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Names for Simplicity

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Zbigniew Herbert entered the realm of poetry as a representative of the “1956 generation” which derived its name from the year of its début and not from the poets’ date of birth. This temporary alliance grouped the representatives of various generations and poetics. They became united in a common opposition: together they emerged against the colourless background of the poetry of the preceding period and reestablished in their contemporaries their faith in poetry which had begun to waver.

Herbert belonged to the older generation: at the time of his début he was thirty-two. He had been formed in a different epoch and had different experiences from other poets who belonged to the 1956 generation. Herbert was not a revealer of the imagination, but a philosophizing moralist, not an explorer of the subconscious, but of culture, and finally: a poet of gentle aesthetic values, not harsh ones. A “classical” poet, not a “romantic.”

Soon after his début (*Struna światła – The Chord of Light*), within a year, he published a second volume (*Hermes, pies i gwiazda – Hermes, Dog and Star*) which had probably been written at the same time; four years later, in 1961 – a third volume (*Studium przedmiotu – Study of the Object*), and in 1969 the fourth volume was published (*Napis – Inscription*). Even though this was not a great deal in comparison with other poets, it was enough to make the critics accord him unanimously a place in the foreground of contemporary Polish poetry. It was also enough for the poet to achieve world fame and become perhaps the most often and most profusely translated contemporary Polish poet.

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Among Herbert's poems there are some of the kind that one remembers all one's life. Who can forget *U wrót doliny* (*At the Gate of the Valley*), *Bajka ruska* (*A Russian Tale*), *Apollo i Marsjasz* (*Apollo and Marsyas*), *Mona Liza* (*Mona Lisa*), *Powrót prokonsula* (*The Return of the Proconsul*)...

Herbert is a "classical" poet. Most of the poets of the younger generations are creators of individual poetic styles, authors of interesting *volumes*; Herbert is the kind of poet who writes excellent *poems*. What is most striking is not: a new vision or conception of the world, a new story about it, which can be traced in every poem—but rather whole poetic units, whose effect cannot be divided up into its component parts. Herbert does not strive for novelty. He strives for perfection.

Herbert's poetry is based on aesthetic canons which we tend to neglect nowadays. Moderation, harmony, balance. A balance between revelation and communication. Between construction and emotion. Between the gravity of the subject and the force of the aesthetic effect.

The poetics of balanced scales—that of scarcely perceivable forms. This is the poetics of Goethe's *Über allen Gipfeln*, of Mickiewicz's *Polaly się lzy me...*

The poetics of balanced scales manifests itself in the simplest proportion, in the figure one. The perfection of simplicity is what Herbert aims at.

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Herbert's work may constitute an Ark of the Covenant between past and recent years, where generations and poetic attitudes are reconciled. His poetry can bring together critics of diverging views such as Bieńkowski and Słonimski, a professor of classical studies and young people frequenting youth clubs, Ignacy Chrzanowski's student and a student of Kazimierz Wyka. The strong bond with the world of values rooted in Greek and Roman culture assures him

understanding and popularity among older generations. On the other hand modern poetic technique and an interest in new trends in art make young people appreciate his work.

Herbert's poetry can reach the public at large because he can write poems which are comprehensible to all (which does not imply that he always does so). Not only in the sense that the text is understandable, that is in its outer semantic layer, but also that it produces the desired poetic effect. Most of his poems—though they remain “modern”—do not collide with the ideas on poetry which prevailed in past times and are still generally accepted outside the intellectual élite.

Herbert, a poet whose work is a balance between revelation and communication, is the kind of poet who does not content himself with revelations or with solving problems set by himself, but who never forgets about his reader. The construction of his poems is subject to a rational, intentional dosing of the emotional effect; to this end he employs principles which allow for such well-known devices as gradation, contrast, climax. The word “emotional” is of vital importance here, for the final result is an aesthetic effect which is nevertheless conditioned by the force of the emotional stimuli connected with experiences which are other than aesthetic. It is worthwhile taking a closer look and reading once again the poem *Apollo i Marsjasz* to see how Herbert plays on the reader's feelings, how he is anxious that the pain experienced by Marsyas might become imprinted in the mind of the reader, and with what great skill he leads him through successive degrees of pain. In the poem *Tamaryszek* (*Tamarisk*), in order to bring out an emotion stirring contrast, he cleverly introduces a small, concrete detail and a sudden change of perspective. The forcefulness of the poem *Mona Lisa* is due to its counterpoint composition.

