

The Courage to Live

by Ewa Thompson

“Often the test of courage is not to die but to live.”

—Vittorio Alfieri, *Oreste* (1785)

The Collected Poems: 1956-1998
by Zbigniew Herbert
New York: Ecco Press; 600 pp., \$34.95

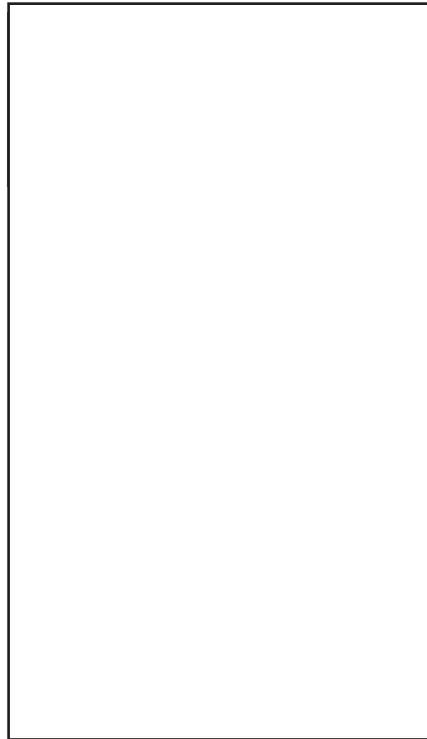


This volume is the first complete English translation of Zbigniew Herbert's poetry—a cause for rejoicing. And, although Alissa Valles's translations are a bit gray, as if sprinkled with fine dust, they are invariably precise and never overstated. While there is more sonorousness in the original Polish, and I like some of the earlier translations by the Milosz-Scott-Carpenter teams, this volume's completeness weighs heavily in its favor. The notes, chronology, and index help navigation considerably.

Zbigniew Herbert, a Polish poet, died in 1998 of causes attributable to poverty. The T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing, which he gratefully received from the Ingersoll Foundation in 1995, brightened his final years somewhat, but it could not undo the circumstances in which he spent his youth and middle age. Poverty shortens lives in ways that are not always traceable. Score one more point for that great Darkness that came from the East.

Years ago, Leopold Tyrmand told me that Herbert should have received the Nobel Prize, and I heartily agreed. But there was no mighty society of friends standing behind him: He never lived near the centers of power and came from an unprestigious country. Still, he had a

Ewa Thompson is research professor of Slavic Studies at Rice University.



Scott P. Richert

following in America, and hundreds of people on American campuses recited his poetry; there was a Mr. Cogito Press (named after one of Herbert's poetic alter egos) somewhere in Oregon at one time; and his collections of poetry have been reviewed in all the journals that possess the correct zip codes. In Soviet-occupied Poland, he was one of the points of light that appear so unexpectedly and against all odds among Poles in all epochs of history. His literary debut was delayed until 1956, when he was 30, because he did not wish to enter a Devil's deal with the regime. His consecutive volumes of poetry were snatched from bookstores by Polish students the way that pop stars' CDs are in today's America. He was adored by the left and the right, and it is said that Adam Michnik—the leftist Polish intellectual (now a neocon) who, in the 1990's, did his best to destroy Herbert's reputation—

once fell on his knees before him. After the suppression of Solidarity by the Moscow-controlled government of Poland in 1981, Herbert continued to publish in *Tygodnik Solidarność* (*Solidarity Weekly*). Angered by the fraternizing of the Polish neocons such as Michnik (who had moved from the leftist to the neocon position, just as many Americans did) with the ex-communists, he criticized them, and they retaliated devastatingly in Michnik's daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which, through the cat's paws of its writers, suggested that Herbert wrote himself out or even lost his marbles.

The necessity to go into these details illustrates the difficulty of writing about the great literary figures who are unsupported by common knowledge of their countries' literary and intellectual history. This is what Edward Said had in mind when he lamented the “orientalist” ways of Western intellectuals pontificating on countries whose language and history they do not know, instructing those who know even less. The texture of allusions, memories, connotations, and nuances can only be lamely recreated even by those who lived in the poet's country; here, I am trying to do precisely this.

How best then to describe Herbert to those who do not know him? Imagine T.S. Eliot conceiving *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* in a Soviet-controlled country, while being exposed to the “invigorating knowledge that we are alone” (“September 17,” Herbert's poem referring to the Soviet Union's attack on Poland two weeks after the Nazi attack of September 1, 1939). Eliot had to come to terms with the Prufrocks, with typists who

“lay out food in tins,” with “the women [who] come and go / talking of Michelangelo.” Imagine him having to come to terms with total loss: “They who lost now dance with bells on their ankles . . . they gave up history and fell into the sloth of showcases” (“They Who Lost”). This is why “The Envoy of Mr. Cogito” (*Mr. Cogito*, 1974) is more profound than anything that can be found in Eliot: Greater suffering creates deeper knowledge.

