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On the Drafts of the Poem “Mr. Cogito and the Imagination”¹

Abstract: The article subjects to analysis selected motifs from Zbigniew Herbert’s poem “Mr. Cogito and the Imagination” based on the draft copies of the work that are stored in the poet’s archive. An analysis of the manuscripts, which reveals a different, hidden aspect of the final text, allows for the investigation of what was omitted in the process of creation, such as the motif of Daedal and the reference to the Upanishads, and traces the development of the significant themes of the poem: a concept of identity and the notion of tautology.

Keywords: Zbigniew Herbert, drafts, “Mr. Cogito and the Imagination,” tautology

Tautology and Metamorphoses

A couplet that opens the final version appears in the poem’s first draft; the beginning of the poem will remain unchanged:

Mr. Cogito never trusted
tricks of the imagination
he didn’t appreciate ~~hybrids~~ labyrinths
the Sphinx filled him with loathing²

the piano at the top of the Alps
~~did not play him any~~ concerts
false

Mr. Cogito “didn’t appreciate hybrids”: the word “hybrids” has been crossed out and will never again return. The removed word attracts attention, becoming a potentially important word that sometimes enriches interpretation and

¹ Originally published in *Konteksty Kultury* 2018, vol. 15, no. 1 (the Polish title: “O brulionach wiersza ‘Pan Cogito i wyobraźnia’”).

² Archive of Zbigniew Herbert, Accession 17 846, vol. 1, p. 72.

at times creates an additional meaning when compared with the final version of the text. On numerous occasions, Herbert expressed pity for the mythological hybrids, rehabilitating the Minotaur and feeling moved by the suffering of Marsyas, but there are different kinds of hybrids... It is significant that the word “hybrid,” which has negative connotations, also appears in one of the drafts of “The Power of Taste” as a component of “torturers’ dialectics”:

we never liked hybrids – of the speech
of the tautology of the oxymoron in rhetoric.³

Thus at the beginning of the process of writing a poem about imagination and compassion a thought about hybrids came to Herbert’s mind, seemingly introducing a thread that would also constitute the core of the poem, which concerns not only the imagination and poetics, but also identity and an ethical attitude, a means of being an artist and a person. Compassion is closely tied to the feeling of identity, as the scholar Antonio Prete emphasizes in the introduction to his suggestive history of compassion: in the face of another human’s suffering, the compassionate subject discovers the chasm between him or herself and his or her neighbor, simultaneously discovering the helplessness of one’s individual being. Therefore, compassion is “a personal matter of the subject,” as our relationship to the other becomes a determinant of our attitude to the world.⁴ Only this – compassionate attitude towards the world counts here, so Mr. Cogito is not concerned about the image created by the critics. When it comes to himself as an artist, Cogito remains faithful to the commandment to compassion at the price of superficial classification as “*minores* type.”

The first draft is less coherent. On the margins of the pages, the author has added new fragments of the text, noting his thoughts that could serve as “inspiration” for moving forward in the process of writing it. The first simple annotation on the right margin concerns tautology:

~~tautology~~ tautology
identity
idem per idem.⁵

Although we will never enter into the territory of the author’s imagination, we can conjecture that perhaps the thought about tautologies gave rise to a reflection about the “immorality” of metamorphoses, which is developed in the second draft as follows⁶:

³ Ibid., p. 292.

⁴ A. Prete, *Compassione. Storia di un sentimento*, Torino 2013, pp. 17, 130–131.

⁵ Archive of Zbigniew Herbert, Accession 17 846, vol. 1, p. 72.

⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

metamorphoses
 seemed to him
 an immoral escape⁷

Why is there such a decisive rejection of metamorphoses, which are a literary representation of the maximal extent of approaching of another, here? Metamorphoses are an image of the carnal experiencing of empathy. They lead to a deeper feeling of one's neighbor's emotions and to identification with another being, while during metamorphoses the loss of one's own identity, forms, and language can awaken the imagination and compassion through strong identification with the one who suffers.⁸ The poem "Biology Teacher," dedicated to an instructor killed by "history's schoolyard bullies," is a delicate dream about an impossible metamorphosis of survival, about the return of the teacher to this world in the form of a beetle. Similarly, mythology, which frequently inspired Herbert, was a plane of constant transformations of the carnal protagonists. Like poetry, it is a field of metaphors that transform reality; thus here the rejection of metaphors, "jungles of tangled images," could be synonymous with the rejection of changes with negative connotations. However, perhaps when Herbert was writing this poem, he did not have in mind mythological or literary transformations, but was searching for a formula in which a truer compassion would fit; a less literary and fictional, but more earnest one. He would be in favor of a model of identity that would be, for example, a negation of the negative image presented in the poem "Khodasevich":

(...) but what was his entelechy
 let's say he was a hybrid a bit of everything mixed in
 spirit and flesh up and down now Marxist now
 Catholic
 cock and hen and to top it all off half-Russian half Pole (...)
 he himself didn't quite know who Khodasevich was (...)⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See A. Prete, op. cit., pp. 78–86.

⁹ "Khodasevich" [in:] Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems, 1956–1998*, trans., ed. A. Valles, London 2007, p. 496; Herbert expressed a similar critique using strong journalistic language in the interview *Pojedynki Pana Cogito* ("Mr. Cogito's Duels"), in which he spoke of the "Protean" Miłosz, who lacked identity. Dagmara Zawistowska-Toczek writes about Herbert's conflict with Czesław Miłosz in a chapter summarizing views on this topic: "Pojedynki wieszczów. Konflikt z Czesławem Miłoszem" [in:] idem, *Stary poeta. 'Ars moriendi' w późnej twórczości Zbigniewa Herberta*, Lublin 2008, pp. 175–202. Unless stated otherwise, Zbigniew Herbert's poems are cited according to *The Collected Poems, 1956–1998*, trans., ed. A. Valles, London 2007.

Apart from three poems about the immorality of metamorphoses, in the first draft there appear two lines that would come back in the second; it is a description concerning Mr. Cogito:

he was one of many
but only himself.¹⁰

The sentences related to Mr. Cogito’s identity express a tautological thought; he was and wanted to be, Herbert later writes in the same draft, “only himself,” and thus faithful to himself and therefore authentic... Mr. Cogito will “adore tautologies,” but the poet is conscious of the various shades and functions of “explanations/ *idem per idem*.” Tautology is usually presented as a model of an empty, superfluous expression, but along with tautology the concept of the truth comes into play, being its marker and, I would say, danger; in mathematical logic, tautology is a true expression because of purely logical reasons, without making reference to real circumstances.¹¹ As sentences that are always true in the system of a language, tautologies can take away our independence and capacity to think critically, therefore serving the discourse of power. Such is the case in “The Power of Taste”:

Truly their rhetoric was just too shoddy
(Marcus Tullius turned in his grave)
chains of tautologies a few flailing concepts
torturers’ dialectics reasoning without grace
syntax devoid of the beauty of the subjunctive (*The Collected Poems, 1956–1998*,
p. 409)

Here, Herbert presents tautologies in a negative conceptualization. A good commentary to these verses could be Roland Barthes’ reflections. In his *Mythologies*, he mentions that tautology is an authoritative statement precluding criticism, as it stands before a superficially obvious reality that can be accepted only passively. For Barthes, tautology is an aggressive, wonderful certainty of nothingness that frees independent thinking from exercising its duties: “signifie une rupture rageuse entre l’intelligence et son objet, la menace arrogante d’un ordre où l’on ne penserait pas.”¹² Barthes also emphasizes the second aspect of tautology, which could be a healthy aphasia when it tells us nothing but

¹⁰ Archive of Zbigniew Herbert, Accession 17 846, vol. 1, p. 72.

¹¹ *Dizionario di filosofia*, Treccani, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/tautologia_\(Dizionario-di-filosofia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/tautologia_(Dizionario-di-filosofia)/), accessed: 5.12.2017.