These classic rules concerning the artistic construction of emotional effects are not the only expression of regard for the reader. The desire to evoke the right effect is not its sole function.

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The simplicity and clarity of Herbert's poetry is above all a matter of language and style. The poem *U wrót doliny* describes

the last few moments before the Last Judgment (we shall leave aside the possibility of a metaphorical interpretation of this poem). The author gives us an eye-witness account. As this is a live account, in the course of it the witness gathers more and more information about what he is describing, he makes conjectures, is not sure about certain pieces of information, but still he passes them on. One might expect that a poem about the Valley of Jehoshaphat should be full of pathos, and no-one would object to it. But Herbert writes:

but enough of these remarks
 let us lift our eyes
 to the throat of the valley

 it is we are told
 a cry of mothers from whom children are taken
 since as it turns out
 we shall be saved each one alone

 the guardian angels are unmoved
 and let us grant they have a hard job

It is quite clear that the poem has nothing to do with pathos. But let us take a closer look: what is the convention that helps to rid the subject of pathos? It is the style peculiar to radio commentators; "our loudspeakers" seem to be installed at the gates of Hell and Paradise. We can almost hear "It's a pity you can't see this." The stylization is very subtle but it can be perceived and in a strange way it brings the eschatological scene closer to the everyday life of modern man.

One can say a little emphatically that this poem is the epitome of Herbert's poetry. He belongs to a generation for which the problem of common experience is rather complicated because of the so-called *embarras de richesse*. The necessity for self-defence against terror and falsehood results in: discretion and irony (or sometimes mockery). An alloy of these two components, the joint appearance of these two attitudes is dominant in Herbert's poetry—not only have they been imposed by history, as often happens, but they also shape most of the poet's reactions. The experience of his generation provides a mask which cannot be removed. It makes the individuality of the artist emerge from the sea of possibilities.

And so the attitude which the poet adopts towards the horror and senselessness of history is the one he adopts towards the horror and senselessness of being.

In the poem *U wrót doliny* both threats are – perhaps – interlinked. Herbert makes them seem petty and tame by 1) relating in a calm, dispassionate, discreet way, 2) creating, thanks to stylization, an ironic semblance of a banal, not dangerous situation. This is mental self-defence on the part of the poet, and at the same time a sure way of increasing the aesthetic and emotional effect.

This intentional therapeutic inclination to belittle what is being described, which produces the opposite effect, is one of the basic principles of Herbert's poetic art. It is enough to mention such poems as *Koń wodny* (*Water Horse*), *Ptak z drzewa* (*Wooden Bird*), or *Jak nas wprowadzono* (*As We Were Led in*).

A particular, irresistible charm is present in Herbert's poetry where this device is employed in playful, joking, childish verse:

my inner voice
has nothing to advise
has nothing to warn against
.....
sometimes I even
try to engage him in conversation
– you know yesterday I refused
I've never done such a thing
I wouldn't now either
– glu – glu

(*Inner Voice*)

This style of writing, which consists in presenting difficult and complicated matters in a clear and simple way to make them easier to understand, also has other functions. No wonder Herbert has been called the poet of the parable; as his poetry has a great deal in common with the parables in the Gospels.

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The simplicity of style and language are not only a matter of clarity but also a matter of morality. When Herbert uses the conventional language of officials, the poem has ironic undertones. This is

true in the case of the radio commentator's style, also in the confidential language of high dignitaries in *Powrót prokonsula*:

besides the emperor likes courage of convictions
to a certain extent to a certain reasonable extent

and in the jargon of ideological discussions in *Apollo i Marsjasz*:

a new kind
of art—let us say—concrete

When the first person speaks about himself, the simplicity is greater still—sometimes even reaching its utter limits. We then have the conventions of slack spoken language—an excess of such conjunctions as “then” and “or”:

first I will describe myself
starting from my head
or better from my foot
or from my hand
(*Próba opisu—Attempt at a Description*)

the monotonous repetition of one phrase, skillfully marking great emotion:

so I'm here
you see I'm here

I hadn't a hope
but I'm here
.....
so I'm here
sometimes it was
sometimes it seemed that
don't even think about it
.....
so I'm here
they were all going to come
I'm alone