In other words, Herbert is difficult to explain to the conservative Anglo audience. While he did make it to the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*, he served there for many years as one of the “dissidents,” to be paraded before liberal and enlightened America and then discarded for newer pursuits. In communist times, the dissidents “from over there” replaced Michelangelo in New York’s casual party conversations. In such circumstances, the reception of Herbert’s poetry was necessarily superficial: Beyond a few *oh*’s and *ah*’s, there was no chance for a deeper assimilation or academic analysis. It is not true that great poets need no interpreters. The incorporation of Shakespeare into the English language and thinking was a gradual process; it is doubtful that the *profanum vulgus* watching his plays in Elizabethan times fully grasped their greatness. To be incorporated into a culture, the great poet needs much attention. Many people have to ponder and rephrase his meanings. In the English language, Herbert has had no such army of facilitators, and, even in his native Poland, the urgent task of removing the rubble of Soviet colonialism has delayed many serious readings. To incorporate Herbert’s insights into the English language the way Shakespeare’s insights have been incorporated (although I am *not* placing an equation mark here) would take a host of dissertations, articles, books, and discussions. In their absence, the chances of Herbert transforming Anglophone thinking are slim. Yet my suggestion that he has this potential should alert readers that Alissa Valles’s book is a treasure trove worth exploring. Herbert’s vision of the world and the rhythm of his poetry are profoundly original, and his ability to infuse his readers with the courage to live is unmatched.

One could divide all poets into those whose words flow effortlessly and abundantly (Walt Whitman or, in Poland, Juliusz Slowacki—both Romantics) and those who drop words sparingly, as if in

pain. Herbert (and Eliot) belong to the second category. This is evident in the volume *Hermes, Dog, and Star* (1957), where, in “A Knocker,” the poet says:

There are those who grow
gardens in their heads . . .

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

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

I thump on the board
and it prompts me
with the moralist’s dry poem.

Unlike the poets who have received the Nobel Prize since 1948 (when Eliot got his), Herbert distrusts metaphors and favors metonymies, and sometimes eschews both, achieving poetic effects with rhythm only. He writes “free” verse, with hardly any punctuation and using as few verbs as possible. His is a world of things—things that are. No poet makes us rediscover ordinary things better than Herbert—things such as tables, chairs, and beds, objects toward which we should feel gratitude, for they never fail us. “I have never observed a chair shift from one foot to another, or a bed rear on its hind legs,” states the poet, “I suspect that objects do this from pedagogical considerations, to reprove us constantly for our instability” (“Objects”). The physical world on which Herbert lavished attention was contained in a three-room flat in a grim block of flats in southern Warsaw, where all the inconveniences of the multiple uses of the same room were clearly visible. Only Herbert’s cat lived in luxury.

In *Study of the Object* (1961), “Pebble” is not a rehearsal of the Platonic essence, as a casual reader might conclude. It is a deeply Thomistic meditation on the phenomenon of being. The poems in this volume could have only been written in a country permeated—nay, saturated—with a Thomistic worldview. This is what distinguishes Poland from other European countries and makes it *sui generis*. Only in Poland has the Thomistic *Weltanschauung* become the bedrock of both artistic expression and public debates—such as they are, mutilated by

colonialism and ignorance, but deeply Thomistic in their core, deeply committed to the premise that two plus two equals four; that discourse is not merely a human creation and therefore cannot be infinitely manipulated; that names are firmly attached to objects because there exists the One who told us He has a name, and that name is hallowed.

Poems invoking the name of Mr. Cogito abound. In “Mr Cogito and the imagination,” the speaker declares that he has never trusted the imagination, and instead has adored tautologies: “a bird is a bird / slavery slavery / a knife a knife / death is death.” This is a fundamentally Thomistic observation of a poet who, unlike T.S. Eliot, had to cope not only with the Prufrocks and evenings resembling patients etherized against the sky, but also with “the abrupt change / of life into archeology” when the poet takes long walks “down avenues of burned houses” and observes a city “without morning papers / without evening papers / [where] there is no / prison / clock / or water” (“Abandoned”).

Herbert, as the chronicler of objects, easily moves from tables and chairs to the Dutch and Italian masters, to the still lifes painted by painters long dead, cathedrals built by builders unknown yet living in their designs. He is deeply immersed in the material world; he is a “materialist” in the sense in which Dostoyevsky’s characters sometimes describe themselves as “materialist” (Prince Myshkin); by the same token, the Devil is an idealist. Herbert holds firm to the material world—not for him the parallel worlds of dreams invoked by some contemporary poets.

Herbert’s poems proclaim the futility of manipulating language in ways that some contemporary philosophers take for granted. These poems confirm the existence of an area of thought to which the vulgarizers and the “flatteners” have no access. While the telling of untruths has been perfected in postmodern times and good writers have emerged that are no more than public-relations men, not all the territory has been conquered. Herbert’s poems remind us that winning has many meanings, and that the most popular meaning is not necessarily the one we are looking for. In “What Mr. Cogito thinks of Hell” we read:

Contrary to popular opinion [the lowest circle of hell] is not populated by despots, matricides, or those who lust after the flesh of others. It

is a retreat for artists, full of mirrors, instruments, and paintings.

