

## Overcoming the Burden of History The Poetry of Tadeusz Gajcy, Czesław Miłosz, and Zbigniew Herbert

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for Andrzej Busza

By the end of August 1944, one of the poets about whom I write was dead. A young man of twenty-two, he was killed while fighting in the Rising in German-occupied Warsaw. Two volumes of his poetry had already been published by underground presses. His name was Tadeusz Gajcy. The other two poets had become DPs (displaced persons), and were living near Kraków. They did not know each other, although the twenty-year-old Zbigniew Herbert had read some poems published by the already well-known thirty-three-year-old Czesław Miłosz. At that moment of their personal history they were both homeless and suffering, but they were alive. The choices they would make in the near future would be determined to a significant degree by their relationship to the past and to the dead man whose works, though limited in number, were intense and original. The choices of the surviving poets would affect their later life, career, and mutual relationship. The lives and works of the three poets were influenced by history in different ways and this interaction offers some insight into the makings of literature.

My title is taken from the essay “The burden of history” by Hayden White, in which he reflects upon the ways of writing history:

[Historians] interpreted the burden of the historian as a moral charge to free men from the burden of history. They did not see the historian as prescribing a specific ethical system, valid for all times and places, but they did see him as charged with the special task of inducing in men an awareness that their present condition was always in part a product of specifically human choices, which could therefore be changed or altered by further human action in precisely that degree.<sup>[1]</sup>

I intend to apply these observations to poets and ask how the three poets perceived history and how it entered their works. I will consider Gajcy’s conscious and total offering, Miłosz’s strategies of escape, and Herbert’s acceptance of the inheritance.

Tadeusz Gajcy made his literary *début* during the war via underground publishing houses. Polish underground literary life was lively: publications were numerous,<sup>[2]</sup> and literary recitations and discussions were thriving while the participants were also undergoing clandestine military training and committing acts of sabotage against the German occupiers. Born into a working-class family, Gajcy manifested early a literary talent that helped him to be admitted to the clandestine university courses and become the editor of an underground literary magazine. In July 1943 he published *Widma* (Spectres), and in July 1944 *Grom Powszedni* (Mundane thunder),<sup>[3]</sup> two weeks before the beginning of the Rising in which he was killed. His poetics are elaborate and he creates a world of his own, a rare achievement for someone so young.

**Confronted with historical challenges Gajcy obediently accepted the role designed for him by fate. . . . Miłosz fled away repeatedly but (as Orestes pursued by the Erynnyies) would explain himself endlessly because he chose the pragmatist way, not the glorious one. . . . Herbert fared better because he recognized the worth of these poets and other historical characters, built up their legend and introduced history into his poetry.**

Along with the surge of history into his life and art, Gajcy depicts a world that is unstable and in perpetual movement. The only fixed point in it is the speaker himself, whom he describes as “strong-willed,” “stubborn,” and “in rebellion.” He can feel joy despite the circumstances, and he savors life all the more intensely as death looms over him. In his poems the speaker follows his course undaunted, with an implicit sense of duty to the country and quasi certainty that he will die. The mood is nonetheless quite serene; nothing and no one seem capable of making the speaker change his ways—even love, frequently present in the poems.

Choćbym mówił: pokocham, zostanę,  
choćbym słowa jak trumnę zbijał,  
ty nie ufaj. I zabierz mi pamięć.

(“Portret”)

Though I might say: I will love you, I will stay,  
though I might nail together words as I would a  
coffin,

don’t trust me and wrest memory away from me.

(“Portrait”) [4]



efforts of the regime to eradicate it. Maciej (the character played by Zbigniew Cybulski in *Ashes and diamonds*, 1958, by Andrzej Wajda), owes much to the romantic perception of the underground fighters. Gajcy and his friends' heroic deaths gave rise to a legend that sometimes overshadowed their poetry. On the other hand, they were unpalatable to the communist regime and were published in rare small print runs and when published, censored. The untimely death of the Resistance Poets made way for less-talented writers who were more pliable in terms of ideology.