(*Mona Lisa*)

This primitive style owes a great deal to the language of children, or, more precisely, to the convention of the simplicity of language which marks conversations between children and adults (*Las—The Forest*), and also to the language of simple, uneducated people. Herbert's outstanding ability to overhear and imitate their language

can be seen in the poem *Podróż do Krakowa (Journey to Cracow)*. The commentary, which the poet has called "a real commentary," goes as follows:

Hamlet—by a foreign writer
also very interesting
only this Danish prince
is a bit too much of a sissy

The poet's sensibility to the profanation of poetry, art and life by falsehood is clearly visible in his poems, especially in *Życiorys (Curriculum Vitae)* and *Ornamentatorzy (Ornamentators)*. Herbert feels that the word has become devalued, which makes him distrust words and leads him to believe that only the greatest simplicity is still capable of expressing truth. In the poem *Kolatka (A Knocker)* he writes:

I thump on the board
and it prompts me
with the moralist's dry poem
yes—yes
no—no

But besides this stern simplicity of ethical rigour there is a different kind of simplicity, based on the same evangelical principles.

Herbert is a poet of compassion. The wronged have a privileged position in his poems (and not only in his poems—also in his beautiful essays on Albigenses and Templars). They have been wronged but not humiliated. Not humiliated, but also not exalted by suffering. This is not myth-inspiring humanitarianism. And though Herbert keeps going back to war themes, they are devoid of heroes of martyrdom. Perhaps because his poetry covers a very wide range of individuals: in fact it covers almost the whole of that imperfect species which scientists have named *homo sapiens*. Man arouses pity, this is clear in the poems *U wrót doliny*, *Koń wodny* and *Apollo i Marsjasz*. When speaking to a person who is suffering you lower your voice and use simple words. Herbert's simplicity also means—*caritas*. And that is one more reason for the universality of his poetry, perhaps the most important one.

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Discretion and irony are effective arms. Herbert, who is very sensitive to existential hardships, is nevertheless far from surrendering the tone and structure of his poetry to experiences of this kind. Having learnt this and that from Silenus (Herbert has written a poem on the subject of that myth), he creates—as becomes a “classical” poet—his own Olympus. At first it seemed that this Olympus would be for him the traditional world of values so deeply rooted in Greek and Roman culture. But this turned out not to be the case. And here we have one more function of the simplicity of Herbert’s poetry:

God when he built the world
 knit his brows
 calculated calculated calculated
 that is why the world is perfect
 and not fit to live in

whereas
 the painter’s world
 is good
 and full of mistakes

(*W pracowni—In the Studio*)¹

Herbert’s simplicity is a creative one. It is a dream about the most elementary, the simplest world, since this complicated one does not come up to his expectations, and since—as it has already been pointed out—the word can be so disappointing. It is the transposition of that dream onto the problems of art, the problems of poetry. This leads to a rejection of all “hells and heavens of the imagination” and to an attempt which is in line with Ponge’s principles at creating poetry “from the beginning,” by the simplest possible description of the simplest objects:

my little finger
 is warm
 curved slightly inward
 ending in a nail

(*Próba opisu*)

¹ Transl. by A. Kukulska. All the other poems are cited from: Z. Herbert, *Selected Poems*, transl. by Cz. Miłosz and P. D. Scott, Baltimore 1968.

The resemblance between this poetry and that of Ponge is sometimes quite considerable. In an essay on Ponge's poetry Zbigniew Bieńkowski writes: "When describing, Ponge is unable to cross certain conventional limits, he is incapable of insight into the structure of a stone, the entrails of a live bird."² And here is an illustration of these words, taken from one of Herbert's volumes:

A wooden die can be described only from without. We are therefore condemned to eternal ignorance of its essence. Even if it is quickly cut in two, immediately its inside becomes a wall and there occurs the lightning-swift transformation of a mystery into a skin.

(*Drewniana kostka—Wooden Die*)

Only—Ponge is not interested in this mystery. Herbert is.