This defiance of the *Zeitgeist* also operates on a lower level. “Silk of a soul” describes a lover overwhelmed by what fellow poet Anna Akhmatova has called the desire to penetrate to the innermost depths of the beloved. In Herbert, the lover surreptitiously uses the open mouth of the sleeping beloved to peek inside. “I expected . . . a house by a lake great and silent.” Instead, he catches sight of “a pair of silk stockings.” Crushed, he will buy her these dreamed-of stockings but asks himself what will replace them: “Will it be something / which cannot be touched / even with one finger of a dream?”

The tone of Herbert’s poetry is somber, as befits a man who has seen monsters go unpunished and straight shooters maligned and executed; one who has seen cities vanish, as Samarkand did under Ghenghis Khan. Even though he does not always write about these things, they are the silent background of his poetry. The more one reads Herbert, the clearer the contours become of the historical horrors he partly witnessed and partly heard about from other inhabitants of Mitteleuropa who lived under the Soviet military occupation for 50 long years.

There is also a playful side to Herbert: The equivalents of *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* are scattered throughout his *oeuvre*. I particularly like the short prose poems about “Bears,” “Elephant,” and “Hermes, Dog, and Star.”

Herbert was a cult figure in Soviet-occupied Poland, somewhat like Walter Benjamin among American humanities professors in the first part of this century. While the comparison may be unsavory, it does convey the worshipers’ feeling that a certain body of writings will eventually destroy what the worshipers deem undesirable. Herbert’s poetry provided Poles and others with the assurance that one is not alone, and that the victory of the powerful is not profound or permanent. Herbert belonged to the category of people for whom the awareness that this is so was enough. Yes, he did indulge in contempt. He never overcame this weakness of noble minds, and several of his poems speak of it.

A slew of books now exists about communist times in countries situated between Germany and Russia: the Baltics, Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Rumania,

Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Some of these books take on literary production under communism; others are histories based on the premise that only those who can write a history deserve a history. Thus, they use the most falsifying principle of selection—namely, group interest. To paraphrase Kevin Brennan, “Sovietologists of all political stripes [have been] given strong incentives to ignore certain facts and focus their interest in other areas.” Toward the end of his life, Herbert became aware of this situation and tried to address it in *Epilogue to a Storm* (1998). The poems in this section of Valles’s book require the support of the texture of references mentioned earlier, or at least exceptional attention to detail. They express the dying poet’s gentle disagreement with much that passes for “the history of the communist period in Central and Eastern Europe”: the elbowing out and dropping into the memory hole of inconvenient facts. Like Paul Ricoeur, Herbert knows that certain events in history are overremembered, whereas others are underremembered, and he whispers this knowledge into the reader’s ear.

In that regard, it should be stated that—unlike his more famous contemporary, Czeslaw Milosz, and the poet who wrote the introduction to this volume, Adam Zagajewski—Herbert is a deeply committed Polish patriot. He takes seriously the “imagined community” of people, ideas, strivings, and suffering that together make what Benedict Anderson has called, in a less famous phrase, “an attractive ideology . . . that encourages good behavior.” Herbert’s invocations of the gnawing pain of loss, misrepresentation, and honors denied to the dead will appeal to those who cherish a similar tissue of remembrances about the American South. To them, I recommend one of Herbert’s best known poems, “The Envoy of Mr. Cogito,” which begins with the following advice: “Go where the others went before to the dark boundary / for the golden fleece of nothingness your last reward.” This poem cannot be reduced to an existentialist exclamation, because existentialism was born in the secure coffee shops of Western Europe and not among the corpses of Mitteleuropa.

Speaking of Mitteleuropa, the rereading of Herbert made me realize how profoundly differently Poles and Germans (please, these are metonymies) have responded to dispossession and loss, to becoming *Vertriebenen*, as the German

saying has it. While the Germans have formed a Preußische Treuhand and noisily demand the return of their properties from the impoverished Poles to whom they have caused indescribable losses, Poles prefer quiet mourning that is miles away from making any demands on the impoverished Ukrainians. (The Germans lost Breslau/Wrocław to Poland, whereas the Poles lost Lwów/Lviv to the Ukraine.) Herbert was born in Lwów, and in one of his last poems (“In the city”), he discreetly laments: “In the borderland city I’ll never see again / there’s a winged stone light and immense . . . / in the faraway city I’ll never see again / there is water that’s heavy and nourishes / he who gives you a drink of that water.” The tone of Herbert’s poem makes it clear that, though an expellee, he realizes that “my city. . . doesn’t exist on any map.”

The first poem in the collection contains an epigraph from Juliusz Slowacki added by translators Milosz and Scott: “No time to grieve for roses, when the forests are burning.” Being torn between his predilection to contemplate roses and the moral duty to ring the bells for the dying forests, Herbert learned to do both. His “Odes to the Confederate Dead” encourage us to live, whereas his meditations on God’s world make us see it anew. In spite of his somberness, he is a nourishing poet. 