



Zbigniew Herbert's Journeys to the South

A Conversation with Andrzej Franaszek and Francesco Matteo Cataluccio, Conducted by Krystyna Pietrych (during the discussion panel at the 12th 'Puls Literatury' Festival in Łódź, 8 December 2018)

Krystyna Pietrych: The immediate pretext of our conversation is the impressive two-volume biography by Andrzej Franaszek, titled *Herbert*. But an equally good pretext, as it is difficult to grade it, is what the organisers of the Festival wrote in the programme. Let me quote: "Our tour guide in the literary journey from the North to the South is Zbigniew Herbert, whose year proclaimed by the Sejm RP we are currently celebrating". It is worth remembering this fact, especially that the Herbert Year [2018] is inevitably drawing to an end. I thought that it would be worth discussing several important issues connected with the journeys of Zbigniew Herbert to the South, using the opportunity that we have such eminent guests here. And I would like to begin chronologically. We can say, obvious as it may seem, that before Herbert headed for the South in the physical sense, he had set out there, in fact, much earlier in a symbolic way. Naturally, I am referring to his first poetic volume, titled *Struna światła* (*A Chord of Light*) from 1956. This is why I want to ask you what South meant to Herbert when he made his debut as a poet? I mean the South from the poems *Do Apollina* (*To Apollo*) and *Do Ateny* (*To Athena*) or from the poem about Daedalus and Icarus. After all, Herbert had not experienced the South directly at that time yet. He experienced it, so to speak, culturally. What kind of South was it?

Andrzej Franaszek: This topic obviously cannot be exhausted in just a few sentences. When we speak about journeys to the South, we have in mind journeys in the direction of the Mediterranean Sea and towards, as Herbert

willingly stressed, the sources of European culture. In his case, this is a journey to Greece in the first place or, to be precise, Ancient Greece; then to Italy as the extension of the Roman Empire. These are two countries which are the most important from his point of view. I think that what is really interesting in the case of Zbigniew Herbert is the fact that for him this mythology was never only a cultural ornament, which is also partly drawn from the tradition of his familial Lviv, the city which is connected with, for instance, Jan Parandowski, probably the most well-known Polish author of tales on Greek mythology. It was not just something that we learn about in the course of our school education. He really took this mythological reality personally and, as we know, also interpreted it this way. One example, in fact a late one, is the book titled *The King of the Ants*. Its subtitle includes a phrase: "private mythology". If, for instance, in the early 1970s Herbert (who had not published his book of poetry titled *Mr. Cogito* yet) was faced with accusations that he had been escaping into antiquarianism when writing of Athena and Marsyas rather than about contemporary times, and if young poets such as Ryszard Krynicki accused him of hiding in the comfortable asylum of timeless culture, that was untrue since he referred this mythological reality to contemporary times. He read it anew. And if Herbert is a major poet of reflection on history and human activity in history, primarily on the infinity of evil which man was capable of creating in history, this is also due to the fact that he interprets ancient history. His adventure – this journey to ancient times – undoubtedly begins in his youth, at school, for instance during his Latin lessons. Many of us can remember the wonderful essay titled *Lekcja łaciny* (*A Latin Lesson*), in which Herbert makes references to his Latin lessons in his gymnasium. But he does not only confine himself to memories. He also speaks about the experience of disillusion which was shared by people of his generation. About bringing up this generation in the belief that each of its representatives is an heir of ancient culture, the ancient Greeks and Romans, and that Lviv is the frontier of Europe. About the realisation – which is illustrated by the example of the poem titled *Przemiany Liwiusza* (*Transformations of Livy*) – that we are not, in fact, descendants of winners (those who establish empires), but, rather, of those who lost in history – nations which either lost or were totally exterminated by the Romans. This interest in ancient times – this journey of Herbert to the South – begins at that very time and it continues when, as a relatively young poet, he writes poems in the early 1950s and initially puts them back into the drawer, because he has no possibility of publishing a book. When he makes references to Athena or Apollo in these poems, he obviously does not aim at some trivial antiquarianism, but, for instance, shows the cruelty which is inherent to every artist. His relationship with ancient times is, therefore, very personal, anchored in life experience: in his biography, in education. But, above all, this relationship is – as I see it – sincere.

