

# ZBIGNIEW HERBERT

1924–1998



# W

HERE did Herbert come from; where did his poetry come from? The simplest answer is: We don't know. Just as we never know where any great artist comes from, irrespective of whether they are born in the provinces or in the capital.

Zbigniew Herbert, born in Lwów [then Poland] in 1924, led a life that especially in his youth was full of adventure and danger, though one is tempted to say that he was created rather for a quiet existence between museum and library. There are still many things we do not know about the wartime period of his life – to what extent he was engaged in the resistance, or what he experienced during the occupation. We know that he came from what is called in English the “middle classes,” and in Polish is known as the *intelligentsia*. The relative, or perhaps truly profound, orderliness of his childhood was destroyed once and for all in September 1939 by the outbreak of war.

When the war ended and Lwów was incorporated into the territory of the Soviet Union, Herbert was one of thousands of young people living in abeyance, trying to study, and hiding their underground past. The whole time up till 1956, when a political thaw altered the situation for the better, Herbert led an unsettled existence, changing addresses frequently, moving around between Gdańsk, Warsaw, Toruń, and Kraków, and taking on various jobs (when he was short of money he even sold his own blood, a painfully accurate metaphor for the life of a poet). He studied philosophy, wondering whether or not he should devote himself to it full time. He was also drawn to art history. For political reasons he was unable to bring out his first book of poetry, but he began to publish individual poems and book reviews. The year 1956, as I mentioned, changes almost everything for Herbert. His debut, *Chord of Light*, is enthusiastically received. Suddenly, thanks to the thaw, the borders of Europe are open to him, to some extent at least; he can visit France, Italy, London. From this moment there begins a new chapter in his life, one that was to last almost to his final months – he died in July 1998.

Every great poet lives between two worlds. One of these is the real, tangible world of history, private for some and public for others. The other world is a dense layer of dreams, imagination, fantasms. Herbert's dreams are sustained by various things – travels, Greece and Florence, the work of great painters, ideal cities (which he saw only in the past, not in the future, unlike many of his contemporaries). But they are also sustained by the knightly virtues of honor and courage. In him we find two central intellectual problems – participation and distance. He never forgot the horror of war and the invisible moral obligations he incurred during the occupation. He himself spoke of loyalty as a leading ethical and aesthetic yardstick. And in the poems and essays the tragic poet steps out alongside the carefree Mr Pickwick, who does not imagine that he has deserved such a great misfortune. It may be here that there lies the particular, indefinable charm of both Herbert's poetry and his essays – this tragicomic mixing of tones, the fact that the utmost gravity in no way excludes joking and irony. But the irony mostly concerns the character of the poet, or that of his porte-parole Mr Cogito, who is by and large a most imperfect fellow.

While as concerns the message of this poetry – and it is poetry with a message, however obscure – the irony does not affect it whatsoever. The paradox of Herbert, which is perhaps especially striking in our modern age, also resides in the fact that though he refers willingly and extensively to existing “cultural texts” and takes symbols from the Greeks and anywhere else, it is never in order to become a prisoner of those references and meanings – he is always lured by reality.

This poetry is about the pain of the twentieth century, about accepting the cruelty of an inhuman age, about an extraordinary sense of reality. And the fact that at the same time the poet loses none of his lyricism or his sense of humor – this is the unfathomable secret of a great artist.

**ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI**



*Herbert Zbigniew*

Własnoręczny podpis właściciela książeczki

NR 4524

1700/p

946

NOS RECTOR

ET

DECANUS COLLEGII PROFESSORUM

FACULTATIS *iuris et oeconomiae*

UNIVERSITATIS COPERNICIANAE THORUNIENSIS

hac tabula profitemur testatumque esse volumus

Dominum *Herbert Zbigniew*

oriundum *Łowia*

in album

UNIVERSITATIS COPERNICIANAE THORUNIENSIS

FACULTATIS *iuris et oeconomiae*

rite relat *um* esse. Eius rei fidem nomina ipsa subscripsimus

Thoruni, die *3* mensis *Januarii* 19 *48*

*[Signature]*  
Rector

Universitatis Copernicanae  
Thoruniensis



*[Signature]*  
Decanus Collegii Professorum  
Facultatis

Zbigniew Herbert's student record book, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, 1948



*nie do zapału*

Vezfely

muzeum bezwartosci  
wczesny pelny wiekiel i smolka  
cmentarz zielone kuratki

kościół św. Maryjki

komora: latki doznania niestety

kob, zółci, brzości: brzości

kamień: gwiazdka

złota zębów

Tutej spelni

mieliszni

tylko wille

inspirowane  
mieliszni bese



pelny wiekiel: mase  
wielomianki Vezfely







W

HAT kind of poet is Zbigniew Herbert? Is he difficult? Is he hard to follow, hard to scan, impossible to remember? Look at “Pebble” and decide for yourself.

What kind of poem is this, and what is it all about? About nature, perhaps? Perhaps. I, for one, though, think that if it is about nature, then it is about human nature. About its autonomy, about its resistance, about, if you will, its survival. In this sense it is a very Polish poem, considering that nation’s recent, more exactly, modern, history. And it is a very modern poem, because Polish history, one may say, is modern history in miniature – well, more exactly, in a pebble. Because whether you are a Pole or not, what history wants is to destroy you. The only way to survive, to endure its almost geological pressure, is to acquire the features of a pebble, including the false warmth once you find yourself in somebody’s hands.

Herbert is a poet of tremendous ethical consequence because his verse zeroes in on the cause, not just the effects, which he treats as something incidental. Which they always are. Symptoms are not the malaise.

In this sense, he is a historical poet. His pen often summons history, which is after all the mother of culture, in order to enable his reader to endure and, with luck, to overcome the vulgarity of the present. His poems show that most of our beliefs, convictions, and social concepts are in bad taste, if only because they are entertained at someone else’s expense. He is a supreme ironist, of course; to me, though, his irony is but the safety valve of his compassion, since human tragedy is repetitive.

**JOSEPH BRODSKY** 1987 Nobel Prize Winner

**I** FEEL a deep affinity with his writings. He was over thirty when his first book of poems appeared. Before 1956 the price for being published was to renounce one's own taste and he did not want to pay it. If the key to contemporary Polish poetry is the collective 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. History for him is not just a senseless repetition of crimes and illusions, and if he looks for analogies between the past and the present, it is to acquire a distance from his own times. His theory of art is based upon the rejection of "purity": to the imperturbable Apollo he opposes the howling, suffering Marsyas, though his own reticent poetry is the opposite of a howl.

**CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ** 1980 Nobel Prize Winner

## Polka Smolek

Tom Tatarski  
Zydzisz Dystyng

To uciele nie wyrażało wielkiego charakteru  
nawet nie fizjologicznie: upiór  
miałem odrobinkę niezgodnej odrogi  
leży w powrocie i zarys, było to sprawa Smolek

Tak Smolek

w którym są infolnia dury - dziesięć sił

Kto nie polubił nas lepiej - pisał w kuzaru  
stano kobiety kószow - pisał jak opłatek  
lub fantazyjne stworzy z obrazów theonimo Boscha  
leży piękno w tym czasie było było pale  
dół młoty żółte morderców barok  
Zwony polcem sprawa wielkości  
Zmieszany Mefisto w leminowicki kurtce  
wypisał w tenże umysłota stworzy  
chłopiec o twarzach ziemianianomach  
bardzo bardziej dzwoniący o uszczelnieniu iskrek

Ich odrobinę porobitko było nie do zniszczenia  
(Marek Tulowy obrazotwór w polce)  
Zamieszane do tamtylej paru polce polce  
Zadnej dystyngacji w rozumowaniu  
puste eksklamatory składano postawiana mody konsekwentnie

Tak więc estetyka może być pomocna w życiu  
nie należy zanadto bywać nauki o praktyce  
~~nie ma w tym~~ jedno jest zawsze dobrze - tego całe uciele

Zanim zformujemy obraz trzeba pilnie badać  
Kształt architektury z dania koloru umyśle  
niezgodzone siła <sup>leżący</sup> ~~szeregami~~ rytmu i proporcji - w leżemy

powinno

Każdy jest narzędziem zmysłów i myśli, dawać im pomoc  
To uciele nie wyrażało wielkiego charakteru  
miałem tylko odrobinkę nie z białej odrogi  
leży w powrocie i zarys, było to sprawa Smolek

Tak Smolek

leżący, leżący wprzei skrywanej się ucieleńi są dawać  
charakter to to miał spasi leżący, leżący ciału  
płowa.

Zanim zformujemy obraz trzeba pilnie badać  
Kształt architektury z dania koloru umyśle  
niezgodzone siła <sup>leżący</sup> ~~szeregami~~ rytmu i proporcji

polce

Ważne jest: nasz odrobinkę profucien  
leżący, leżący wprzei skrywanej się ucieleńi są dawać



Zbigniew Herbert with the heroine of Solidarity, Anna Walentynowicz, 1981. The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the workers' protests in Poznań, which were bloodily suppressed by the communist regime

**B**ARBARIAN *in the Garden* is an ironical title. This “Barbarian” who makes his pilgrimage to the sacred places is steeped in the culture and history of classical and medieval Europe, and even though there is situated at the centre of his consciousness a large burnt-out zone inscribed “what we have learned in modern times and must never forget even though we need hardly dwell upon it,” this very consciousness can still muster a sustaining half-trust in man as a civilizer and keeper of civilizations. The book is full of lines which sing out in the highest registers of intellectual rapture.

But Herbert never gets too carried away. The ground-hugging sturdiness which he recognizes and cherishes in archaic buildings has its analogue in his own down-to-earth-ness. His love of “the quiet chanting of the air and the immense planes” does not extend so far as to constitute a betrayal of the human subject, in thrall to gravity and history.

Herbert always wants to probe past official versions of collective experience into the final ring of the individual’s perception and endurance. He does so in order to discover whether that inner citadel of human being is a selfish bolt hole or an attentive listening post. To put it another way, he would not be all that interested in discovering the black box after the crash, since he would far prefer to be able to monitor the courage and conscience of each passenger during the minutes before it.

Zbigniew Herbert is a poet with all the strengths of an Antaeus, yet he finally emerges more like the figure of an Atlas. Refreshed time and again by being thrown back upon his native earth, standing his ground determinedly in the local plight, he nevertheless shoulders the whole sky and scope of human dignity and responsibility.

**SEAMUS HEANEY** 1995 Nobel Prize Winner

DIE UNIVERSITÄT WIEN VERLEIHT AUF BESCHLUSS  
DES KURATORIUMS DEN

GOTTFRIED-VON-HERDER-PREIS

DER VON DER STIFTUNG F.V.S. ZU HAMBURG  
FÜR VERDIENSTVOLLES WIRKEN IM SINNE EINER  
FRIEDLICHEN VERSTÄNDIGUNG UNTER DEN VÖLKERN  
ZUR VERFÜGUNG GESTELLT WURDE, FÜR DAS JAHR 1973

HERRN

ZBIGNIEW HERBERT

WARSAWA

ER HAT ALS LYRISCHER UND DRAMATISCHER DICHTER  
TRAUM UND ERFAHRUNG, MYTHOS UND RATIO,  
WÖRTER UND SACHEN, ZEITEN UND SYSTEME IN EIN  
ÄSTHETISCHES GLEICHGEWICHT GEBRACHT UND DARIN  
DURCH DIE STILLE KRAFT BESTÄNDIGER GEDANKEN-  
ARBEIT WIRKSAM ERHALTEN

SEINE PHILOSOPHIE IST DICHTERESCH WIE EIN POEM,  
SEINE DICHTUNG IST KLAR WIE EIN PHILOSOPHISCHER  
DIALOG, EIN BEITRAG ZU EINER SPRACHE, IN DER SICH  
DIE WELT VERSTÄNDIGEN WIRD

ALS EINER, DER SICH, WIE GOETHE ES WOLLTE, VON  
DREIßIG JAHREN RECHENSCHAFT ZU GEBEN  
WEISS, HAT ER DIE FRUCHTE DES ARENLÄNDISCHEN  
GESTESLEBENS WAHRLICH NICHT ALS „BARGAR“  
GEPLUNDERT, SONDERN ALS GÄRNER, GEPFLEGT  
UND GEMEHRT

DIESE URKUNDE IST AUSGESTELLT  
AM TAGE DER FRIEDLICHEN ÜBERGABE DES PREISES

WIEN, AM 2. MAI 1973

*Antonius Trinkl*  
REKTOR DER UNIVERSITÄT

*G. Lemus*  
VORSTAND DER STIFTUNG

BUNDESMINISTERIUM FÜR UNTERRICHT

AUF EINHELLIGEN ANTRAG  
DER JURY VERLEIHE ICH  
ZBIGNIEW HERBERT  
FÜR DAS LYRISCHE SCHAFFEN  
DEN ÖSTERREICHISCHEN  
STAATSPREIS FÜR  
EUROPÄISCHE LITERATUR  
ALS INTERNATIONALEN  
NIKOLAUS LENAU-PREIS  
WIEN-AM 25. OKTOBER 1965