**The untimely death of the Resistance Poets made way for the less talented writers, more pliable in terms of ideology.**

Miłosz's early poems, published in the 1930s, are aptly called "catastrophist" since they are full of apocalyptic imagery, whereas the poems he wrote during the war are quite different in tone and express a strange distancing from the events going by. The speaker is a spectator much of the time. Such is the case in "Piosenka o końcu świata"[10] (Song about the end of the world, 1943). The world is falling apart but the speaker remains aloof, absorbed by private concerns. The author can even block the world off, as in "Świat poema naiwne"[11] (The world or a naive poem, 1943). This sequence of quiet stories seen through children's eyes is characterized by a lack of knowledge. The dichotomy between innocence and experience is evidently modeled on William Blake's work. The reader is faced with what psychologists call "regression," a way to cope with an unbearable situation that does not call forth moral judgement.

In the poem "W Warszawie" (1945) Miłosz goes further. He refuses to put his poetry to the use of the national tragedy, understood as endless fighting and dying. He sums it up as not wanting to be "płaczka żałobna" (a ritual mourner).[12] "W Warszawie" was published in the volume titled *Ocalenie* (Rescue). It was one of two volumes published in 1945 by the official publishing houses in Poland—the depth of war devastation can be measured by this fact alone. Miłosz was given the privilege of publication because he did not oppose the communists who seized power with the help of the Soviet army. His desire to escape the past suited the strategy of the new regime; he was lured by promises of a new order. He was sent as a diplomat first to Washington, DC, and later to Paris. During a trip to Warsaw in 1950 he became so frightened by what he had witnessed that upon returning to Paris he defected. After ten years of waiting for a visa to the

United States, he accepted the position of lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley. At first he experienced solitude and ostracism from émigré circles. His Nobel Prize in 1980 was attributed by some to political circumstances: 1980 was the year when Solidarity, an anticommunist trade union in Gdańsk, was born. He lived a long life and published too many works. His death was marked by controversy: he was denied the prestige of interment in the crypt of the Wawel castle.

Miłosz's writings contain the same breaks and escapes he experienced in personal life. He is hard to classify because he significantly changed his style, diction, and genre over the years. Critic Kazimierz Wyka noted a pathetic tone in Miłosz's poetry as early as 1937;[13] it remains a defining trait. The elevated expression Miłosz seeks in poetry is exemplified by his love of complex syntax and solemn rhythm that endows his poetry with visionary feeling. Critic Andrzej Zieniewicz described Miłosz's technique as "psychopoetics." [14] My own opinion is that the author's strong ego renders him impervious to external events and makes his avoidance of history possible. He is a witness equipped with some intellectual understanding, but without empathy. The self-preservation mantra comes from a wondering awareness

Że jednak jestem chociaż wszystko ginie [15]  
that I—am, while everything expires [16]

It bears repeating: Miłosz escapes history thanks to his ego. He finds in himself a reason to live as everything else falls apart. He could be called a "diarist poet" since he usually uses a poem to carefully write down his every thought and every move. History only appears through his solipsist adventures.

The correlation to this self-absorption is the perception of time in which the present moment is the most important experience. Happy memories from the past recur regularly but the fully lived instant remains the reference, as stated by the verse beginning with "the eternal moment" (in "Brzegi Lemanu"—The Leman lake shores) [17] that Aleksander Fiut appropriately chose as a title for his essay on Miłosz's poetry.[18] Life is a series of moments, and as such does not fit into any definite particular narrative apart from the biographical one. This can best be observed in *Traktat poetycki* (A Treatise on Poetry), (1957) [19] in which Miłosz aims to offer a panorama of Polish poetry. Here Miłosz is at his most literal and judgmental. In his desire to not leave any doubt about what he thinks, he directs

the reader toward a single interpretation, closing any other door:

Dwudziestoletni poeci Warszawy  
Nie chcieli wiedzieć, że Coś w tym stuleciu  
Myślom ulega, nie Dawidom z procą.[20]

The twenty-year-old poets of Warsaw/Did not want to know/that something in this century/Submits to thought, not to Davids with their slings.[21]

Miłosz suggests that one should not engage in a fight whose outcome is uncertain at best. However, the author was apparently afraid of a straightforward statement on this topic since he added to the poem a prose commentary longer than the poem itself and not always illuminating.