Francesco M. Cataluccio: I have always been fascinated with Herbert's story about his education in the gymnasium in Lviv: this famous professor Grzegorz Jasikowski, who drew the map of the Forum Romanum on the

board... When Herbert was in Rome for the first time – as a barbarian in the garden – he mentioned that one merit of his Latin teacher was that he did not feel alone there, as he put it, “lost among stones”. And he added: “I recall him with gratitude”. In addition, another gymnasium student of interwar Lviv, Stanisław Lem, also mentioned that the role of Latin – not as a language but as classical culture – was very important in the whole school education. And that it sparked students’ interest. If we recall how Witold Gombrowicz depicted a picture of tuition at a school in Warsaw in *Ferdydurke*, we can clearly see that the way of looking at the future was totally different in Lviv. The reason for that could have been the considerable distance from the territory of the former Roman Empire; perhaps it was the distance that strengthened his conviction about the value of that world and its culture. It should also be added that Herbert paid a lot of attention to the figure of Marcus Aurelius and the philosophy of stoicism, to which his master, professor Henryk Elzenberg, devoted ingenious essays. And it was precisely the Mediterranean culture that created stoicism. Herbert once said that the philosophy of stoicism was a real lesson of life for him and that owing to it he was capable of surviving all his life tragedies. It enabled him to look at the reality and himself in such a way that he was able to fight, as life is a constant struggle. And in order to fight this battle, it is necessary to adopt an attitude such as the one proposed by the philosophy of stoicism.

AF: Yet Herbert’s stoicism is devoid, I should think, of this ancient ‘naivety’. Because when we read stoics, such as Seneca or even *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, we often find out that we can easily free ourselves from suffering, remain outside some random events, gain a special kind of autonomy: it all depends on our mind or on our spirit. Herbert does not have this conviction. This really wonderful poem, *Do Marka Aurelego (To Marcus Aurelius)* – dedicated to Henryk Elzenberg – depicts the fragility of human civilisation, fragility of our lives surrounded by politics, by history, by barbarians. And we could also add – on a slightly different level – surrounded by suffering. In a poem written much later, *Mr. Cogito Meditates on Suffering*, also an excellent one, it is clearly stated that it is impossible to be easily freed from this suffering; create something which as if did not concern us, as an orthodox stoic would have said. Herbert says: nothing of this kind. But we can at least act with this suffering a little. Try to withdraw from it. Also through art, through creating something and gaining distance in this way. So Herbert was a stoic, but a stoic ‘with a past’ of the 20th century...

KP: And, consequently, it was a different kind of stoicism. As you said, the Mediterranean culture – which we arbitrarily refer to as the South to mark the direction of the expedition – was a tool for Herbert, a tool of both cognition and self-definition on the personal, individual plane. But it was also a possibility of diagnosing, in the language of Aesop, what was happening not in the South, but in Poland back then, still in the 1950s and then in the 1960s. This cultural heritage, all that he gained from his school in Lviv, is indeed very important but then he undertook his journey: the first to the

so-called West, to Paris, in 1958, and the second to the South, to Italy, in 1959. I would like to ask a question: what changes for Herbert in his picture of the Mediterranean region after he has had a direct contact with Italy and Greece? To what extent is this picture modified and how?