DER BUNDESMINISTER FÜR UNTERRICHT:

*S. Gustav Pöhl - Püschel*

## TO MARCUS AURELIUS

*To Professor Henryk Elzenberg*

Good night Marcus put out the light  
and shut the book For overhead  
is raised a gold alarm of stars  
heaven is talking some foreign tongue  
this the barbarian cry of fear  
your Latin cannot understand  
Terror continuous dark terror  
against the fragile human land

begins to beat It's winning Hear  
its roar The unrelenting stream  
of elements will drown your prose  
until the world's four walls go down  
As for us? — to tremble in the air  
blow in the ashes stir the ether  
gnaw our fingers seek vain words  
drag off the fallen shades behind us

Well Marcus better hang up your peace  
give me your hand across the dark  
Let it tremble when the blind world beats  
on senses five like a failing lyre  
Traitors — universe and astronomy  
reckoning of stars wisdom of grass  
and your greatness too immense  
and Marcus my defenseless tears

## ANSWER

It will be a night of deep snow  
thick enough to muffle steps  
deep shadow changing bodies  
into two puddles of darkness  
we're lying holding our breath  
even thought's lowest whisper

if wolves don't track us down  
or a man in a fur coat cradling  
fast-shooting death on his chest  
we'll have to jump up and run  
amid a din of short dry salvos  
to that longed-for other shore

everywhere earth is the same  
it teaches wisdom everywhere  
a man is weeping white tears  
mothers are cradling children  
the moon is beginning to rise  
and building us a white house

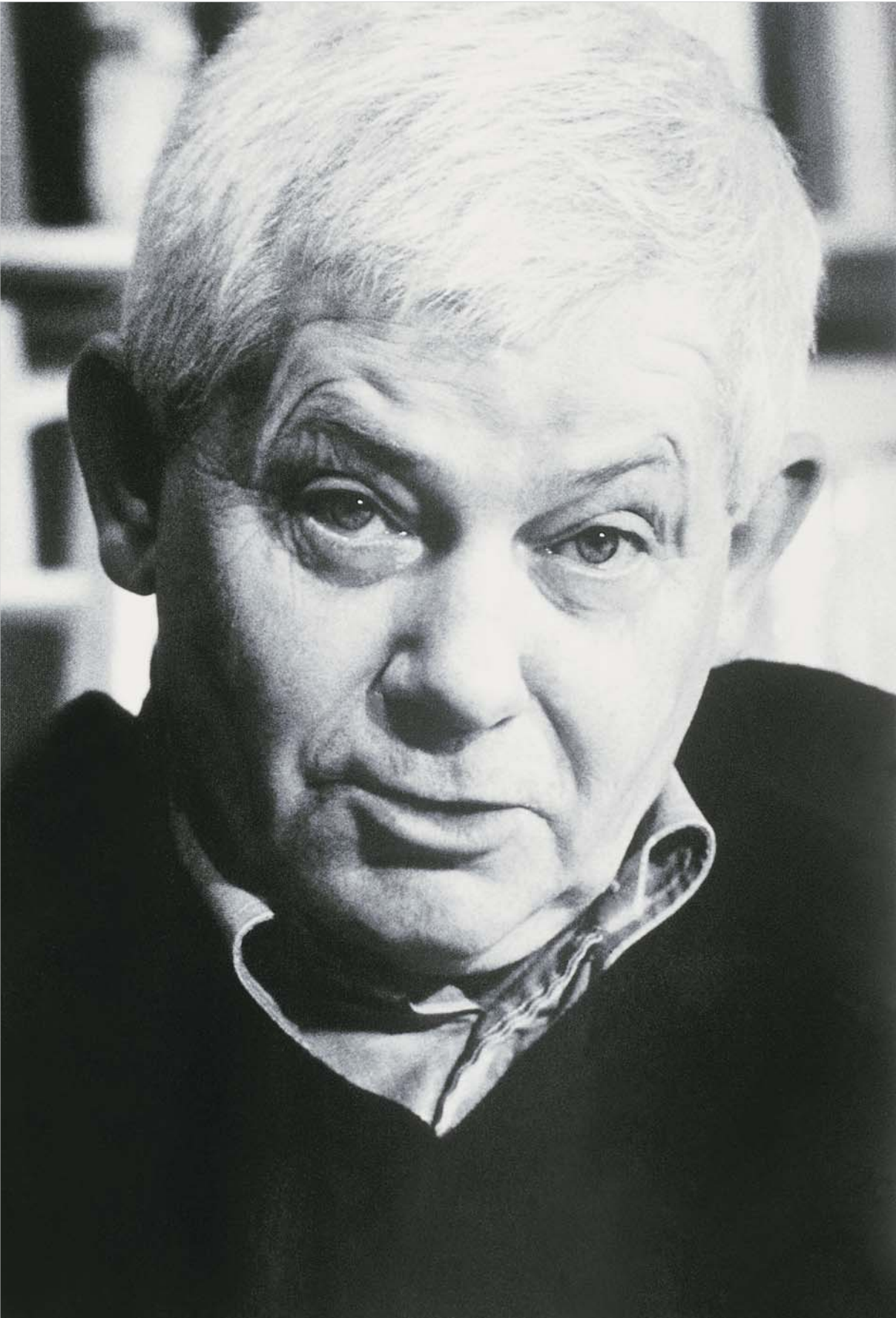
It will be a night after hard waking  
the conspiracy of the imagination  
tastes of bread is light as wodka  
yet every dream of palm trees  
confirms our choice to stay here

the dream is cut off by three tall  
rubber-and-iron men who enter  
check your name check for fear  
and order you down the stairway  
not allowing you to take a thing  
but a guard's compassionate face

Hellenic Roman medieval  
Indian Elizabethan Italian  
probably French above all  
a bit of Weimar Versailles  
we lug so many homelands  
on one back on one earth

but the one homeland I'm sure  
to keep in the singular is here  
where you're trod into the mud  
or with a proudly ringing spade  
they dig a fair hole for longing





## 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 from their foreheads

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

I strike the board  
it answers 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 moralist's dry poem  
yes — yes  
no — no

## THE ENVOY OF MR COGITO

Go where the others went before to the dark boundary  
for the golden fleece of nothingness your last reward

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

you have survived not so that you might live  
you have little time you must give testimony

be courageous when reason fails you be courageous  
in the final reckoning it is the only thing that counts

and your helpless Anger — may it be like the sea  
whenever you hear the voice of the insulted and beaten

may you never be abandoned by your sister Scorn  
for informers executioners cowards — they will win  
go to your funeral with relief throw a lump of earth  
a woodworm will write you a smooth-shaven life

