 146). In this case, duty is first of all the obligation to work. Taking the risk of being left with nothing to live on—and at that time the poet constantly balanced between poverty and modest stability—he chooses to be obedient to his muses. His determination is accompanied by the conviction of having made the right choice. However, his obedience to his duty was not reduced, in Herbert’s case, to waiting for inspiration and practicing purely artistic proficiency. The poet saw his work in a bit of a different context, subjecting it to the aim of transgressing the horizons of a literary café: “The world is standing on its head. How long will it go on. Of course I am not writing anything,²⁰ because for writing, which is ordering the world, one has to order himself first, and this can in no way be done at the moment” (HHM [date not given, probably 1956], 193). For the author of this letter creating starts with recognizing the condition the “subject of creative activities” finds himself in,

and reconstruct it precisely with the same disinterested joy as if he himself were the author.” Zbigniew HERBERT, “Rozmowa o pisaniu wierszy” (A conversation about writing poems) [1973], in *Herbert nieznan*, 19.

¹⁹ A fragment of *Diariusz grecki* (*Greek Diary*) says a lot about this situation: “It is not us that look at works of art, but works of art that look at us. Kritios’ charioteer looked at me coolly, without approval, and simply found me uninteresting” (Zbigniew HERBERT, “*Mistrz z Delft*” i inne utwory odnalezione (*The Master of Delft and Other Rediscovered Works*), ed. Barbara Toruńczyk (Warsaw: Zeszyty Literackie, 2008), 30).

²⁰ In the text of the book, full of other errors, we have here the word “proszę” (“asking”), which does not have any sense, so I have corrected this obvious typing error to “piszę” (“writing”).

and it is dependent on this condition. By no means do I think that this had to be understood above all as achieving some narrowly moral stability. Writing poetry first assumes the shape of a spiritual exercise that has the function of preparing the instrument, choosing the proper key. This kind of effort leads one outside, through creativity turned to the world that is afflicted by disharmony. A poet's work—composing just this elegy, arranging the voices in just this drama—has an analogy in ordering the author's inner micro-universe. The connection between these two activities has the character of feedback. The outer reality that is losing its stability, that is, pushing against the subject, triggers off a need to oppose it in the form of a duty that he experiences, that is, the duty to achieve balance. And this is a condition of successfully achieving the aims set to one's own work—the aim of limiting the processes of cultural entropy. From the point of view of the philosophy of culture, Herbert sets fundamental aims for his creativity. The German philosopher Robert Spaemann remarks that all culture consists in such resistance that it applies a contrary force to the universal tendency to disintegration.²¹ From this point of view, a gardener stands shoulder to shoulder with a poet and a musician. An echo of this thought will return, in a way “from the other side”, in the praise for contemplation that was written in the verses of the poem “The Book,” with its excellent conclusion: “haste is the worst thing in spiritual matters.” The key issue in the quoted passage from the letter to Misiołkowa is certainly the work of a writer presented as the ordering of the world. Where the need to order comes from we know from the poet himself, for the world, deprived of order, was Warsaw seen from the windows of the museum in the winter of 1952. But it was also the France of “the importunate machines and incomprehensible civilization” from the letter to Zawieyski of December 1966. In it, Herbert opposes the “contemplative” Vermeer to “lusting” Picasso, who was, incidentally, an idol of this civilization (HZ, 23.12.1966, 144). Resonances may be heard here of the modernist in the spiritual eccentricity of its attitude towards noisy modernity to which the ideal of nearly monastic calm is opposed.²² In the letter to Misiołkowa those prophetic ambitions, romantic in their spirit, of the later famous text “Poeta

²¹ Robert SPAEMANN, *Granice. O etycznym wymiarze działania (Limits: On the Ethical Dimension of Actions)*, translated into Polish by Jarosław Merecki (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 2006), 475.

²² A sample of this anti-egalitarian critique of the “dictatorship of great cities,” presented in the spirit of Le Bone, is given by Zenon Przesmycki in his essay “Walka ze sztuką” (A Struggle Against Art) [1901], in IDEM, *Wybór pism krytycznych (Selected Critiques)*, ed. Ewa Korzeniewska, vol. 2 (Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1967), 45–46.

wobec współczesności” (A poet in the face of the present day) are not heard. The author does not yet see himself in the role of a poetic Moses coming down to the reading public with tablets containing his own axiology: “building values, building tablets of values, determining their hierarchy, means a conscious, moral choice of them, with all the living and artistic consequences that are connected with it—this seems to me the fundamental and most important function of culture.”²³ In 1956—if the dating of the letter is right—ordering is to go on according to “imperfect” subjective criteria: those of the order pervading the poet.