AF: This is a difficult question, in my opinion... But maybe one more sentence do add here. We can infer, from what we were all talking about, that the experience of ancient culture is, according to Herbert, not only language and history, but also some spiritual formation. Herbert cites in his late utterances a famous poem by Rilke, titled "Archaic Torso of Apollo", from which we learn that it is not only us who look at the statue; it is not only us who look at the antique heritage, but also this statue – and what is behind it, so the perfection of the form, the artist's endeavour, certain moral code once present in our civilisation – is looking at us. And in the finale we read: "You must change your life". This is a very well-known poem, perhaps quoted all too often, but I think it is very true. And Herbert also says that it is not only us who look at paintings in museums. Also paintings look at us. We do not always rise to the challenge, we do not always live up to this heritage. Herbert displays the attitude of humbleness towards the past. At a certain point, possibly during his first trip to the West, he turns very clearly – regarding his interests connected with the history of art – to the past. The avant-garde of the late 1950s clearly disappoints him. He is under the impression that this is mainly humbug, a machine producing subsequent works with great ease. And then he chooses the past. His fascination with Piero della Francesca begins. He sees his paintings first in the National Gallery in London, and then in Italy, precisely during his journey in 1959. And we could also add that when he visits the South – both Italy and Southern France – he gets saturated with colours, flavours, smells. Then he writes that he fell in love with the Provençal cuisine, that he adores bathing in the sea. From the *Barbarian in the Garden* I can remember the description of a pizza, drinking *orvieto classico*... So we do not have a tale from a course book on history or history of art, but a record of experiencing the joy of life. When Herbert arrives in Spoleto for the first time – invited to take part in a music and literature festival – he writes to his parents that after a day and a half he knows about half of the town and that he could nearly speak Italian. And he begins to wonder, of course ironically, what is better: the fate of a beggar in Spoleto or that of an eminent poet in Warsaw. With the supposition that it is maybe better to beg for a glass of red wine in Spoleto...

FMC: It is worth noticing that Herbert, setting out as a "barbarian" to the Mediterranean "garden", was very well prepared for the journey. He was by no means an ordinary tourist. Before he set off, he read many books. And what he was later saying on Siena, for instance, was based on solid knowledge, also on the history of art. He was befriended with assistant professor Maria Rzepińska, the author of *Historia koloru (The History of Colour)*, who lived in Kraków. Regrettably, this ingenious book has not been translated into Italian. Herbert reproached me for that, for that matter. I consider the

way he looked at paintings to be extraordinary. Naturally, he observes the motifs, being excellently prepared for this, but he is also interested in what is material. For instance, he read letters of Bruegel in order to find out how much particular paint colours cost. He was a very specific lover of art – not one that is idealising, but, rather, focused on the concrete. And I think that having this knowledge at his disposal during his journey to Italy, Provence, or Greece, he wanted to see through the prism of art what the reality was like. I remember that when we were together in Milan and we were watching *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, he was mainly interested in what there was on the table. He was looking at people who were having bread and wine, and he was pondering what else they could be eating. And it was a fantastic topic for him: what was actually being eaten during the last supper?... And he was laughing that *The Last Supper*, which Veronese painted in Venice, is a huge baroque supper – a totally incredible table probably created with the audience of this painting in mind. I have been always extremely intrigued by this liking for the concrete in Herbert the “barbarian”...

KP: Something different caught my eye. When I was reading Herbert's texts anew not long ago – owing to the biography written by Andrzej Franaszek – I began to ponder on his journeys. I agree with you that what he experienced during those journeys was a kind of incarnated culture in which he had already been functioning. But certain things began to disturb me when I took a closer look at these journeys... Don't you have the impression that there was something else beside fascination and delight; beside this sunny side of the Mediterranean region? I was alarmed, for example, by a letter written by Herbert probably from Crete. Herbert writes in it about a touch of death in a very depressive manner. Maybe this South was not, after all, so unambiguously bright, radiant, wonderful – as an experience?

AF: Of course, it wasn't. And it is probably clear that we cannot summarise any progression of Herbert's life, or anybody else's life, in just one formula. It is obvious, therefore, that travelling was not only joy and delight even though there was also plenty of delight and joy. It seems to me that the moments in which Herbert was happy in his life most often were precisely the moments connected with travelling. And there are indeed a lot of those joyful anecdotes here. Maybe Francesco will tell us in a moment about how Herbert was singing operatic arias in his tenement... But beside this there are, of course, other experiences, maybe the deepest ones; and the one you referred to is this type of experience. I was also fascinated many years ago when I came across such testimonies for the first time. Those were precisely touches of death. In his letter from Crete, he records his way through the street from the harbour to the hotel in burning heat – such a heat that can strike only in the south of Europe. Herbert feels that he is actually shrinking, that he is close to death, but not the literal death from heat or exhaustion, but from disappearing, being consumed by nothingness. The sweltering heat turns into white nothingness which consumes him. And he says that he has