The speaker takes a further step in “Ballada” (Ballad, 1958)[22] in which he accuses Gajcy of having fought for the wrong cause and wasting his life and his death. The accusatory tone and the almost morbid delight in the minute evocation of the different aspects of death are surprising. Nonetheless, Gajcy’s poems are not subject to attack in “Ballada.”

In 1958 Miłosz met in Paris Zbigniew Herbert whose perception of time, history, and the significance of Gajcy was very different. Herbert made a late debut and only thanks to the cultural “thaw” of 1956. He had just been allowed to visit France and was enthralled by the beauty of Paris and its wealth of art. The other valuable aspect of his stay was that he could meet the Polish émigré personalities.

**This is how Herbert sees the role of different people in the resistance process: those who fight and die; and those intent on surviving, who are also useful because they manage to get through everything and carry on with life.**

Miłosz and Herbert experienced roughly the same horrors during the war with the exception of the Soviet occupation that Herbert experienced in Lwów (Lviv) from 1939 to 1941, after the partition of Poland by the allied German and Soviet troops in September 1939. In June 1941 Germans broke their pact with the Soviets and invaded the USSR (or rather, those Polish territories that were under Soviet occupation). Miłosz and Herbert reacted very differently to these events. Herbert refused to forget either the past or the dead. The memory is made tangible as in the poem “Our fear:”

umarli są dla nas łagodni  
niesiemy ich na plecach

śpimy pod jednym kocem  
zamykamy oczy  
poprawiamy usta  
wybieramy suche miejsce

i zakopujemy

nie za głęboko  
nie za płytko[23]

the dead are gentle to us  
we carry them on our shoulders  
sleep under the same blanket  
close their eyes  
adjust their lips  
pick a dry spot

and bury them

not too deep  
not too shallow[24]

Herbert quickly found his own voice characterized by a refined minimalist style and a concern for man in history. Echoes of Gajcy appear in his choice of words and metaphors. Herbert’s first volume, *Struna światła* (Chord of Light, 1956),[25] speaks of war and death under the guise of ancient Greek mythology. An essay published posthumously, “The Latin lesson”[26] provides evidence of Herbert’s extensive classical education. He was fascinated by the writings and heroic deaths of the young Resistance poets. It is as if he decided that Gajcy’s poem “To the man to come”[27] was addressed to him.

For Herbert, solidarity with the past became vital in the face of war and occupation, followed by imposition of a totalitarian system. Herbert accepts the legacy and takes on the burden of fighting for freedom in life and art. To a large extent, his writing arises from a sense of duty to the dead. This is best expressed in the essay “Duszyczka” (Little soul, 1973),[28] where the narrator articulates his need to experience as much as possible and write about it. His “survivor complex” turned into a “giving back” complex. The essay is dedicated to his friend Zdzisław Najder, a Joseph Conrad scholar: the duty imperative is strong in all of Conrad’s characters. In 1946 Maria Dąbrowska used it to defend the soldiers of the Warsaw Rising against criticism from a communist journalist who denied them “historical relevance.”[29] In the 2000s Najder reentered the intertextual chain by presenting two papers on Herbert’s deep respect for the poets who fell in battle.[30] Herbert’s loyalty is best expressed in the two lines of his famous poem of 1974, “Przesłanie Pana Cogito” (The Envoy of Mr Cogito):

ocalałeś nie po to aby żyć  
masz mało czasu trzeba dać świadectwo [31]

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

The “survivor complex” interpretation was suggested by Herbert himself when he quoted these lines in 1998.[32] He felt a strong affinity with Gajcy but distanced himself from Miłosz.[33] At the same time, their personal relationship was amicable and Miłosz was Herbert’s first translator into English.