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

beware however of overweening pride  
examine your fool's face in the mirror  
repeat: I was called — was there no one better than I

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

Keep watch — when a light on a hill gives a sign — rise and go  
as long as the blood is still turning the dark star in your breast

repeat humanity's old incantations fairy tales and legends  
for that is how you will attain the good you will not attain  
repeat great words repeat them stubbornly  
like those who crossed a desert and perished in the sand



## APOLLO AND MARSYAS

The real duel of Apollo  
with Marsyas  
(absolute ear  
versus immense range)  
takes place in the evening  
when as we already know  
the judges  
have awarded victory to the god

bound tight to a tree  
meticulously stripped of his skin  
Marsyas  
howls  
before the howl reaches his tall ears  
he reposes in the shadow of that howl

shaken by a shudder of disgust  
Apollo is cleaning his instrument

only seemingly  
is the voice of Marsyas  
monotonous  
and composed of a single vowel  
A

in reality  
Marsyas relates  
the inexhaustible wealth  
of his body

bald mountains of liver  
white ravines of aliment  
rustling forests of lung  
sweet hillocks of muscle  
joints bile blood and shudders  
the wintry wind of bone  
over the salt of memory

shaken by a shudder of disgust  
Apollo is cleaning his instrument

now to the chorus  
is joined the backbone of Marsyas  
in principle the same A  
only deeper with the addition of rust

this is already beyond the endurance  
of the god with nerves of artificial fibre

along a gravel path  
hedged with box  
the victor departs  
wondering  
whether out of Marsyas' howling  
there will not some day arise  
a new kind  
of art — let us say — concrete

suddenly  
at his feet  
falls a petrified nightingale

he looks back  
and sees  
that the hair of the tree to which Marsyas was fastened  
is white

completely

## 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 no 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 defenseless 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  
the 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 of the ant-hill and the clock's 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



karu vj

## WHY THE CLASSICS

*To A.H.*

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 endeavors  
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  
unfavorable winds

Thucydides says only  
that he had seven ships  
it was winter  
and he sailed quickly

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 be like lovers' weeping  
in a small dirty hotel  
when wallpaper dawns



## PEBBLE

The pebble  
is a perfect creature

equal to itself  
mindful of its limits

filled exactly  
with a pebbly meaning

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

its ardor 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



## NIKE WHO HESITATES

Nike is most beautiful at the moment  
when she hesitates  
her right hand beautiful as a command  
rests against the air  
but her wings tremble

For she sees  
a solitary youth  
he goes down the long tracks  
of a war chariot  
on a gray road in a gray landscape  
of rocks and scattered juniper bushes

that youth will perish soon  
right now the scale containing his fate  
abruptly falls  
toward the earth

Nike would terribly like  
to go up  
and kiss him on the forehead

but she is afraid  
that he who has never known  
the sweetness of caresses  
having tasted it  
might run off like the others  
during the battle

Thus Nike hesitates  
and at last decides  
to remain in the position  
which sculptors taught her  
being mightily ashamed of that flash of emotion

she understands  
that tomorrow at dawn  
this boy must be found  
with an open breast  
closed eyes  
and the acid obol of his country  
under his numb tongue

## MR COGITO AND THE IMAGINATION

1

Mr Cogito has never trusted  
the tricks of the imagination

the piano at the top of the Alps  
played concerts false to his ear

he had no regard for labyrinths  
the Sphinx filled him with disgust

he lived in a cellarless house  
without mirrors or dialectics

jungles of tangled images  
were never his homeland

he rarely got carried away  
on the wings of a metaphor  
he then plunged like Icarus  
into the arms of the Great Mother

he adored tautologies  
explanations  
*idem per idem*

a bird is a bird  
slavery slavery  
a knife a knife  
death is death

he loved  
a flat horizon  
a straight line  
earth's gravity

Mr Cogito  
will be counted  
among the species *minores*

he will receive indifferently  
the verdict of men of letters

he employed the imagination  
for wholly different purposes

he wanted to make of it  
an instrument of compassion

he longed to understand fully

- Pascal's night
- the nature of a diamond
- the prophets' melancholy
- the wrath of Achilles
- the fury of mass murderers
- the dreams of Mary Stuart
- the fear of Neanderthals
- the last Aztecs' despair
- Nietzsche's long dying
- the Lascaux painter's joy
- the rise and fall of an oak
- the rise and fall of Rome

in order to revive the dead  
and maintain the covenant

Mr Cogito's imagination  
moves like a pendulum

it runs with great precision  
from suffering to suffering

there is no place in it  
for poetry's artificial fires

he wants to be true  
to uncertain clarity

## THE POWER OF TASTE

*For Professor Izydora Dąmbska*

It did not take any great character  
our refusal dissent and persistence  
we had a scrap of necessary courage  
but essentially it was a matter of taste

Yes taste

which has fibers of soul and the gristle of conscience

Who knows if we'd been better more prettily tempted  
sent women pink and flat as wafers  
or fantastic creatures out of Hieronymus Bosch  
but what did hell look like in those days  
a mud pit a cutthroat's alley a barracks  
called a Palace of Justice  
a moonshine Mephisto in a Lenin jacket  
sent Aurora's grandchildren into the field  
boys with potato-eaters' faces  
very ugly girls with red hands

Truly their rhetoric was just too shoddy  
(Marcus Tullius turned in his grave)  
chains of tautologies a few flailing concepts  
torturers' dialectics reasoning without grace  
syntax devoid of the beauty of the subjunctive

So in fact aesthetics can be an aid in life  
one shouldn't neglect the study of beauty

Before we assent we must examine closely  
architectural forms rhythms of drum and fife  
official colors the homely rituals of burial

Our eyes and ears refused to submit  
our princely senses chose proud exile

It did not take any great character  
we had a scrap of necessary courage  
but in essence it was a matter of taste

Yes taste

which tells you to walk out wince spit out your scorn  
even if for that your body's precious capital the head  
would roll

Jodmowa

To wcale nie wymagało wielkiego charakteru  
nasza <sup>niecierpliwość</sup> ~~niecierpliwość~~ niezgoda i upór  
mieliśmy odrobinę koniecznej odwagi  
lecz w gruncie rzeczy była to sprawa smaku  
Tak smaku  
w którym są włókna duszy i chrząstki sumienia