to capture two things: there is a metal bed frame in the hotel room, there are a lot of objects in the museum – and that keeps him on this side of existence. But this is, of course, quite untypical of Herbert – there are not many instances of such a touch of nothingness in his works. There are also other aspects, however, which he quite often mentions. Travelling was like wrestling with the world on different levels: trying, for instance, to rise to the challenge. And, indeed, once you have reached Acropolis, which you dreamt of for dozens of years, you have to find in yourself the ability to be genuinely delighted rather than note some kind of disappointment. That involved also daily wrestling in the financial sense. His travelling budgets were generally rather tight. So he hitchhiked and slept in the cheapest hotels. There is one more aspect. When we read *Modlitwa Pana Cogito – podróżnika* (*A Prayer of Mr. Cogito the Traveller*), we will find there an address to God: “Forgive me that I did not fight like Lord Byron for the happiness / of conquered peoples and only treasured the risings of the moon / and museums”. There are also similar comments in some of Herbert’s letters. I went to Greece several times, it was Greece of the military junta, an enslaved country, I knew it but I did not write about that for a number of reasons. For instance, because I do not think that it is always the writer’s task to meddle in the temporality and political affairs. If I, as a writer of communist Poland, write about the Greek fascist government, it is clear that I will be ideologically used. But this does not mean that I did not notice it. And, reconstructing Herbert’s way of thinking, I feel certain ambiguity: I saw Acropolis, but I also saw persecuted and suffering people... So I think that apparently it is possible to point to at least several difficult aspects connected with Herbert’s journeys.

FMC: Overseas journeys were like getting a breath of fresh air for Herbert. During our meetings he would say: “I breathe at last”. But it should be taken into account what he, metaphorically speaking, had in his suitcase. He carried with himself, in the metaphorical sense, a very heavy suitcase from Poland. He surely could breathe abroad, but he always carried some heavy burden with him as well. And this excellent extensive book by Andrzej Franaszek explains this matter very well. I learned a lot from it. Herbert’s journeys – getting to know different cities and cultures – did not solve his problems. His longer stay in France in the second half of the 1980s turned out to be very difficult for him. He lived with his wife in a council flat in a district of Paris quite far from the city centre. They both had little money. They rarely went out in the evenings as they were apprehensive of the Arabs who formed the majority of the inhabitants of that district. In addition, at that time, and we are talking about the last period in Herbert’s life, his mental problems exacerbated. Despite this, meetings with art provided him with moments of genuine satisfaction and escape from trouble. And I noticed one intriguing thing in his contacts with art. I met two people in my life who reached the works which they were looking at through drawing. The first one was precisely Zbigniew Herbert, and the second one – Andrzej Wajda. Looking at the catalogue from the exhibition of Herbert’s drawings which was prepared for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków in

2015, it is possible to find out how he drew, for instance, human faces. And Wajda – I remember this from his stay in Bologna and Venice – always carried his sketchbook with him. It is known that he drew a lot when preparing his films, as initially he wanted to be a painter. And his drawings are somehow similar to the drawings by Herbert. And when you look, for instance, at these portraits drawn by Herbert, it is instantly clear that these are not some student copies of Raphael's face, but his personal interpretations. When I compared the originals – five or six of them – with Herbert's works, I noticed that the portraits which he drew are extremely tragic. It can be clearly seen e.g. that the eyes are sadder. I think that this way of drawing was a representation of his way of looking at himself. And the paintings which he looked at were just a pretext: they were, in reality, like mirrors. And the countries which he visited were also such mirrors. His stay there provided him with a pretext to look at himself from a distance when being far away from his country. The tragic philosophy of the life of Mr. Cogito, which is also ironic, was manifesting precisely at that time.