The differences between the two poets become obvious in “Tren Fortinbrasa” (The Elegy of Fortinbras)[34] that Herbert dedicated to Miłosz on 16 July 1958. The dedication always plays an important role in Herbert’s semiotics. The poem is a monologue of the Norwegian prince who confronts the dead Hamlet. The scene takes place after the action of Shakespeare’s play comes to an end. Herbert often presents his characters and their doubts after the critical moment highlighted by history or a work of art. The critics usually state that Herbert’s sympathy lies with Hamlet and that Fortinbras is a despot in the making; I see it differently. The theme of separation that lies at the heart of the poem makes me see Miłosz in Hamlet who was unable to live in the “prison” of Denmark (read: communist Poland). Fortinbras stands for Herbert, determined to confront the ugly things of life, trying to improve them and by using symbols win the town. My interpretation is meant to show that Herbert’s use of ambiguity allows different readings and that his world is not a Manichean one: irony and polysemous meanings are its essential traits.

“The Elegy of Fortinbras” is part of a central quartet of poems in *Studium przedmiotu* (Study of the Object, 1961), along with “The Return of the Proconsul,” “Naked town,” and “Reflections on the problem of the nation.”[35] These poems obviously reflect discussions the two men had in Paris. Here the speaker asserts his refusal to emigrate, not so much for artistic reasons (Miłosz was afraid of losing his Polish audience) but for moral ones (not distancing oneself from one’s nation in need). This last claim conveys something instinctive, due to the fact of having been born in a certain place. According to Herbert’s moral code one takes responsibility even for situations one did not choose because they concern one’s own people:

What do I think about Poland? The same as you do because I have no blood link (even less than you do) to the country but this Erde (ohne Blut) is mine, just like an illness or a venereal disease, and

regardless of how hard I could try to kick it off I won’t free myself from it. [36]

Although Herbert welcomed every opportunity to travel abroad and stay for longer periods in France, Austria, Germany, and the United States, he refused to leave his country. Herbert’s ties to the past, as Gajcy’s, are bonds to people, to a community. His vision of history, however, is marked by detachment and aloofness resulting in irony.

The fact that Herbert worked a long time on his poems (some of them took years to complete) helped him obtain the necessary distance to depict events and gain control over expression. The absence of big words helps carry the idea of truth. The levelheadedness is achieved by means of carefully assembled words and structures. The simplicity enhances the metaphors, oxymorons, and metonymies. The limited choice of words, referring to essential objects and qualities, makes for an integrated poetic world. Like George Herbert before him, Zbigniew Herbert could easily provide various illustrations to William Empson’s *Seven types of ambiguity*. [37]

Herbert uses myth as a means of making his country’s tragedy understandable. His poems “catch” the hero in the aftermath of his defining deed and show him returning to being an ordinary man; heroic behaviour thus becomes almost an episode in normality. Herbert’s mythical protagonists are not presented as semidivine figures but as very human in their reactions. Herbert also depicts a contemporary average man whose cares and troubles are comprehensible to us, but who in a certain way reflects his mythical counterpart. This poetic strategy invests myth with intense reality. Such is the case of the Minotaur:

Wyczerpawszy wszystkie środki król Minos  
postanowił pozbyć się zakały rodu. Sprowadził  
(także z Grecji, która słyneła ze zdolnych ludzi)  
zręcznego mordercę Tezeusza. I Tezeusz zabił  
Minotaura. W tym punkcie mit i historia są ze sobą  
zgodne. [38]

Having exhausted all his resources, King Minos resolved to get rid of this disgrace to the royal line. He brought in (again from Greece, which was known for its able men) the ace assassin Theseus. And Theseus killed the Minotaur. On this point myth and history agree. [39]

Here myth becomes the privileged narrative vehicle of history, simple and dramatic enough to channel the flow of history into an intelligible tale. The generality of myth helps tell the story not only of the underground

soldiers of the Second World War, but of every resistance movement:

ci którzy toczą wózki po źle brukowanym  
przedmieściu  
i uciekają z pożaru z butlą barszczu  
którzy wracają na ruiny nie po to by wołać  
zmarłych  
ale aby odnaleźć rurę żelaznego piecyka  
głodzeni—kochający życie  
bici w twarz—kochający życie. . . .  
naród trwa  
i wracając z pełnymi workami ze szlaków ucieczki  
wznosi łuk triumfalny  
dla pięknych umarłych[40]

those who draw their carts through badly paved  
suburbs  
and flee from fires with a bottle of borsch  
who return to the ruins not to claim the dead  
but to recover the pipe of an iron stove  
starved—loving life  
beaten on the face—loving life . . . .  
the nation endures  
and returning with full sacks from its routes of  
retreat  
builds triumphant arches  
for the beautiful dead [41]

This poem exemplifies the way Herbert sees “the dialectics of life,” or the role of different people in the resistance process: those who fight and die and those intent on surviving who are also useful because they manage to get through everything and carry on with life. The “substance” is made up of both heroes and common people.