¹² R. Barthes, “Racine est Racine, Le mythe, aujourd’hui” [in:] *idem, Mythologies*, Paris 1957, p. 91. Translation: “it means a brutal dissociation of thought from its object, arrogant threats from order, where one does not need to think.” *Idem, “Racine to Racine”* [in:] *idem, Mitologie*, trans. A. Dziadek, Warszawa 2008, p. 129.

represents the truth of reality with respect to language and is an expression of great disillusionment with speech. We kill language with tautology, then, as language betrays us.¹³

Because it has a relationship to reality, tautology is dangerous and should be used cautiously. Perhaps that is what Herbert wants to tell us by writing about boorish tautologies of power in “Power of Taste” but also about nature’s “wise tautologies” in “Prayer of the Traveler Mr. Cogito.”¹⁴ The juxtaposition of these poems shows us that tautology can be a tribute to the presented reality, but it can contain a minus sign as a dangerous tool of linguistic manipulation and dishonest propaganda that can eventually be contrasted with another tautology, referring back to the hard reality of the presentation of objects and facts and to ethics and say clearly that “slavery” is “slavery.”

Tautology, with which we “kill language,” is in an obvious way bound to the problem of presenting reality and can express euphoric admiration for existence and the various forms of being, which language can try to reflect solely through powerless repetition. In this sense, it can be interpreted as an “anti-metaphor,”¹⁵ a source of extreme realism, and thus it also appears in the poem about the imagination of the lyrical I, who does not like concerts at the tops of the Alps. It is worth mentioning at this point Umberto Eco’s words, which are consistent with Herbert’s realism. Taking part in a philosophical debate on the concept of realism that has been held in Italy in recent years, Eco spoke of “negative realism,” of the awareness that there is a hard kernel of reality: facts sometimes rebel against our interpretation and then we realize that we cannot say everything, that some sentences are false, and that there are moments “when the world, when faced with our interpretations, tells us NO.”¹⁶ And this “no,” like Herbert’s stone, which can be domesticated, is resistance put forth by the “only” reality with respect to our language and our knowledge, and this is a great lesson in humility. Hence the love for tautology, which sometimes expresses a euphoric awe of the world, and other times the clear consciousness

¹³ Idem, “Racine est Racine, Le mythe, aujourd’hui” [in:] idem, *Mythologies*, Paris 1957, pp. 91–92, 226–227.

¹⁴ For more on tautology in Herbert’s poetry, see Wojciech Ligęza’s probing essay: “Sen kamienia, tautologie natury” [in:] *Dialog i spór. Zbigniew Herbert a inni poeci i eseści*, ed. J.M. Ruszar, Lublin 2006, pp. 145–165; Dariusz Pawelec’s article “Elegia” [in:] *Niepewna jasność tekstu. Szkice o twórczości Zbigniewa Herberta 1998–2008*, ed. J.M. Ruszar, Kraków 2009, pp. 129–145; Magdalena Śniedziewska’s book *Wierność rzeczywistości. Zbigniew Herbert o postawie wobec świata i problemach jego reprezentacji*, Kraków 2013.

¹⁵ F. Muzzioli, *Le strategie del testo. Introduzione all’analisi retorica della letteratura*, Roma 2006 [2004], pp. 116–117.

¹⁶ See: “esiste uno zoccolo duro dell’essere, tale che alcune cose che diciamo su di esso non possano e non debbano essere prese per buone. (...) Ci sono delle cose che non si possono dire. Ci sono dei momenti in cui il mondo, di fronte alle nostre interpretazioni, ci dice NO,” U. Eco, “Di un realismo negativo” [in:] idem, *Bentornata realtà. Il nuovo realismo in discussione*, ed. M. De Caro, M. Ferraris, Torino 2012 [trans. – F.F.].

that "slavery is slavery." A brief sequence of tautology in the second draft gives pause for thought. It consists solely of elements referring to situations of danger and the loss of freedom. The first word did not refer to the world of nature; it was not the "bird" of the final version, but a tool of enslavement:

a chain a chain
 slavery slavery
 a knife a knife
 death is death¹⁷

It is as if Herbert had wanted to emphasize that in the face of evil we can sometimes only repeat the simple tautological knowledge that is least dishonest when it does not falsify this reality, against which we can rebel only when we call it by name.