H

Kto wie gdyby nas lepiej i piękniej kuszone  
siano kobiety różowe płaskie jak opłatek  
lub fantastyczne ~~st~~twory z obrazów Hieronima Boscha  
lecz piekło w tym czasie było ~~była~~ jakie  
dół mokry zaułek morderców barak

nazwany

nazwany pałacem sprawiedliwości  
samogonny Mefisto w leninowskiej kurtce  
posyłał w teren wnuczka Aurory  
chłopców o twarzach ziemniaczanych  
bardzo brzydkie dziewczyny o czerwonych rękach

Zaiste H

Zaiste ~~retoryka~~ ~~paraboli~~ ~~była~~ ~~nie do zniszczenia~~  
/ Marek Tuliusz obracał się w grobie /

Tautology  
poprawców  
H

~~parafrazowanie~~ ~~as~~ tautologii parę pojęć jak cepy  
dialektyka ~~tytułów~~ żadnej dystynkcji w rozumowaniu  
~~puszte oklamacje~~ siadnia pozbawiona urody koniunktywu

Z

Tak więc estetyka może być pomocna w życiu  
~~nie należy zaniedbywać nauki o pięknie~~  
Zanim zgłosimy akces trzeba pilnie badać  
kształt architektury rytm bębnow i piszczałek  
kolory oficjalne nikczemny rytuał pogrzebów

Nasze oczy i uszy odmówiły posłuchu  
księżęta naszych zmysłów wybrały dumne wygnanie

y

## REPORT FROM A BESIEGED CITY

Too old to carry arms and fight like the others –

I was mercifully given the supporting role of a chronicler  
I write down – not knowing for whom – a siege's history

I have to be precise but I don't know when the siege began  
two centuries ago in December September dawn yesterday  
we here are all suffering from the loss of a sense of time

we were left only the place and an attachment to the place  
we govern ruins of temples ghosts of gardens and houses  
if we lose our ruins we will be left with nothing

I write as best I can in the rhythm of these endless weeks  
Monday: stores are empty a rat is now the unit of currency  
Tuesday: the mayor has been killed by unknown assassins  
Wednesday: cease-fire talks the enemy interned our envoys  
we don't know where they are that is where they were shot  
Thursday: after a stormy meeting a majority of votes rejected  
the motion of the local merchants for unconditional surrender  
Friday: plague broke out Saturday: N.N. a staunch defender  
committed suicide Sunday: no water we resisted an assault  
at the eastern gate the one called the Gate of the Covenant

I know it's all monotonous it won't move anyone to tears

I avoid comment emotion keep a tight rein write on facts  
it appears only facts have value on the foreign markets  
but with a kind of pride I long to bring news to the world  
of the new breed of children we raised owing to the war  
our children don't like fairy tales they have their fun killing  
waking and sleeping they dream of soup of bread and bone  
just like dogs and cats

in the evening I like to wander along the edges of the City  
skirting the borders of our uncertain liberty  
I watch from above an ant procession of troops their lights  
I listen to the noise of drums and the barbarians shrieking  
it is truly beyond me why the City is still defending itself

the siege is taking a long time our enemies have to take turns  
nothing unites them apart from the desire for our destruction  
Goths Tartars Swedes Caesar's men ranks of the Transfiguration  
who can count them  
the banners change their colors like a forest against the horizon  
a delicate bird yellow in spring through green to winter's black

then in the evening freed from the facts I can meditate  
on ancient questions remote ones for instance about our  
allies across the sea I know they feel sincere compassion  
they send flour sacks encouragement lard and good advice  
they don't even know it was their fathers who betrayed us  
they were our allies from the time of the second Apocalypse  
the sons are blameless deserve gratitude so we are grateful

they have not lived through a siege long as an eternity  
they who are touched by misfortune are always alone  
defenders of the Dalai Lama the Kurds and the Afghans

now as I write these words those who favor appeasement  
have acquired an advantage over the party of the staunch  
an ordinary mood swing the stakes are still being weighed

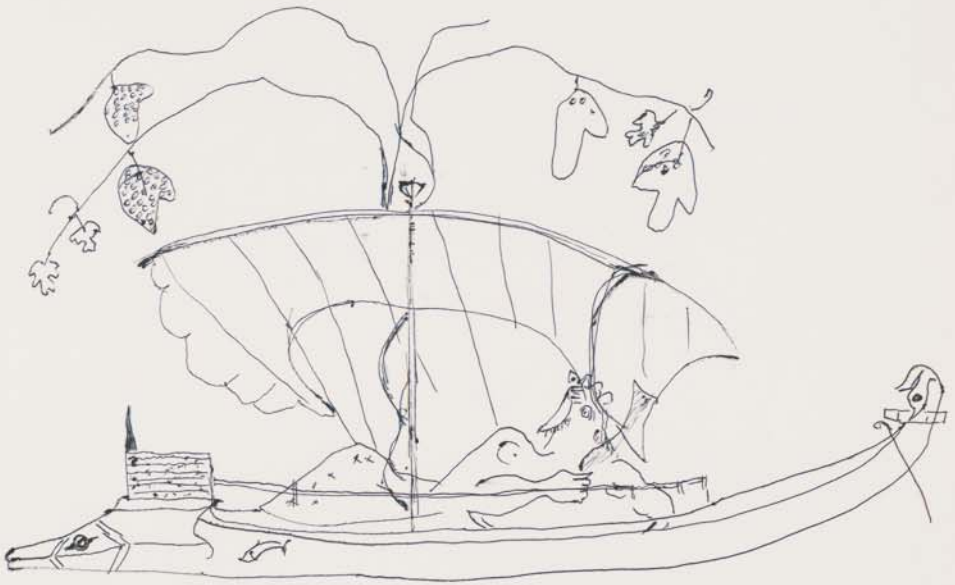
cemeteries are growing the number of defenders shrinking  
but the defense continues and it will continue to the end

and if the City falls and one man survives  
he will carry the City inside him on the paths of exile  
he will be the City

we look into hunger's face the face of fire face of death  
the worst of all – the face of betrayal

and only our dreams have not been humiliated

1982



*Faint, illegible text or a signature, possibly in Chinese characters, located below the fish drawing.*

ONE OF THE DEADLY SINS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE IS THAT IT pettily avoids a frontal confrontation with the highest values. Also the arrogant conviction that we can do without models (both aesthetic and moral), because our place in the world is supposedly so exceptional and can't be compared with anything. That's why we reject the aid of tradition and stumble around in our solitude, digging around in the dark corners of the abandoned little soul.

There exists a false view to the effect that tradition is like a fortune, a legacy, which you inherit mechanically, without effort, and that's why those who object to inheritance and unearned privileges are against tradition. But in fact every contact with the past requires an effort, a labor, and a difficult and thankless labor to boot, for our little "I" whines and balks at it.