AFTER THE CHAOS OF NOTIONS

Restoring the proper hierarchy, construing the tablets of value—where are these ideas from? Why did Herbert want to set the key of his poetry according to this scale? After all, both in his letter to Miziołkowa and in the declaration made for the first time in April 1972 at the 9th Kłodzka Wiosna Poetycka (Kłodzko Poetic Spring) he speaks first of all about the aims he set for his own poetic works. In this case, the experience of war²⁴ is the closest context, and—as I have already mentioned—a reflection on the dramatic consequences of its end. The motif of the need to think over the meaning of the war’s havoc in the moral, esthetic, but also semantic, sphere appears as soon as the poet’s early articles. One of his first published texts—in a series of poetics for amateurs—was concluded with perhaps a little naive, but surely thoroughly thought through, appeal:

The word must, however, return to its home port—to its meaning. It is already not an esthetic problem, but also one concerning morality. Naming human things and problems leads to understanding and judging them. Especially after the chaos of notions—after the recent war, after the flood of lies, poetry has to make an effort at the moral reconstruction of the world by reconstructing the value of the word. We have to separate good from evil anew, light from darkness.²⁵

²³ Zbigniew HERBERT, “Poeta wobec współczesności” (A poet in the face of the present day), in *Węzeł gordyjski oraz inne pisma rozproszone 1948–1998* (*The Gordian Knot and Other Scattered Writings 1948–1998*), ed. Paweł Kądzioła (Warszawa: Więzi, 2001), 45.

²⁴ Cf. Małgorzata MIKOŁAJCZAK, *Pomiędzy końcem i apokalipsą. O wyobraźni poetyckiej Zbigniewa Herberta* (*Between the End and the Apocalypse. On Zbigniew Herbert’s Poetic Imagination*) (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2007), 52–97.

²⁵ Zbigniew HERBERT, “Od słowa ciemnego chroń nas...” (Deliver us from the dark word...), *Tygodnik Wybrzeża* no 39 (1948): 10, in IDEM, *Węzeł gordyjski*, 371.

The author of these words stood with the program of his poetry on the side of rebuilding, but not the rebuilding that was officially decreed. The diagnosis was accompanied by the hardship of finding a remedy for the recognized weaknesses and by the axiological reconstruction undertaken with determination. Thus, the young Herbert did not sound the depth of the fall with cool despair, as—simplifying the problem—Różewicz and Borowski did when searching for a utopian remedy in communist ideology. Focusing on the esthetic-moral work at the grass roots level he saw himself on the side of good, truth and beauty. In the quotation from *Tygodnik Wybrzeża* (*The Wybrzeże Weekly*) one can hear the words from the previously cited text of *A Poet in the face of the present day* that will later return almost in the form of a paraphrase, but also the definition of taste that is key to this attitude: “in which there are fibers of the soul and the cartilages of the conscience” (*The Power of Taste*).

However, reducing the program of axiological re-harmonization proposed by Herbert to only a simple reaction to the consequences of the cataclysm of war would be—in my opinion—a misunderstanding, unless we understand this cataclysm broadly, and its consequences as a longstanding state in which the world found itself after 1945. Sándor Márai, the outstanding Hungarian intellectual, perceived it just like that; in his autobiographical novel *Ziemia, ziemia* (*Memoir of Hungary*) he wrote about the end of the four hundred long history of “the white man’s rule”, about the Western humanism killed “in the Auschwitz gas chambers, in the mass graves of Katyń, about the inferno of the Soviet and German concentration camps, among the ruins of Dresden and Coventry [...],”²⁶ adding a remark about the West’s complete blindness and its lack of reflection on what happened: “Nobody suspected that the end of a certain civilization came, and what was realized in the peace years is not its new kind but a completely new image of the world, which people have not had time to get used to,”²⁷ This is a vision that is close to that of the author of the poetic prose of *The Country* and many poems taking up the motif of catastrophe presented both in biographical and cultural aspects.

²⁶ Translated into Polish by Teresa Worowska (Warsaw 2005), 299, 290.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 301.

YOU ARE CLOSE TO SŁOWACKI

In the concept of the creative mission that appears in Herbert's letters, I can see a distinct Romantic trait. By no means am I claiming that this context explains everything that the author of *The Power of Taste* said about the poet's vocation and about the function of poetical art. But surely Romanticism in its various manifestations, not only in the philosophy of creativity, is a significant context for understanding his poetic attitude. In a letter that has been recently published, Józef Czapski tells Herbert about an important observation from the author's reading of *Blackthorn*: "The poem you concluded your lecture with, that is really a mission for us all and that reminded me, or what is more, made me realize how close you are to Słowacki and his indications, his orders to us all" (CzH, 02.06.1986, 112–113). This testimony to the interpretation is confirmed in Herbert's last text prepared for printing. He calls Juliusz Słowacki his master in the poetic trade—"constantly balancing between loftiness and ridiculousness."²⁸ He concludes this statement with a passage from a fragment of *My Testament*:

However, this dreadful force will remain from me
Which is useless for me alive... it only graces my forehead;
But after my death it will press you, invisible,
Until it changes you, men in the street, into angels.²⁹

When reading this text, written by the trembling hand of the gravely ill poet, it is hard not to notice the intention to speak about himself, about the vocation of his own work, but using somebody else's words, ones borrowed from one of the "high shadows" who was an inhabitant of a "completely different world." The program of the poetry evening in the National Theatre, where Herbert quotes *My Testament*, also contains Norwid's *A Funeral Rhapsody in Memory of General Bem*, which the poet himself recited at a declamation contest,³⁰ a significant repetition that I interpret as proof of a hierarchy of grand people of literature that was formed early and forever. The Romantic trace in the meaning of a poet's vocation—and even thinking

²⁸ Quotation from the brochure: "Zbigniew Herbert. Wieczór poetycki: 25 maja 1998. Teatr Narodowy" ("Zbigniew Herbert. A poetry evening: May 26th 1998. The National Theatre").

