



Penguin Modern European Poets

Zbigniew Herbert
Selected Poems

Selected Poems

ZBIGNIEW HERBERT

TRANSLATED BY

Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

A. ALVAREZ



PENGUIN BOOKS

*To the
condemned
cousins*

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Introduction to the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert

In Western Europe we take for granted that there is a fundamental split between poetry and politics. The problem is not that the twain can never meet but that they can do so only at a great cost. The complexity, tension and precision of modern poetry simply doesn't go with the language of politics, with its vague rhetoric and dependence on clichés. This is the argument against Yevtushenko, against much of Mayakovsky, against Auden's 'Spain', or the young Spender's nugatory Marxism. It amounts to the belief that political poetry, *as poetry*, must be relatively but debilitatingly simple-minded. This means that, although it may on occasions be effective, it can't finally be 'good', since our criteria of excellence are defined by qualities more intuned and subtly discriminating than politics leaves room for.

To all this Zbigniew Herbert is an exception. He is an *avant-garde* poet whose experiments and precise, restrained rhythms have sent Polish prosody off in a new direction. Trained in law, he is a man with a passion for classical literature and for history, and with all the intellectual tautness associated with, say, T. S. Eliot. Yet his poetry is unremittingly political. In the circumstances, it could never have been otherwise. Born in Lwów in 1924, he wrote his first poems during the appalling Nazi occupation of Poland and served a peculiarly savage apprenticeship in the underground resistance. When the war ended he went to university at Kraków and Toruń, where he took a degree in Civil Law. During the grim years of Stalinism the magazines he wrote for tended to get themselves banned and he pushed his pen uncreatively in an office. His first book of poems, *The Chord of Light*, was not published until the thaw was well under way, in 1956.

Clearly, he is not political in the conventional sense: he does

not purvey, in suitably touched-up forms, the predigested truths supplied by any party. He is political by virtue of being permanently and warily in opposition. Yet that, too, is a misleading, over-dramatic way of putting it. His opposition is not dogmatic: during the Nazi occupation he was not, to my knowledge, a communist, and during the Stalinist repression he was never noticeably even Catholic or nationalist. Herbert's opposition is a party of one; he refuses to relinquish his own truth and his own standards in the face of any dogma.

The best Western poets, arguably, do much the same. By implication at least, they too are deeply committed to the politics – or anti-politics – of protest. But where they create worlds which are autonomous, internalized, complete inside their own heads, Herbert's is continually exposed to the impersonal, external pressures of politics and history. This makes for a curious reversal of values. Poets in Western Europe and America react to the cosy, domesticated, senselessly sensible way of life in a mass democracy by asserting the precariousness of things and deliberately exploring the realm of breakdown and madness. For Herbert, on the other hand, madness and disintegration are all on the outside, the products of war and totalitarianism. In a poem called 'Our Fear' old-fashioned horrors of death and the supernatural have been replaced by political terror; 'the dead are gentle to us' and the only sanity lies in the brief, ironic tenderness of one person for another.

This has been his theme from the start. In one of his first poems, 'Two Drops', written when he was about fifteen, a man and woman make love as the bombs fall. This ultimate existential gesture – as though a kiss could annihilate annihilation – is the clue to all his subsequent work: it is a question of quarrying for himself a little area of light and sense in the engulfing darkness of total war and repression. The pressures he is fighting against are defined at the end of a poem called

'Parables of the Russian Émigrés', when all the touching,
elegant survivors of the old order have been swept away:

after a couple of years
only three of them were spoken about
the one who went mad
the one who hanged himself
she to whom men used to come

the rest lived out of the way
slowly turning to dust

This parable is told by Nicholas
who understands historical necessities
in order to terrify me i.e. to convince me

Most of Herbert's poetry is concerned with reasons for not
being convinced, and with his strategies for survival.