One of the main appeals of Herbert’s poetic characters is that they are endowed with the power of choice. Among those who ponder what they ought to do we find the very popular Mr. Cogito. The volume of poems bearing this title appeared in 1974. The characters in the poems are related to one another as family, friends, fighting comrades, or people from the past. Part of the fascination that Herbert’s poetry produces in his audience can be attributed to the existence of a community in his poems, the community that embraces the readers themselves. The speaker shares his understatements with the reader. Owing to this, Herbert enjoyed a cult status with several generations of readers in Poland. The banner of this cult has been “The Envoy of Mr Cogito,” a poem ending with a simple exhortation “Be faithful Go.” It became a rallying cry for communism’s opponents in the 1970s and ’80s. It is a rare example of the use of the “performative” function

of language in poetry. This poem has been the most commented on of Herbert’s poems. It is equivocal, though; it deals with an uneasy balance between feeling, obligation, and a sense of humility.

Herbert’s poetic speakers display a wide range of attitudes regarding their place in history, from the vanquished who retired from the current of events:

Ci którzy przegrali tańczą z dzwonekami u nóg  
w kajdanach śmiesznych strojów w piórach  
zdechłego orła . . . .  
oddali historię i weszli w lenistwo gablotek  
leżą w grobowcu pod szkłem obok wiernych  
kamieni [42]

Those who lost dance with bells at their legs  
in fetters of comic costumes in the feathers of a  
croaked eagle . . . .  
they abandoned history and entered the laziness of  
a display-case  
they lie in a glass tomb next to faithful stones [43]

to those engulfed in a totalitarian system:

rozsądni mówią  
że można współżyć  
z potworem

należy tylko unikać  
gwałtownych ruchów  
gwałtownej mowy . . . .  
Pan Cogito jednak  
nie lubi życia na niby

chciałby walczyć  
z potworem  
na ubitej ziemi[44]

reasonable people say  
we can live together  
with the monster

we only have to avoid  
sudden movements  
sudden speech . . . .  
Mr Cogito however  
does not want a life of make-believe

he would like to fight  
with the monster  
on firm ground [45]

As we know from contemporary Polish history, Herbert’s readers opted for the second solution. The fight was long and dreary, especially since the martial law introduced in December 1981 resulted in ten more years of regression in social development and economy.

On the other hand, a political situation inspired *Report from a besieged city* (1982). Herbert's besieged city resembles ancient Troy, the Albi of the French Cathars, Leyden in 1574, and Acropolis. For Polish readers it was a metaphor of the situation in Poland. The speaker is a chronicler of the siege. One of the purposes of the chronicle is to preserve the city's glory and its resistance against the conquerors who want to erase the civilization of the vanquished and make them forget their culture. Similarly, a poet's task is to keep alive a language and a memory. "The report of a besieged city" has features of an epic; it was published thirty years ago but, as Krzysztof Biedrzycki aptly pointed out, it could be applied to the siege of Sarajevo that took place in 1992–95.[46] In Herbert's poems, places function as signposts of history.

All these traits converge to enhance the epic quality of the poem, the narrative of a nation founded on a common struggle for liberty. There is no description of righteous victory since Herbert's epic is designed to convey a recurring message of hope to fighting people. Symbolic victory is achieved through the strength of individuals determined to resist, whatever the odds. At the same time, Herbert's poems partake of universal imagery: they portray stone, sand, forest, images that invite symbolic interpretation. This is why these poems find resonance among various peoples and countries. They portray a struggling humanity, trapped in a situation it cannot control and fighting its way out of it. Herbert's poems that referred to the Polish situation have achieved universal significance.