Daedalus or Icarus?

The third of the fragments added to the middle column in the first edition is the germ of a stanza that would enter the final version:

he rarely got carried away
 on the wings of a metaphor
 and
 ✕ like Daedalus fell forcefully on the face of the earth¹⁸

This fragment will be subjected to changes in the second and third editions, but the reference to Daedalus always appears. It is only in the preserved manuscript,¹⁹ which is the last stage of the genesis of the text, that this stanza no longer differs from the printed one, where the mythological figure that Mr. Cogito compares himself to is not Daedalus, but Icarus:

he rarely got carried away
 on the wings of a metaphor
 he then plunged like Icarus
 Great Mother

¹⁷ Archive of Zbigniew Herbert, Accession 17 846, vol. 1, p. 71.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁹ Archive of Zbigniew Herbert, Accession 17 846, vol. 2, p. 81.

The thought of Daedalus as the model for Mr. Cogito's attitude to the metaphorical flights of art came first and would return in later editions. This was not Daedalus' first appearance in the poetry of Herbert, who used his own "mythological imagination" in order to present in "Daedalus and Icarus" a dialogue between a father and son before a mythical flight. Daedalus gives Icarus advice; looking into the sky, he is to remember that he is walking, not flying, but the son's eyes "like two stones" gaze at the ground. Herbert's Icarus falls into the sea because he felt the laws of gravitation too much. The final comment appears to emphasize Icarus' powerlessness and naivety, while Daedalus appears to be a man aware of the human condition of being between heaven and earth; it is the latter who mentions that wings are only a decoration, that we can rise up only as much as we have been allowed. In "The Fathers of a Star," the topic of life in accordance with the laws of nature is tied to the figure of Daedalus, a scholar and wise man capable of understanding that human boundaries cannot be transcended.²⁰ In "The History of the Minotaur," Daedalus appears once more as an artist making pedagogical architecture and who designs a labyrinth, the prison of the wretched Minotaur. Mr. Cogito did not like labyrinths in this poem, which may be why Herbert has decided to remove Daedalus, who after all did not "fall violently" to the ground, as he fortunately had finished his flight.

Analyzing the literary myth of Daedalus, André Peyronie notes that in the twentieth century Daedalus frequently gives way to Icarus as the figure of a man capable of flying, but is later also "rehabilitated" in his role as architect and inventor, becoming an important point of reference in contemporary literature. He appears in it as the archetype of an artist creating a work of art – labyrinths – from words, such as in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Stoffe*. As an artist who is aware of his capacities, Daedalus personifies the rational factor of artistic creativity in opposition to the heroic factor represented by Icarus in the myth.²¹ The transition from Daedalus to Icarus can better correspond to the depreciation of Mr. Cogito as an artist "of the lesser kind" and above all magnifies the dramatic approach of Mr. Cogito and his fidelity to the earth, even at the cost of losing his life, as has happened to Icarus.

²⁰ "The Fathers of a Star": "they will read the tale of Daedalus to their children/ the Greek was right he didn't want the moon or the stars/ he was only a bird he remained in the order of nature/ and the things he created followed him like animals/ like a cloak he wore on his shoulders his wings and his fate" (p. 191).

²¹ A. Peyronie, "Dedalo" [in:] *Dizionario dei miti letterari*, ed. P. Brunel [ed. of the Italian edition G. Gabetta], Milan 1995, pp. 169–176.

