

The slender Mr. Cogito.(The Collected Poems: 1956-1998) (Book review).

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Zbigniew Herbert
The Collected Poems: 1956-1998.
Ecco, 600 pages, \$34.95

"Fatten your animal for sacrifice" Apollo warned the ancient Greek poet Callimachus, whom opponents criticized for avoiding civic verse, "but keep your muse slender." The implication of this directive--that poetry's aesthetic value depends upon its refusal to engage in contemporary politics--has never been less true than in the case of the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998), whose slender Muse magically digests even the most ungainly of fares. His rejoinder to the ancient warning came late in his career, in the tribute to his own early mentor Henryk Elzenberg in 1992:

The times we lived in were truly a tale told by

an idiot

Full of sound and cruelty

Your severe gentleness delicate strength

Taught me to weather the world like a

thinking stone

Patient indifferent and tender all at once....

Praise be to your Books

Slender

Spacious

More lasting than bronze.

Forged under the political pressure of the Second World War and the subsequent Soviet occupation, Herbert's profoundly original vision attests to the truth of this paradox: his own verse, though sparse and slender, opens inward to an abundant spaciousness. Hence the intellectually exciting, unforeseeable trajectory of a poem like "Fortune-Telling," from his first volume *Chord of Light* (1956), which begins by distinguishing the mighty life-line that rushes through the "valley of the palm" from the stunted, "helpless" line of fidelity beside it. Maybe the line of fidelity is really this slender, Herbert proposes, or

Maybe deeper under the skin it continues

further

parts the tissue of muscles and enters the

arteries

so that we might meet at night our dead

down inside where memory and blood

flow in minshafts wells chambers

full of dark names

Even in a poem about seeing into the future, who could have predicted the masterful imaginative swerve whereby the seemingly slight line of fidelity opens into the darkened caverns of tissue and memory, diving toward those tutelary spirits whom Herbert calls elsewhere the "Fall Shades"? This is Herbert at his best: cunningly simple, parabolic, and delightfully unexpected. And as the long-awaited publication of his *Collected Poems* reveals, Herbert is almost always at his best.

In light of the uncompromising skepticism and critique to which they subject tyranny and injustice, Herbert's poems have been praised repeatedly for their piercing political vision. It is almost comforting to call him a political poet, to pigeonhole him alongside Czeslaw Milosz and Joseph Brodsky, both of whom perhaps less equivocally belong in that category. "May your sister Scorn not abandon you," he reminds his own poems. We label him an ironist, a moralist. But this is primarily because we don't know where else to put him, because his creative strangeness--which draws as much from his sense of fragility, tenderness, and sympathy as from his political dissent--places demands upon our imaginative compassion that we're simply unused to confronting.

Our fluency in modernism makes Herbert's unconventional punctuation, informal metrics, and classical emphasis on discipline and restraint all somewhat familiar. But no modernist irony prepares us for a lyrical masterpiece like "The Rain" which begins with a faintly familiar account of a wounded soldier returned from war. The speaker's elder brother, we learn, bears on his forehead "a splinter of shrapnel" "a little silver star/ and under the star/ an abyss." But Herbert's power to delay and enchant transforms a potentially somber war poem into an acutely personal, moving elegy. The elder brother grows confused, loses the power of speech, but

what stories

he told with his hands

in the right he had romances

in the left soldier's memories

they took my brother

and carried him out of town

he returns every fall

slim and very quiet

he does not want to come in
he knocks at the window for me
we walk together in the streets
and he recites to me
improbable tales
touching my face
with blind fingers of rain

The dehumanizing vulgarity of war is what propels the poem. But what brings it to rest is the seemingly unwarranted beauty of the speaker's grief, the tantalizing deferral of the poem's key metaphor until the final line, and the beguiling improbability with which he confronts so desperate a longing for consolation and metamorphosis. The sad shade of Virgil--and the tears of things--lingers in those final lines.

Herbert's verse shuns the baroque and avoids linguistic fireworks, both of which he regarded as ideologically suspect. The result of his Spartan aesthetic is that, as Joseph Brodsky wonderfully puts it, we don't so much remember his lines as find our own imagination "branded by their ice-cold lucidity."

Alissa Valles does a great service by lending the volume a consistency that allows us to trust her translations, though at times one misses the subtle elegance that characterized John and Bogdana Carpenter's earlier versions, which copyright issues likely prohibited her from using. In their 1993 translation, one of Herbert's most delightful prose poems begins: "To take objects out of their royal silence one must use either a stratagem or a crime." Valles's rendition of the line--"To extract objects from their majestic silence takes either a ploy or a crime"--seems a falling off.

Herbert's many noble hymns to simple objects beguile with the same radiant energy as his elegies. "Stool" reveals his devotion to the "tiny quadruped with oaken legs"; "At last," the speaker concludes, admitting his own inconstancy, "the fidelity of things opens our eyes." Elsewhere he mourns the archaic nibbed pen and the "luminous initiation" of the oil lamp, whose wild flickers Herbert likens to "the hysterics of a prima donna." And just as, in his hands, the patina of our soiled and dowdy treasures becomes radiant, so too the luminosity we expect from the discarnate and ethereal becomes heavy with earth and imperfection (another speaker hopes that we "who are made of blood and illusion," might free ourselves one day from "the oppressive levity of appearance"). His captivating parables of angels and divinities always refuse transcendence. The seventh angel, for instance, whom he calls "Shemkel"

is black and nervous
and has been fined many times
for illegal import of sinners ...
Shemkel Shemkel
--the angels complain
why are you not perfect

Any account of Herbert's finest poems--among them "Knocker," "Elegy of Fortinbras," "Meditations on Father" and "Pebble"--is incomplete without mention of Mr. Cogito, the alter ego whom he adopts in his 1974 volume of that name and who reappears throughout the rest of his career. Herbert's ironic double, Mr. Cogito--the mundane "Mr" plays Sancho Panza to Descartes's Quixotic phrase--is never simply an object of derision or abuse. When he looks in the mirror, he loses "the tournament with my face"; when he drinks "an extract of bitter herbs" he makes certain to leave some for later. Nothing "crosses" his mind when Mr. Cogito thinks; instead, his thoughts "sit on the rocks/ Wringing their hands."

Here and elsewhere, Herbert's irony neither defends nor diverts. It is the obverse of a funhouse mirror, flashing back to a distorted face an image more true--fragile, ashamed, fearful--than its original. "Beware however of overweening pride," Mr. Cogito warns himself: "examine your fool's face in the mirror/repeat: I was called--was there no one better than I." The urgency, tenderness, and determination of Cogito's closing "Envoy" vibrate through the entire Collected volume as well:

Keep watch--when a light on a hill gives a
sign--rise and go
as long as the blood is still turning the dark
star in your breast
repeat humanity's old incantations fairy tales
and legends ...
Be faithful Go

This is both the warning and the pledge of a poet who stood, quite simply, alone among his contemporaries.