Epic literature creates an order and even introduces a teleology in the world as the efforts and the struggles of the people result in victory and/or in mastering history. From the magma rises a story that gives meaning to facts that could have remained unrelated, but in order for epic literature to become truly epic a community has to accept it, recognize itself in it, and choose it among other possible narratives. This clearly happened with Herbert's works. From the 1960s to the 1990s some readers chose the classical and mythical interpretation, some chose the free will and philosophical interpretation, but all were certain that the tale of an unremitting struggle for freedom was theirs. It is a rare and ironic instance of a society refining its hermeneutic skills thanks partly to the activity of censors.

The new wave of the Polish opposition in the 1980s, consisting largely of thirty-year-olds, rediscovered the memory of the insurgents of the Second World War and identified with them. They demanded access to the past and to truth about it and engaged in

underground printing and resistance. In doing this, they also endowed Herbert's epic with the new substance of their lives and actions. Herbert's answer to Hayden White's question would be to treat history as an epic and try to engrave one's people's deeds on the general history of mankind.

Wszystkie linie zagłębiają się w dolinie dłoni  
w małej jamie gdzie bije źródło losu  
oto linia życia patrzcie przebiega jak strzała  
widnokrąg pięciu palców rozjaśniony potokiem  
który rwie naprzód obalając przeszkody  
i nie ma nic piękniejszego nic potężniejszego  
niż to dążenie naprzód [47]

All the lines descend into the valley of the palm  
into a hollow where bubbles a small spring of fate  
here is the life line look it races like an arrow  
the horizon of five fingers brightened by its stream  
which surges for overthrowing obstacles  
and nothing is more beautiful more powerful  
than this striving forward [48]

Herbert has the ability to translate the brutal course of history into an epic tale of human struggle, while at the same time interpreting the complexities of life in a simple way. The discipline of hermeneutics is symbolically associated with the god Hermes, an expert at deciphering riddles and assisting successive steps of initiation, which made him become patron of the Eleusinian mysteries in ancient Greece. Herbert mentions several times that he chose Hermes as a patron because he was the god of travelers. Hermes was also a trickster, and he guided the souls of the dead.[49] In *The Greek Myths* Robert Graves states that Hermes was also the patron of poets until Apollo took that role away from him.[50] Herbert certainly knew about all these attributes when he chose this god as an ostensible patron. It is quite typical of his artistry to not display his learning, to leave some things untold and make discovery possible for the readers. The fact that Hermes is a guide to souls is particularly germane. Herbert took upon himself the role of a "guide" to the souls of the dead young poets, trying to speak for them and to keep their memory alive. The intensity and urgency of living, the sensuousness of experience and a final peace are things that Herbert clearly remembered from Gajcy's poetry.

The volume *Epilogue to the Tempest* was published in 1998, a few months before the poet's death, without

the eponymous poem that Herbert did not have enough time to complete. It clearly alludes to Shakespeare's play and Giorgione's painting, both called *The Tempest*. The unfinished poem (published posthumously[51]) is a conversation between Prospero and Caliban after the end of the play when they find themselves alone on the island. The device is similar to the one in "Elegy of Fortinbras." The magician represents mind and control, whereas Caliban is a symbol of instinct and strength. The irony of leaving this poem unfinished, knowing that readers would look for closure, may have been inspired by Hermes "the trickster," or perhaps was just a literary way for Herbert to leave his own artistic testament open.

In conclusion, confronted with historical challenges Gajcy obediently accepted the role designed for him by fate, along with the death scheme, just as the hero of a Greek tragedy would. Miłosz fled repeatedly but (as Orestes is pursued by the Erynnyes) would explain himself endlessly because he chose the pragmatist way, not the glorious one. In so doing he would try to deny the value of the sacrifices made by poets such as Gajcy. Herbert fared better because he recognized the worth of these poets and other historical characters, built up their legend and introduced history into his poetry.▲