I have always wished that I would never lose the belief that great works of the spirit are more objective than we are. And they will judge us. Someone very rightly said that not only do we read Homer, look at frescoes of Giotto, listen to Mozart, but Homer, Giotto and Mozart steal looks at us, eavesdrop on us and ascertain our vanity and stupidity. Poor utopians, debutants of history, museum arsonists, liquidators of the past, are like those madmen who destroy works of art because they cannot forgive them their serenity, dignity and cool radiance.

"The Little Soul" [extract], in: *The Labyrinth on the Sea*

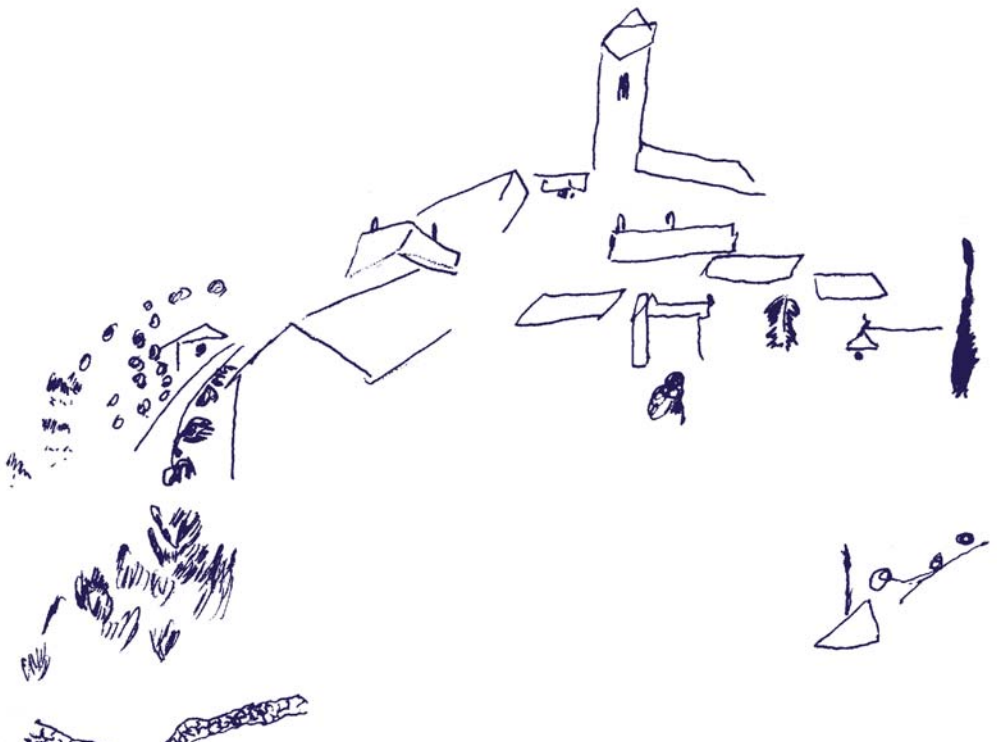


THE INVESTIGATION, HOWEVER, WAS OVER AND THE ENVOYS OF CLEMENT V assisted passively at the passing of the sentence. The leaders of the Templars faced life imprisonment. The sentence of Jacques de Molay and Geoffroi de Charney was read in Notre-Dame Cathedral. A great crowd listened in silence; but before the reading of the sentence could be completed, both men – perhaps the dignified Gothic of Notre-Dame exercised its influence – faced the people and shouted down the charges of crime and heresy levelled against the Templars whose rule “was always sacred, right and Catholic.” A sentry’s heavy hand fell on the mouth of the Master to muffle the last words of the condemned. The cardinals handed over the recalcitrant to the court of Paris. Philip the Fair commanded burning at the stake on the same day. To appease his anger, he gave to the flames another thirty-six unrepentant brothers.

High Jury, that appears to be the end of the drama of the Templar Order. Experts rummage the tombs for a clue to the mystery. Sometimes they come across the gifts of eternity, sometimes they are fascinated by the smile of the alleged Baphomet found on a portal. The defence set forth a more modest task: examination of the tools.

In history nothing remains closed. The methods used against the Templars enriched the repertoire of power. That is why we cannot leave this distant affair under the pale fingers of archivists.

“Defence of the Templars” [extract], in: *Barbarian in the Garden*



TULIPOMANIA – THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY BOTANICAL FOLLY WE know – was an episode inscribed on the margin of Great History. We have chosen it not without reason. It should be honestly confessed: we have a strange liking for presenting follies in the sanctuaries of reason, and we also like to study catastrophes against a gentle landscape. There are reasons more important than frivolous personal or aesthetic inclinations, however. For doesn't the affair we have described remind us of other, more dangerous follies of humanity that consist in the irrational attachment to a single idea, a single symbol, or a single formula for happiness?

This is why we cannot put a large period after the date 1637 and consider the matter definitively closed. It is not reasonable to erase it from memory, or count it among the inconceivable fads of the past. If tulipomania was a kind of psychological epidemic, and this is what we believe, the probability exists – bordering on certainty – that one day it will afflict us again in this or another form.

In some Far Eastern port it is getting ready for the journey.

“The Bitter Smell of Tulips” [extract], in: *Still Life with a Bridle*

Roger V. d. Weyden

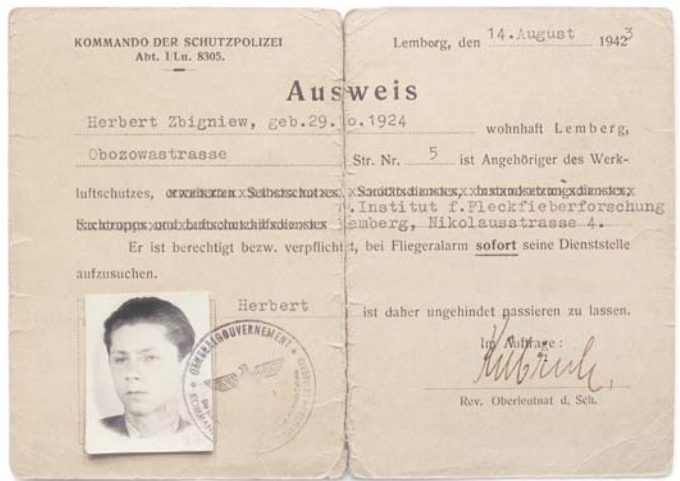




Norman Fruman and Zbigniew Herbert, California State College, Los Angeles, 1970



Zbigniew Herbert's Dienstausweis and Ausweis, Lwów 1943. Documents issued by the German occupation authorities



Zbigniew Herbert (born October 29, 1924 in Lwów, died July 28, 1998 in Warsaw) — Polish poet, essayist, dramatist and author of radio plays. Economist and lawyer by training, he also studied philosophy. During the Second World War he was a member of the resistance movement. He published his first volume of poems, *Chord of Light*, only in 1956, following the events of the Polish October when the Stalinist repressions had been softened. From 1958, he often stayed abroad, living mainly in Paris and Berlin, from where he ventured frequently to Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Austria and England. In the 1970–71 academic year, he taught modern literature as visiting professor at the California State College in Los Angeles.