The first element is light, an important word in this poetry, a traditional symbol of wisdom, from which, according to the author of “Epilogue of the Storm,” we are separated by “a great chasm.” Herbert’s sensitivity to light appears in a recollection of his childhood, to which the writer often referred in interviews, telling how he was fascinated by the wall across from the apartment window in Lvov, how this “wall with warm light” would later become an abstract experience, an “inexpressible color” that would haunt him.²⁴ The fall of the Sassanid Empire is replaced with the “Sassanid intrigues” in the second edition and disappears in the third; perhaps one empire, Rome, was sufficient in this poem... Elements of the natural landscape here are vertical elements that in the lyrical poem could refer to an otherworldly dimension. Thus it is unsurprising that in the second edition, in addition to “the waterfall of a cloud’s mountain,” Herbert would add “the ecstasy of the mystics.” In the second draft, there is no longer any fragment expressing the trait of the author’s empathy, which was to lead to complete identification, to understand “the desert [as if there were a desert],” more directly. The defenders of Masada, who greatly excited Herbert’s “historical imagination” (which we know, for example, thanks to David Weinfeld’s recollections of the poet’s visit to Israel²⁵), would disappear from the final edition as well.

New elements appear in the second draft. Some (“the nature of a diamond,” “the fury of mass murderers”) would make it to the final version, while others, such as “Jan Hus’ drama” and “the ecstasy of the mystics,” would be confined to the discarded drafts. Two verses of enumeration, in the left column in the penultimate draft with numerous deletions, are next to each other in the third edition:

Pascal’s night	– the wrath of Achilles	– Pascal’s night	the nature of a diamond
the prophets’ melancholy		the prophets’ melancholy	
the fury of mass murderers		the wrath of Achilles	
the dreams of Mary Stuart		the fury of mass murderers	the dreams of
the fear of Alexander	Neanderthals	Mary Stuart	the fear of Neanderthals
Cleopatra’s dying	Nietzsche’s long dying	the last Aztecs’ despair	
the dreams of simple folk		Nietzsche’s long dying	
		the rise and fall of an oak	the Lascaux
		painter’s joy	and the fall of Rome ²⁶

²⁴ Z. Herbert, “Światło na murze. Rozmawia Marek Sołtysik” [in:] *Herbert nieznan. Rozmowy*, Warszawa 2008, pp. 112–113.

²⁵ See: D. Weinfeld, “Rozproszone wspomnienia o Herbercie w Izraelu,” <http://www.fundacjaherberta.com/krotki-rys-biograficzny/wspomnienia-rodziny-i-przyjaciol-o-herbercie/david-weinfeld>, accessed: 26.04.2017.

²⁶ Archive of Zbigniew Herbert, Accession 17 846, vol. 1, p. 73.

The fear of Alexander, the protagonist of history and of Herbert’s apocrypha *The Gordian Knot*, who amidst the “tangled material of the world” could not accept “marvelous human uncertainty,” is replaced with the fear of Neanderthals; Herbert goes back into the depths of our pre-cultural history, going back to the past of the primitive man. Cleopatra is exchanged for Friedrich Nietzsche, who was important for Herbert. The thinker, who so ruthlessly viewed the weak compassionate subject, becomes the object of the tenderness of Mr. Cogito, who would like to comprehend that which seems incomprehensible: the dark suffering of the philosopher, an obstinate opponent of compassion, who in this way arouses our human compassion even more.²⁷ The enumeration, significant in the third edition, is the last element of “the dreams of simple folk” that would close the list, opposing the worldview of the philosopher of the superman. The fourth and last verse of enumeration is close to the final one. Herbert was unsure whether to add “the nature of a diamond”; the last verse of the enumeration contains fewer natural elements and thus more human suffering and boundary experiences apart from one completely clear note, which is present only thanks to adding “the Lascaux painter’s joy.”