*This paper is based on a lecture given at Oxford University in July 2011.*

## NOTES

- [1] Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *Tropics of Discourse, Essays on Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 49.
- [2] Wiesław Budzyński, "Wstęp" in Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, *Kiedy się miłość śmiercią stała...* (Warsaw: Interlibro, 1993), p. 6.
- [2] According to Józef Garliński, 1,400 underground periodicals were published during war period. *Polska w drugiej wojnie światowej* (London: Odnova, 1982), p. 238. This is confirmed by Andrzej Paczkowski who speaks of 1,500 titles (*Pół wieku dziejów Polski*, Warsaw: PWN, 2005), p. 61.
- [3] *Widma* was published under the pen name of Karol Topornicki. See Tadeusz Gajcy, *Wybór Poezji—Misterium niedzielne*, edited by Stanisław Bereś (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1992).
- [4] Tadeusz Gajcy, *Grom Powszedni*, in *Wybór Poezji - Misterium niedzielne*, p. 160. Translation by B. G. Professor Bogdana Carpenter was kind enough to suggest improvements to the translation.
- [5] Gajcy, op. cit., 185.
- [6] Ibid., p. 170.
- [7] Ibid., p. 209.
- [8] Ibid., p. 190.
- [9] Wiesław Budzyński, see fn. 2
- [10] Czesław Miłosz, *Poezje* (Paris: Institut Littéraire, 1984), p. 102.
- [11] Ibid., pp. 92–101.
- [12] Ibid., pp. 122–23.
- [13] Kazimierz Wyka, "Płomień i marmur," *Rzecz Wyobraźni* (Warsaw: PIW, 1977), p. 262.
- [14] Andrzej Zieniewicz, "Autoryzowanie historii. Doświadczenie i zapis w drugiej połowie XX wieku," *Teraźniejszość i pamięć przeszłości*, edited by H. Gosk i A. Zieniewicz (Warsaw: Elipsa, 2006), p. 107.
- [15] Miłosz, "Pieśń obywatela," *Poezje*, p. 103.
- [16] Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems* (1931–2001), translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter (New York: Ecco Press, 2001).
- [17] Miłosz, *Wiersze*, vol. 2 (Kraków: Znak, 2002), p. 163.
- [18] Aleksander Fiut, *The Eternal Moment: The Poetry of Czesław Miłosz*, translated by Theodosia S. Robertson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- [19] Miłosz, *Wiersze*, vol. 2, pp. 167–251.
- [20] Ibid., 216.
- [21] Miłosz, *New And Collected Poems*, p. 130.
- [22] *Król Popiel i inne wiersze*, in *Wiersze*, 298.
- [23] "Nasz strach," *Studium przedmiotu*, in Zbigniew Herbert, *Wiersze zebrane* (Kraków: Wyd. A5, 2008), p. 261.
- [24] "Our fear," translated by C. Miłosz and P. Dale Scott, *Study of the object*, in Zbigniew Herbert, *The Collected Poems. 1956–1998* (New York: Ecco, 2006), p. 177.
- [25] Zbigniew Herbert, *Struna światła* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1956).
- [26] "Lekcja łaciny," *Labirynt nad morzem* (Warsaw: Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich, 2000), 165–97. English translation: "The Latin Lesson," *Labyrinth on the sea*, in Zbigniew Herbert, *The Collected Prose (1948–1998)*, translated by Alyssa Valles (New York: Ecco, 2009).
- [27] "Do potomnego" in Tadeusz Gajcy, op. cit., 209.
- [28] *Labirynt nad morzem*, op. cit., 83–91.
- [29] Maria Dąbrowska, "Conradowskie pojęcie wierności," (The Conradian notion of fidelity) in *Warszawa*, 1946/1, in response to Jan Kott, "O laickim tragizmie" (On secular tragic) in *Twórczość*, 1945/2.
- [30] Zdzisław Najder, "Pierwsze wspomnienie" and "La poésie comme devoir" (Poetry as duty), in *En hommage a Zbigniew Herbert, Les Nouveaux Cahiers Franco-Polonais*, 2005/5, edited by Danuta Knysz-Tomaszewska, Brigitte

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[31] “Przesłanie Pana Cogito,” in Herbert, *Wiersze Zebrane*, 439.