AF: There is a beautiful essay by Józef Czapski, titled *Tumult i widma* (*Tumult and Phantoms*), which revolves around a ship's voyage – if I remember correctly – to South America. Czapski begins this essay with the statement that when we set out for a journey, our demons – various anguish and pangs of conscience – are left as if behind. And the journey liberates us from them, at least for some time. At the end of his text, Czapski says: so, now the phantoms have caught up with me. And the peace ends. The same happened to Herbert. He wrote beautifully not only about delight, but also, for instance, about immersing into the new city on the first day of stay drinking in every detail and exploring what the colours of this city are, what materials it is built of, what the smell of the air is like, how people behave, in front of which shops or bakeries they gather... He was naturally a person travelling to museums, making pilgrimages to paintings by Rembrandt or Vermeer, but he also noticed the tangible, material, physical world. He could describe this, he could take part in this savouring of the world. And naturally, trivially, I would say, this enriched his writing about art. It seems to me, however, that a certain change was taking place over the years. Relatively young Herbert, going to the West for the first time and then writing *Barbarian in the Garden*, tends to immerse more into human relations. It is the similar case with middle-aged Herbert, who travels to Greece and writes essays from the volume titled *A Labyrinth by the Sea*. But that older Herbert – finishing, not without some effort, *Still Life with a Bridle* in his old age – this is Herbert who is separate, withdrawn, more focused e.g. on a single image.

KP: My following question is actually connected with this. When I was comparing the other day some fragments of *Barbarian in the Garden* and *Still Life with a Bridle*, I kept thinking how much these two texts differ – of course not only thematically, but how different this North is and how different this South is. And this is closely related to Herbert's age. Actually, in *Still Life with a Bridle* there is not a single fragment which would concern sensory

experiences, which would indicate that he delights in the food, taste, or touch...

AF: Admittedly, we can say that he might have liked the Dutch cuisine less than the Italian one...

KP: Without doubt, but this is pretty obvious... No smell reaches him, though, despite the fact that at the same time he is extremely sensitive to colours and details found in paintings. When the travelling Herbert was described earlier, he was referred to as a "barbarian" – as he called himself quite ironically and with a wink – who was going West from the East, which was also due to the fact that it was communist at that time. Now we saw his journey on a different axis: the North – the South. As a result, I would like to ask you: what was this 'northern' Herbert like? How was he different from the 'southern' Herbert?

AF: It is important to notice that, basically, there are three directions on Herbert's map. There is the South which meets the West and, in fact, this is one direction – let's say the Mediterranean Sea, but this part of it which remembers the Roman Empire. Anyway, Herbert felt much better in the south of France – in Provence – than in Paris. He believed that the extermination of the Albigenses was a catastrophe in the history of Europe which brought about the demise of the Southern culture. We remember this from *Barbarian in the Garden*. Herbert's map also features the North and this is not only due to Dutch paintings, but also his interests in, for instance, the Vikings, and his willingness to write about Scandinavia: here we have an unfinished project – a book-essay titled *Saga o podboju* (*A Saga on Conquest*). Sicily was for him an interesting place – one where the North and the South met, where the Normans from the North met the Arabs, creating, for a brief moment at least, an intriguing unusual kingdom in which different cultures intermingled. We remember, of course, that this is precisely the setting of *King Roger*, the opera by Karol Szymanowski and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz.

The East is conspicuous by its absence on Herbert's globe. And this is undoubtedly connected with the very beginning of his life, with Lviv, and a certain tradition of thinking of a large part of Poles at that time, namely that we are here the heirs of the Mediterranean culture. And further to the east there is grassland and barbarians. And if this grassland eventually comes to Herbert in 1939, it is not in the form of Dostoyevsky, but of the Red Army and the NKVD. Factors of this kind make Herbert never really take any interest in Russian culture, which is also a certain limitation. If Czapski could sharply distinguish communism from flesh and blood Russia, the Russian culture, and, finally, concrete people who he met "in this inhuman land", Herbert actually never turned to this direction. He turns his back to the East and marches to the South, to the West, to the North – anywhere but not there.