Author of 9 volumes of poems (the best known are: *Study of the Object*, *Mr Cogito*, *Report from a Besieged City*).

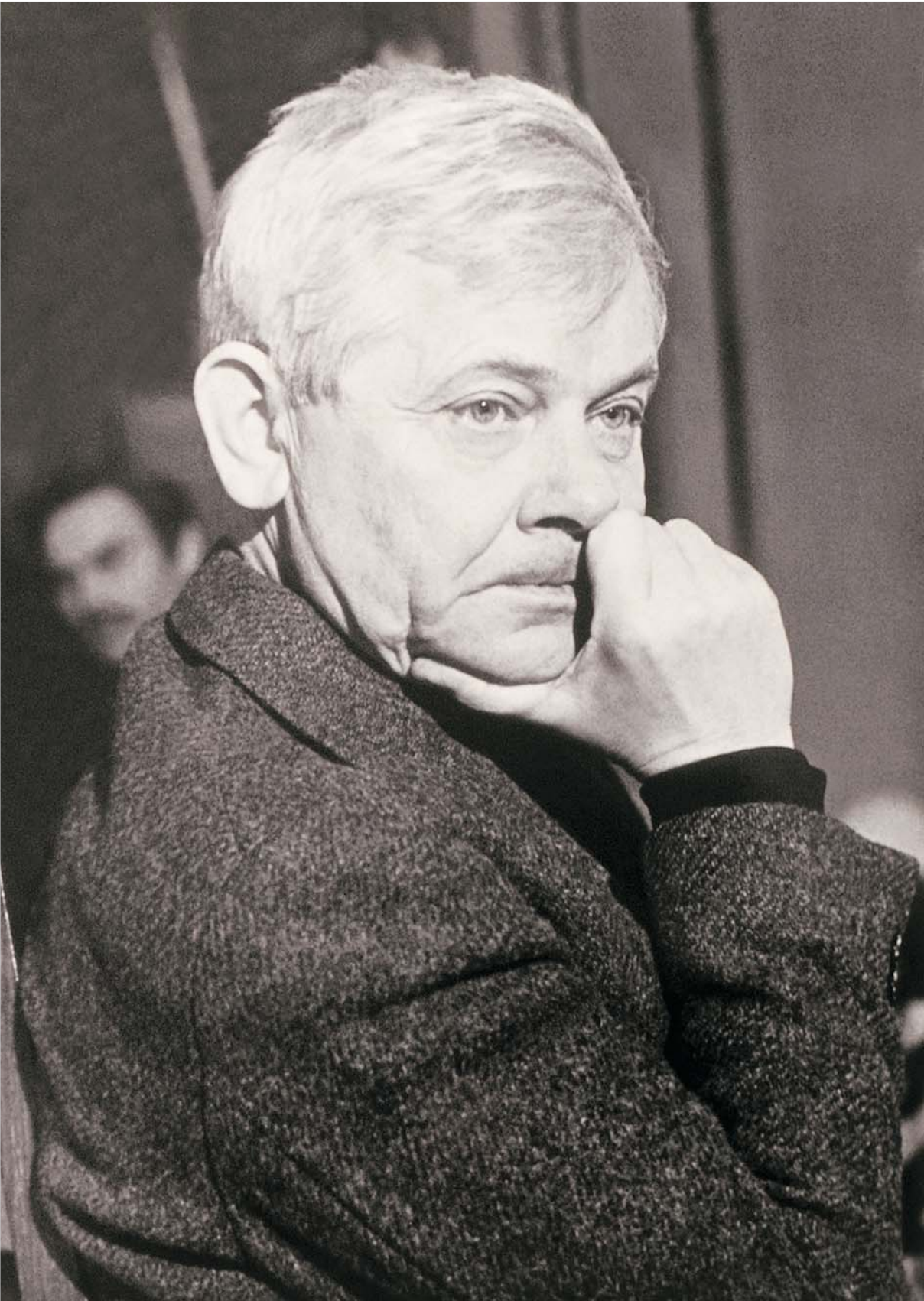
His volumes of essays *The Labyrinth on the Sea*, *Barbarian in the Garden* and *Still Life with a Bridle* make an extraordinary story of “the golden age” of European art and civilization.

Prize-winner of many international awards, including: Internationaler Nikolaus Lenau Preis (Vienna 1965), Johann Gottfried von Herder Preis (Vienna 1973), Petrarca-Preis (Verona 1979); Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society (Jerusalem 1991), Preis der SWR-Bestenliste (Baden-Baden 1994), T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing, awarded by The Ingersoll Foundation (USA 1995); Preis der Stadt Münster für Europäische Poesie (Münster 1997).

Zbigniew Herbert’s works have so far been translated into 35 languages.

Zbigniew Herbert’s passport, 1986–92





On July 10, 2007 the Sejm (Parliament) of the Republic of Poland declared the year 2008 as the Year of Zbigniew Herbert. The resolution reads:

On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the poet Zbigniew Herbert, one of the most outstanding writers of our times, the Sejm (Parliament) of the Republic of Poland has decided to pay tribute to the artist, who – creatively referring to the great tradition of European culture – enriched and strengthened it.

In times of a crisis of values and painful despondency, he stood firmly on the side of values: in arts – the canon of beauty, hierarchy and craft, in life – ethical codes, clearly separating the notions of good and evil. For many, he was a tragic and steadfast writer, an embodiment of faithfulness – to himself and the word.

Courageous and free-thinking, he expressed in his poetry the love for freedom, the faith in the dignity of the individual and its moral strength. He perceived patriotism as tough love, non-idealizing and requiring from those who profess it, not only sacrifice but also enlightened criticism, not only noble gestures but also hard work and responsibility.

He introduced into the Polish language an expression – commandment, the words “Be faithful Go.”

Being deeply assured of the exceptional value of his literature, the Sejm (Parliament) of the Republic of Poland hereby declares the year 2008 as the Year of Zbigniew Herbert.

## POLISH FIRST EDITIONS

### POETRY

*Struna światła (Chord of Light)*. Warsaw, Czytelnik 1956.