[32] “Słowo na wieczorne poetyckim w Teatrze Narodowym,” in Herbert, *Węzeł gordyjski i inne pisma rozproszone, 1948–1998*, edited by Paweł Kądziała (Warsaw: Biblioteka Więzi, 2001), 94–100.

[33] Zbigniew Herbert– Czesław Miłosz, *Korespondencja* (Warsaw: Zeszyty Literackie, 2006).

[34] *Wiersze zebrane*, 271.

[35] “Powrót prokonsula,” 269; “Miasto nagie,” 273; “Rozważania o problemie narodu,” 274. English translation by Miłosz and P. D. Scott, “The return of the proconsul,” 184 and “Naked town,” 188. English translation by A. Valles, “Reflections,” 189.

[36] Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz, *Korespondencja*, op. cit., 93. Translated into English by B. G.

[37] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930).

[38] Herbert, *Wiersze zebrane*, 413.

[39] Herbert, *Collected Poems*, translated by Alissa Valles, 308.

[40] “Substancja,” *Wiersze zebrane*, 160.

[41] “The Substance,” translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter, *Selected Poems* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 27.

[42] “Ci którzy przegrali,” *Wiersze zebrane*, 400.

[43] “Those Who Lost,” *Mr. Cogito*, translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter (Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 27.

[44] “Potwór Pana Cogito,” *Wiersze zebrane*, 487.

[45] “The Monster of Mr Cogito,” *Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems*, translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter (Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 40–41.

[46] Krzysztof Biedrzycki, *Poezja i pamięć - o trzech poematach Czesława Miłosza, Zbigniewa Herberta i Adama Zagajewskiego* (Kraków: Wyd. Uniw. Jagiellońskiego, 2008), p. 201.

[47] “Wróżenie,” *Wiersze zebrane*, 67.

[48] “Fortune-telling,” translated by C. Miłosz and P. Dale Scott, *Collected Poems*, 50.

[49] A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), p. 145.

[50] Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (NY: Viking, 2011).

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## A Strange Poet

### A Commentary on Cyprian Norwid's Verse

Agata Brajerska-Mazur

There lived in Paris. . . a Polish writer little known in his own country, an artist known even less, a strange poet, a hieroglyph-stylist, whose every poem has to be read syllable by syllable ten times over. . . His ideas, despite his profound learning and detailed familiarity with the achievements of contemporary knowledge, move in a diametrically opposite direction to that of modern philosophical current. But he was not a dilettante, and certainly not a visionary, a mystic, or a lunatic. . . He knew how to uncover in every thing such a relation of it to other things that it would become so original as to appear almost unrecognizable. He carried his soul around with him as if it were some kind of a numismatic rarity, unknown to anyone, unwanted, useless. . . He resembled a stone salvaged from some marvelous edifice, which somewhere, sometime had burnt down completely.[1]

Józef Tokarzewicz wrote these words about Cyprian Kamil Norwid in an obituary notice. Tokarzewicz described a strange poet: unknown, obscure, moving in an opposite direction to fashionable trends in art and philosophy. Such a description was appropriate because in the eyes of his contemporaries Norwid was indeed strange, obscure, ill-understood, and rejected.

This exceptional Romantic poet, novelist, playwright, sculptor, painter, engraver, and draughtsman was born in 1821. As an orphan he was raised by his grandmother Hilaria Zdziechowska, née Sobieska.[2] Norwid spent his youth studying painting but in 1840 he made his debut as a poet on the pages of a Warsaw newspaper. As a result, he enjoyed a brief spell of fame and recognition. It soon ended in rejection and bitterness because it became clear that his works had little to do with the poetry of the second generation of the Polish Romantics, and his views did not fit the programs of emigration political parties,[3] nor did they have much in common with the manifestoes of Polish Positivism. They were too difficult, too precursory to be understood by the readers of that time. As one of the poet's critics stated, he was a “genius not appreciated enough. . . born one hundred years too soon.”[4] Norwid died in oblivion in France, in the St. Casimir Shelter for impoverished Polish war veterans and orphans run by Polish nuns. He was first buried at Ivry, then moved into a mass grave at the Polish cemetery in Montmorency. The fluctuation of critics' attitudes toward Norwid's poetry can be best exemplified by a