²⁹ Juliusz SŁOWACKI, *Dzieła wszystkie (Complete Works)*, vol. 8, ed. Juliusz Kleiner (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich, 1958), 430.

³⁰ Herbert mentions his participation in the declamation contest in a letter to Misiołkowa (HHM, 03.11.1954, 93).

about the “poet’s vocation” deserves attention—leads us to the thought about the long existence of this tradition in Polish literature. Here, Herbert would be close to Miłosz who also searched for confirmation of his identity in Romanticism. In this way, they both differed from Polish poets younger than they were, but also from their Anglo-Saxon peers. As Al Alvarez wrote: “the idea of an author as a moral authority died more or less at the time of Milton, and when Shelley called poets ‘humanity’s unofficial legislators,’ he expressed utterly Romantic wishful thinking”³¹. Against this background the translator notices the exceptional quality of Herbert’s creative attitude and the difference in his poetic diction.

I DO NOT LIKE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

The author of *Three studies on realism* in his letters often expressed his opinions on his own poetic work, on the arcana of his art, and in the aims he had set for his work. He formulated aphoristic thoughts on the philosophy of creativity. I understand the word “philosophy” very broadly here, simply as a synonym for all of the poet’s ponderings on the mysteries of his workshop and the process of writing. The current of meta-literary reflection is not broadened too much, but it is a clear and perceptible component of the poet’s letter-writing, helping to clarify at least some of the questions of interpretation. Meta-poetical statements from Herbert’s dialogs that he has in his letters assume an importance in the context of a lack of these kinds of statements formulated in his poems. As Jacek Łukasiewicz noted, “there are almost no self-thematic poems, ones about his own writing, reflections on Herbert’s works. He thinks that one should give complete products and it is not fitting to talk about preparing them.”³² I think I will not be mistaken too much if I explain the lack of explanations noted by Łukasiewicz by the poet’s reluctance to write autobiographies in general. In one interview he plainly said: “I simply do not like autobiographies.”³³ All the same, studying Herbert’s letters, besides fulfilling the function of dotting the i’s and crossing

³¹ „Nie walczysz, to umierasz” (“You are not fighting so you are dying”), in *Poznawanie Herberta* (*Learning about Herbert*), translated into Polish and supplied with an Introduction by Andrzej Franaszek (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2000), 17.

³² “Ostatnie książki Herberta” (Herbert’s last books), in *Poznawanie Herberta 2* (*Learning about Herbert 2*), 90.

³³ “Poeta sensu” (The poet of meaning. Conversations with M. Oramus), in *Herbert nieznany*, 107.

the t's in the hesitations concerning the interpretation, may lead to the sketching of a new picture of this intriguing personality. One complementary to the portraits painted earlier: lyrical,³⁴ dramatic,³⁵ essayistic.³⁶

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³⁴ Andrzej KALISZEWSKI, *Gry Pana Cogito (Mr. Cogito's Games)* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, 1990); Stanisław BARAŃCZAK, *Uciekinier z Utopii. O poezji Zbigniewa Herberta (A Fugitive from Utopia. About Zbigniew Herbert's Poetry)* (Warszawa–Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2001).

³⁵ Jacek KOPCIŃSKI, *Nastuchiwanie: sztuki na głosy Zbigniewa Herberta (Listening: Zbigniew Herbert's Plays for Voices)* (Warsaw: Więzi, 2008).

³⁶ Piotr SIEMASZKO, *Zmienność i trwanie. O eseistyce Zbigniewa Herberta (Variability and Continuation. On Zbigniew Herbert's Essays)* (Bydgoszcz: Instytut Wydawniczy "Świadectwo," 1996).

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ORDERING THE WORLD.
THE AIMS OF ART IN ZBIGNIEW HERBERT'S LETTERS

Summary

This article is devoted to Zbigniew Herbert's thoughts concerning esthetics. The author interprets the poet's letters written to various people (among others, to Halina Misiółkova, Czesław Miłosz and Jerzy Zawieyski) and looks for his opinions on art and creativity. He treats the letters not as auxiliary materials for the study of poetry, but as the main subject of his research. He perceives the transition from private letters to writing poetry as a consequence of the axiological connections joining both of these types of expression. He pays special attention to Herbert's care for the consciousness of the aims of art, stemming from historical experience. The poet himself defined them in one of the letters as "ordering the world."

Key words: esthetics; philosophy of creativity; Polish epistolography; autobiography; Polish poetry after 1945; communism.

Translated by Tadeusz Karłowicz



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