FMC: Yes, this is true. Herbert would often joke that he comes from Scotland. What he meant is that his family is of Scottish origin and has

nothing in common with the East. This is, in fact, an interesting topic. There is one thing that I have always found really valuable, namely that despite all the geopolitical problems, many representatives of the Polish culture – intellectuals or writers – were capable of understanding and thoroughly assessing the Russian culture. Czapski, who studied in Saint Petersburg still before the revolution... Gustaw Herling-Grudziński – but not also the likes of him who were in the labour camp... Or Miłosz himself... Herbert, in turn, always remained very insular. He admitted that Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekhov and a couple of other authors were outstanding writers or poets, but they simply did not belong to him, because he was connected with a totally different culture and, above all, different sensitivity. I remember such a discussion once in France about whether or not Russia belonged to Europe. At that time, Herbert happened to be in Paris. Milan Kundera wrote his famous text (“An Introduction to a Variation”, *The Book Review*, 6 I 1985), in which he stated that Dostoyevsky was not close to him, that his philosophy of life was completely alien to him and that, generally, the Russian culture did not belong, in his opinion, to the European culture. Europe is defined by the ancient Greek culture whereas Russia – the ancient Slavic culture. Joseph Brodsky responded to these statements (“Why Milan Kundera Is Wrong About Dostoyevsky”, *The New York Times*, 17 II 1985), giving convincing arguments as to why that was not true. Herbert told me then that he did want to write on this topic, but that it was Kundera who was right and touched upon the gist of problem, and Brodsky could not speak otherwise because he was a Russian. Therefore, it may be said that according to him Europe ends in Lviv, and there is something completely different to the east of it...

KP: Precisely. If Europe ends in Lviv – and traces of such thinking are present in Herbert’s works actually all the time – another question arises. What is the reason, in your opinion, why Herbert never went to Lviv after the war? Did you come across any documents or traces that would explain that? Didn’t he want to go there?

AF: In contrast to the title of a well-known poem by Adam Zagajewski, Herbert was not going to Lviv... Essentially, there are two possible attitudes of people who lost their hometown, be it Lviv or Vilnius, Wrocław or Gdańsk... Those who adopt one attitude say: if there is a possibility, let’s go there, because we need to see, touch... And Herbert could go on a trip to the Ukrainian People’s Republic in the 1960s or 1970s, and visit his hometown... In turn, people representing the other attitude when going through the trauma of abandonment do not want to undertake any attempts at all to confront the hometown. They do not want to see, in particular, that it is now in other hands, in a different form, with different names of streets, written in a different alphabet. I think that we are not surprised by this. I like one anecdote, but I am not going to relate it now, stealing it from one of its protagonists; instead, I would merely like to announce it. So, there is a beautiful moment when Zbigniew Herbert and Francesco Matteo Cataluccio are

standing, maybe not in a gondola but on board of a vaporetto, and they are sailing around Venice. And here something happens with Lviv, doesn't it...?

FMC: Yes. Herbert claimed that Venice was a city similar to Lviv. This is a little funny, but he did explain these connections to me. Firstly, because the lion is the sign of both these cities. It goes without saying: Venice is the city of St. Mark, hence the lion. But not only this. Secondly, slightly because of architecture. Herbert claimed that tenement houses on the Lviv market had clear connections with the Italian culture. Thirdly, due to the connections with the Byzantine Empire, which were of particular interest to him. In the last period of his life, Herbert wanted desperately to go to Ravenna – precisely because of those interests in the Byzantine world. But this idea, like many others, remained unaccomplished. And Venice is really closely connected with the Byzantine Empire. I had been always very impressed with how much he knew on this topic. Once, he gave me a two-volume edition of *Listy (Letters)* by Stanisław Brzozowski (edited by Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1970). Laughing, Herbert read to me a fragment of a letter of this writer to Wula and Rafał Buber (of 31 December, 1905): “We have seen little in Venice so far, anyway St. Mark’s Square and part of the Doge’s Palace. St. Mark is peculiar. It is beautiful, as if it had been built by a pirate for his lover. There is this randomness of the loot. This or that is there, because they laid their hands on it. Style? This is also the style. Perhaps the only criterion against this beauty is its impossibility to develop”. As practically everything that it is made of – like the columns – was robbed from Istanbul. Herbert, agreeing with Brzozowski, joked that it was not a church of the Italians, but of the Byzantine world. There is one more anecdote. When we look at the facade of St. Mark’s Basilica, on the left side we can see lions which were brought from the Byzantine Empire. And next to them there is a strange bas-relief which features Alexander the Great lifted by two birds in accordance with the legend that he was granted ascension after his death. Herbert said that most Italians would be shocked by the information that in St. Mark’s Basilica there are bones of Alexander the Great and not the bones of the church patron, as there is a legend saying that the expedition which was to transport the relics of St. Mark from Alexandria on the orders of the government of Venice accidentally took with them also the remains of Alexander buried nearby. According to Herbert, the presence of a pagan image on the facade of a Christian church would be a sign confirming this mistake and indicating that there are really no relics of St. Mark inside...