This creative simplicity, however, has its antecedences in Polish poetry. In an article entitled *Abstract Art—How to Find a Way out*³ Julian Przyboś saw the way out in a return to the object, in Strzemiński's solaristic paintings of aftersights "of the colour of the inside of an eye" and in the new figurativeness of which Berlewi's *The Chair* has become representative. In the title poem, *Studium przedmiotu* we read:

extract
 from the shadow of the object
 which does not exist
 from polar space
 from the stern reveries of the inner eye
 a chair

beautiful and useless
 like a cathedral in the wilderness

place on the chair
 a crumpled tablecloth
 add to the idea of order
 the idea of adventure

The chair which is spoken of here is *The Chair* by Berlewi. Only for Herbert discovering the way to a new figurativeness is not the most important thing. "Let it have the face of the last

² Z. Bieńkowski, *Piekła i Orfeusze*, Warszawa 1960, p. 453.

³ "Przegląd Kulturalny," 1957, no. 45.

things"—he says about his chair. In his poetry the old, immortal longing for full understanding keeps recurring, the longing to "touch" the essence of things, the longing for the simplest simplicity.

two perhaps three
times
I was sure
I would touch the essence
and would know

—he writes in the beautiful poem *Objawienie (Revelation)*.

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This longing, close to that of symbolists and mystics, is the highest aspiration of that poetry, and it is an objective which cannot be reached. It goes in the same direction as the poet's reflexions on life and death.

Objawienie is based on an antithesis which keeps recurring in these poems: movement of the universe—immobility of the universe, its sudden halt. Among the mechanisms of Herbert's imagination this antithesis is parallel to another, which is used much more often. The equivalent of movement is a bird, the equivalent of immobility—a stone.⁴ Both words have various functions in the poems. The bird is sometimes a symbol of life, sometimes it is a symbol of the most highly appraised and the most vulnerable spiritual values: soul, poetry, freedom, love. This is to a certain extent explained in the words: "you who [...] are a bird among men,"⁵ words which are directed towards the poet. The bird symbol is then also an "auto-symbol" or an "autoideal."

The stone, one of Herbert's key-words, a word which persistently reappears in his poetry, something which is perfect in its immobility—
—is a symbol of the indestructibility and indifference of the inorganic world, and also (as in the poem *Biały kamień—White Stone* and in other poems) a symbol of that which is—sardonically and relatively—indestructible in the human body: bones, skeleton. Thus: a symbol of death.

⁴ A pair of symbols which recently have become extremely popular in poetry.

⁵ A quotation from the poem *Maly ptaszek (A Little Bird)*.

These two symbols often appear together. This can be clearly seen in *Przypowieść (A Tale)*:

The poet imitates the voices of birds

.....
the poet imitates the sleep of stones

.....
what would the world be
were it not filled with
the incessant bustling of the poet
among the birds and stones

But the “imitation of the sleep of stones” does not have any grim undertones. The poet

when asleep [he] believes that he alone
will penetrate the mystery of existence
and take without the help of theologians
eternity into his avid mouth

And so the stone symbol reconciles death with the longing for full understanding. Eschatological problems are considered from the philosophical and metaphysical point of view. The stone symbol liberates from fear. The end of a man’s life is associated with the moment of fulfilment, with the expectation of an instant (eternity?) of absolute happiness.

The very same thing happens in the poem *Objawienie*. Here also the longing for an understanding of the essence of things, for full truth of the simplest kind, is linked with the idea of death. The colour black has its straightforward, traditional meaning. And “the heart of things” is both “a dead star” and “a black drop of infinity.” This is the unity and ultimate simplicity of that poetry.

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Herbert’s poetry: between Różewicz, Baczyński and Ponge. A dialogue between the bird and the stone. Unity—representing simplicity. Tragedy, irony, playfulness. Between the whiteness of creation and the blackness of eternity. Caritas.

The humanitarianism of Herbert’s poetry should perhaps be stressed most of all. It is not the humanitarianism of a journalist who

of the damned against the angels, on the side of “the natural history teacher” against “the manipulators of human history.”

This humanitarianism is neither naïve nor pathetic. It makes rather charming allowances for human weakness. A lump in the throat is masked by an ironic smile and passed off with a joke. But always—Herbert’s poetry is on Marsyas’ side against Apollo, on the side of the damned against the angels, on the side of “the natural history teacher” against “the manipulators of human history.”

Transl. by *Agnieszka Kukulska*