He Naively Believed/ In One Reality

The topic of realism and Herbert’s attitude to reality has engaged scholars of his poetry and will continue to do so. It is a major theme of his writing to be interpreted in the categories of both the history of culture – in reference, for example, to the discussion on the topic of the imagination and realism in Poland in the 1950s – and in philosophy or aesthetics. The word “reality” appears in the pages of the drafts of the poem. It is present in the fourth stanza of the first draft; this word would return in the right lower margin amidst the *in fieri* records, sometimes noting important thoughts that would later be added to the poem. These two verses about Mr. Cogito are as follows:

he naively believed
in one reality²⁸

In the second draft, this stanza is found at the very end and explains why in Mr. Cogito’s imagination “there is no room/ for the fake fires of poetry”: “For he naively believed/ in one reality.” An interesting Indian motif that would confirm faith in the existence of this one reality appears in the first and second drafts. Of all the “professions of wisdom,” Herbert writes, Cogito:

²⁷ A. Prete writes about the Nietzschean critique of compassion in: op. cit., pp. 128–130.

²⁸ Archive of Zbigniew Herbert, Accession 17 846, vol. 1, p. 72.

most liked
 that is you
 invisible substance
 dear fig seed²⁹

“Dear fig seed” sends us to the sixth chapter of the *Chandogya Upanishad*, to the dialogue of the father and his son Svetaketu, who after twelve years of studying with a master returns home at the age of twenty-four, convinced that he is already a wise man. In the twelfth subsection, the father encourages his son to peel the fruit of the Indian fig down to the seed and instructs him that the universe is contained within this open seed and that he is this seed: “that is you, dear Svetaket.”³⁰

Herbert also wrote in the margins: “Tat tvam asi.” These are “great” words of the formula of wisdom of the Upanishad, which mean: “You, individual soul, are *Tat*,” the being, the highest element. This sentence expresses the identification between Brahman and Atman, between what is the smallest and what is the greatest, and the faith that all phenomena are cloaked behind “one reality.”³¹ A Brahman can attain Atman by removing himself from the earthly reality. However, as scholar Carlo della Casa writes, it seems that the Upanishads do not preach complete rejection of the world; if all phenomena being part of One contain the truth within themselves, earthly life must be accepted: “humanity is anchored in the world and cannot be distracted from its own condition; hence the humanity of the Upanishad.”³²

This fragment clearly proclaims that the “fireworks” of the imagination are rejected in the name of “one reality;” it will disappear just like the Indian motif, which will appear once more in the second draft: the reference to the Upanishad’s “tat tvam asi” without a shade of irony matches the message of the poem, which perhaps could lead the reader of the text, which is strongly on the side of specifics and of human suffering, towards other, mystical sides.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

³⁰ “Upaniszad Chandogya” [in:] *Upanisad*, ed. C. Della Casa, *Classici delle religioni*, Torino 1983, s. 250 [trans. – F.F.].

³¹ *Upanisad*, op. cit., p. 20.

³² C. Della Casa, “Wprowadzenie” [in:] *Upanisad*, op. cit., pp. 23–24 [trans. – F.F.].

To His Uncertain Brightness

I will conclude by quoting the last sentence of the verse that appears in the first draft: Mr. Cogito:

wanted to remain faithful
to his dark brightness³³

In the second manuscript, his two versions coexist in the form of inconclusive alternatives; the author has not made a decision. Mr. Cogito:

wanted to remain faithful
to his dark brightness uncertain brightness³⁴

The decision was made in the final draft, although there remained a sign of indecision: the crossing out of a small word, a possessive pronoun, is visible. Mr. Cogito:

wanted to remain faithful
~~to his~~ uncertain brightness³⁵

Mr. Cogito’s “dark brightness” becomes uncertain forever. Herbert chooses a somewhat less metaphorical oxymoron by substituting “darkness” with “uncertainty,” which more concretely expresses the knowledge that Mr. Cogito strives for. Through the elimination of the possessive pronoun, this “uncertain brightness” is no longer Mr. Cogito’s private perspective, but becomes a formula of a broader poetic, philosophical, and existential formula, including, perhaps, our own. This brightness will always be uncertain, as in it there is no room in it for another’s suffering and for the awareness that, both with regards to this suffering and to the naked truth of reality, our imagination is always limited, and sometimes turns out to be merely tautological repetition.

Translated by Filip Mazurczak

³³ Archive of Zbigniew Herbert, Accession 17 846, vol. 1, p. 72.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

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