AF: There would be some charm in pilgrimaging to the relics of Alexander the Great...

FMC: Precisely. This temple was for Herbert the quintessence of the Byzantine Empire, since St. Mark’s Basilica is not the cathedral of Venice but, in accordance with the Byzantine tradition, the cathedral of power. This is the Doge’s chapel, situated next to their palace.

AF: It can be said that there are two moments – Venetian moments – at the beginning and end of Zbigniew Herbert's life. At the beginning we have the market in Lviv. A young lad buys for himself roasted chestnuts there. Herbert will come across them in Paris years later and will write to his parents that the smell of these chestnuts is for him the smell of the past which is out of his reach for ever. In the middle of the old town there is an ugly Austrian town hall which looks like some inferior barracks, but around there are splendid Renaissance tenement houses designed by Italian architects brought to Lviv. And on one of them there is a bas-relief showing the lion of St. Mark, as it was the seat of the Embassy of the Republic of Venice. On the other end of this biographical story, so about 70 years later, Herbert is gravely ill lying in his bed in Warsaw, with a small tube delivering him oxygen as he could not breathe in any other way – unable, in fact, to undertake a journey greater than getting out of bed and reaching the bathroom. And he comes up with an idea that he wants to escape from this world; we could say – escape death; go to Venice, live there. I remember that when I heard this, it sounded half-legendary, half-apocryphal. Yet how moved I was when I found in Herbert's archive the plane tickets which the nurse bought him along with hotel room reservations. This undertaking was naturally completely unworkable but, on the symbolic level, very poignant.

KP: Exactly. One can say that on a symbolic plane Herbert did visit Lviv in a way. I mean, if Venice was to be symbolically connected with Lviv, as this is a really major clue. I would also like to ask about two things. One of them surprised me greatly when I started to recall Herbert's poetry – read it with regard to his journeys. And I saw a thing which I did not expect – maybe you noticed it somehow, too. In reality, there are very few Herbert's poems which contain traces of the direct of experiencing space in the topographical, geographical sense. These include, naturally, *Clouds over Ferrara* or *Rovigo*, but rather as a kind of non-C, an inscription of non-being rather than being in that town. I was wondering why his poetry does not reflect this infatuation with the South, fascination and even the hardships of experiencing it. This was surely present in his essays and correspondence. Do you have, perhaps, any hypothesis about it?

AF: I do not have any explanation. I remember, however, that one of his travelling companions, Magdalena Czajkowska, drew attention to this very issue when writing a text about Herbert's works. She noticed that if Herbert's poetry was heading towards a certain, let's say, abstractness and this is why it was not saturated with the topographical or temporal concrete, essays make up for a reversal of this situation. In particular his early essays, which are full of sensory details.

FMC: I do not have clarity on that. I have always been under the impression that Herbert ignored his essays. Poems are what is important and essays just accompany them. Hence it is different than in the case of Miłosz, where all the forms make a whole. In my opinion, however, Herbert's essays are

important, but not as personal as his poems. His intention to describe the Byzantine world was an idea not for poems, but for an essay...

AF: We could say that his poems are like a Latin inscription carved in stone. If Herbert went to Latin classes as a young man and recalled later that Latin struck him with balance and perfection, it was like an inscription carved in the Roman type as compared to rustling, clumsy Polish. His poems are also sometimes carved in a marble slab in Roman type. And when you carve stone, there is no time or place for descriptions or too many adjectives – you need to convey an essence. I present all this, of course, a bit as an essayistic joke...