*Hermes, pies i gwiazda (Hermes, Dog and Star)*. Warsaw, Czytelnik 1957.

*Studium przedmiotu (Study of the Object)*. Warsaw, Czytelnik 1961.

*Napis (Inscription)*. Warsaw, Czytelnik 1969.

*Pan Cogito (Mr Cogito)*. Warsaw, Czytelnik 1974.

*Raport z oblężonego miasta i inne wiersze (Report from a Besieged City and Other Poems)*. Paris, Instytut Literacki 1983.

*Elegia na odejście (Elegy for the Departure)*. Paris, Instytut Literacki 1990.

*Rovigo*. Wrocław, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 1992.

*Epilog burzy (Epilogue to a Storm)*. Wrocław, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 1998.

### PLAYS

*Dramaty (Plays)*. Warsaw, PIW 1970. Including: *Jaskinia filozofów (The Cave of Philosophers)*, *Rekonstrukcja poety (Reconstruction of a Poet)*, *Drugi pokój (The Second Room)*, *Lalek*.

### ESSAYS

*Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie (Barbarian in the Garden)*. Warsaw, Czytelnik 1962.

*Martwa natura z wędzidłem (Still Life with a Bridle)*. Wrocław, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 1993.

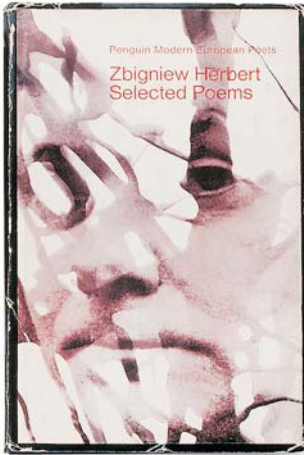
*Labirynt nad morzem (The Labyrinth on the Sea)*. Warsaw, Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich 2000.

*Król mrówek (The King of the Ants)*. Kraków, Wydawnictwo a5 2001.

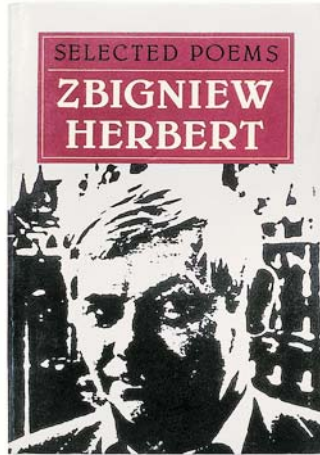
### PRESS ARTICLES

*Węzeł gordyjski oraz inne pisma rozproszone (The Gordian Knot and Other Scattered Writings)*. Warsaw, Biblioteka Więzi 2001.

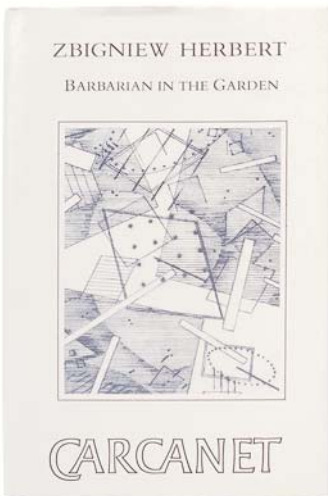
## ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS SELECTED WORKS



*Selected Poems.* Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books 1968; reprinted by Carcanet (Manchester) in 1985 and by The Ecco Press (New York) in 1986.

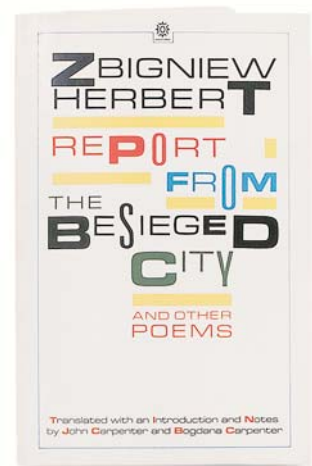


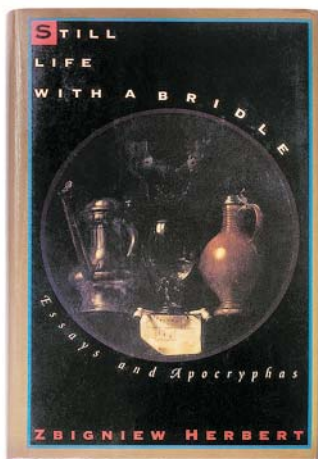
*Selected Poems.* Translated with an introduction and notes by John and Bogdana Carpenter. Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977.



*Barbarian in the Garden.* Translated by Michael March and Jarosław Anders. Manchester, Carcanet 1985; reprinted by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (San Diego) in 1986.

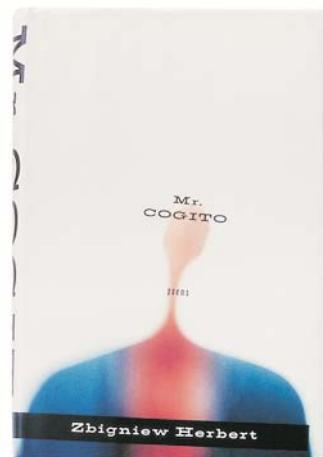
*Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems.* Translated with an introduction and notes by John and Bogdana Carpenter. New York, The Ecco Press 1985; reprinted by Oxford University Press (Oxford) in 1987.



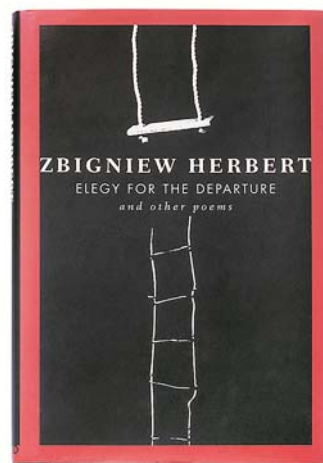


*Still Life with a Bridle. Essays and Apocryphas.* Translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter. New York, The Ecco Press 1991; reprinted by Jonathan Cape (London) in 1993 and by Vintage (New York) in 1994.

*Mr Cogito.* Translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter. New York, The Ecco Press 1993; reprinted by Oxford University Press (Oxford) in 1993.



*Elegy for the Departure and Other Poems.* Translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter. Hopewell, The Ecco Press 1999.



*The King of the Ants. Mythological Essays.* Translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter. Hopewell, The Ecco Press 1999.

*The Collected Poems. 1956–1998.* Translated and edited by Alissa Valles, with additional translations by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott, introduction by Adam Zagajewski. New York, Ecco 2007.