KP: And, actually, a convincing metaphor. The final question: what do you think – is Herbert's vision of the South – of the Mediterranean region in a broad sense – important, attractive, interesting, useful for the contemporary human being? To what extent, in your opinion, is it not outdated?

AF: It is possible to answer this question in a number of ways. For instance, I remember how many years ago someone in the editorial office of *Tygodnik Powszechny* said: why should we read *Barbarian in the Garden* if we have such excellent guidebooks to Italy? We have the Internet and in it there is everything we need in order to cognise the world. We can go there any minute. But the answer would be like this: Zbigniew Herbert as a historian of art may not have been a very original and – although we would think so – professional author; and professional historians of art point to different borrowings or incorrectness of some of his ideas. But if someone, and this is not only my impression, read *Barbarian in the Garden* in a good moment of their life, for instance in secondary school, they will always go to Siena remembering what Herbert wrote about Siena. He was capable of spreading his love and passion towards works of art which he wrote about, towards those places which he visited. And later, naturally, we will read other books, like Kazimierz Chłędowski's excellent monograph devoted to Siena, and we will find out much more. But we owe it to Herbert rather than anyone else that our emotions are moved and that we fall in love with the story about the city.

FMC: Yes, this is true. In any case, essays from the *Barbarian in the Garden* collection have never been translated into Italian. No one found the reason to do so. They claimed: what do we, Italians, need this for? I think that this attitude is wrong. Herbert's essays are, above all, a stylistic masterpiece. Another masterwork is the way he looks at Siena, Greece, or the Dutch art. I think that, above all, Herbert's way of thinking and style of writing both retain their freshness. *Barbarian in the Garden* was a book which was very abstract for Poles in the 1960s as very few of them could travel abroad. It was certainly important to them that there is someone who is capable of talking about their journeys in such a fantastic way. But I still meet many educated Poles who look at Siena or Orvieto from Herbert's perspective.

KP: True. When you read *Barbarian in the Garden* today, it is not in order to obtain detailed information from a historian of art. This is something we already know or we can easily check. What is absolutely unusual about these essays is some kind of victory of Herbert the poet. Their language is incredible. There are such wordings which could not be found in any guide, since an artist is needed to create them.

Edited by Jerzy Wiśniewski

SUMMARY

The topic of a conversation of three literary scholars which took place in the last months of the Zbigniew Herbert Year (2018) is the experience recorded in the poet's poems and essays of the Mediterranean culture, antiquity as a tool of cognition, an important code as well as the experience of his real journeys to the south of Europe being a kind of dividing line in his literary output and resonating in it.

Keywords

Zbigniew Herbert, essay, culture of south Europe, art history

Francesco Matteo Cataluccio (1955) studied philosophy and Polish philology in Florence and Warsaw. He is an author of many articles on the history and culture of Poland and Eastern Europe as well as an editor of the Italian edition of works by Witold Gombrowicz, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński or a collective Italian and Spanish edition of works by Brunon Schulz. He is known to the Polish reader as an author of books such as *Niedojrzałość, choroba naszych czasów* [Immaturity: Disease of Our Time] (ZNAK, Kraków 2006), *Jadę zobaczyć, czy tam jest lepiej. Niemalże brewiarz środkowoeuropejski* [I'm Going to See if It's Better There] (ZNAK, Kraków 2012) and *Czarnobyl* [Chernobyl] (Czarne, Wołowiec 2013). His correspondence with Zbigniew Herbert was published in the volume *Herbert. Studia i dokumenty* [Herbert: Studies and Documents] edited by Piotr Kłoczowski (Warsaw, 2008). He received the Ryszard Kapuściński Award for Literary Reportage in 2013.

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Adventures of the Soul] (Kraków, 2010) and *Herbert. Biografia*, t. 1-2 [Herbert. Biography, vol. 1-2] (Kraków, 2018). He is currently working on a biography of Józef Czapski.

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