Most important of these strategies is irony. Yet Herbert's
irony has nothing to do with the dandified, touch-me-not dis-
taste – by Eliot out of Laforgue – which was fashionable
among the post-Symbolist poets of the 1920s and the American
academics of the 1940s. For that irony was, in essence, a
slightly less than noble art of self-defence; it protected those
who wielded it from emotions they felt they would be better
without – feelings for other people, the temptations of com-
mitment. In contrast, Herbert's irony is neither elegant nor
embattled:

First there was a god of night and tempest, a black idol without
eyes, before whom they leaped, naked and smeared with blood.
Later on, in the times of the republic, there were many gods with
wives, children, creaking beds, and harmlessly exploding thunder-
bolts. At the end only superstitious neurotics carried in their pock-
ets little statues of salt, representing the god of irony. There was no
greater god at that time.

Then came the barbarians. They too valued highly the little god

of irony. They would crush it under their heel and add it to their dishes.

(‘From Mythology’)

Irony of this kind is a two-edged weapon, which turns on the poet as readily as on the world outside. It is based on a sense of his own ineffectual fragility when faced with the steam-roller of political force. It is, in short, the irony of a vulnerable man. In his love poems, like ‘Silk of a Soul’ or ‘Tongue’, it inhibits nothing; it simply helps him gently to preserve a sense of proportion, the watchful compassion of a man who, like his ‘Pebble’, has come to terms with his own limits:

The pebble
is a perfect creature
equal to itself
mindful of its limits
filled exactly
with a pebbly meaning
with a scent which does not remind one of anything
does not frighten anything away does not arouse desire
its ardour and coldness
are just and full of dignity
I feel a heavy remorse
when I hold it in my hand
and its noble body
is permeated by false warmth
— Pebbles cannot be tamed
to the end they will look at us
with a calm and very clear eye

Hesbert’s irony is in the service of an ideal of balance and repose. It is not a safety device which ensures that the outer world will impinge on the poetic only in discreet, carefully regulated doses; it is, instead, a way of focusing the whole

mass of his experience so that 'to the end (he) will look at us with a calm very clear eye'.

This sense in his poetry of a strong and steady light, which, without denying the shadows, somehow makes them easier to tolerate, is the core of that 'classicism' always invoked to describe his work. There are also other, related qualities: his preoccupation with the Greek and Latin classics, cannily modified so that contemporary experience is constantly held in the long, cooling perspective of myth. Then there are his subdued, chaste rhythms and spare language, which leave no room for romantic excesses:

my imagination
is a piece of board
my sole instrument
is a wooden stick

I strike the board
it answers me
yes – yes
no – no

Herbert's poetry is also classical in the tensely intellectual control which edges it continually towards some Platonic point of rest, some poise of art and understanding. In poem after poem he strains cunningly towards the moment of final silence – 'the heart of things/a dead star/a black drop of infinity' – only, at the last moment, for the postman to knock and nudge him back into the fallen world. For all his fine classical yearning he never tries to betray or even to escape the unredeemed obduracy of things and people and situations.

This tension between the ideal and the real is the backbone on which all his work depends. It is what allows him to be at once classical and insistently political. For everything he writes is founded on the realization that poetry, by its nature,

is idealistic, hopeful or, as William James put it, 'tender-minded', while the situation in which he must function as a poet is savagely 'tough-minded' – pragmatic, political, destructive, controlling. And he has come to this understanding not abstractly but from his own experience: first under the occupation of the Nazis, who massacred one in five of the Polish population; then during the long years of grinding Stalinist repression. So the facts of his whole life since early adolescence strain continuously against his classical education and philosophical inclinations. His gift is to be able to express this contradiction whole and without falsification.

To some degree, this tension places him firmly in the tradition of Polish literature, which has developed during the last two centuries despite constant domination by one foreign power or another. But where most Polish poets derive some support from their fierce nationalism, Herbert seems to work without illusions at all. He is a poet of complete isolation. Soon after the thaw he wrote an ironic ode to his desk drawer (p. 89); the theme was simply that now he was able to publish all the work he had kept locked away for so long, he no longer had anything to write about. According to the code of Herbert's politics of isolated opposition, even publication is a betrayal of standards, a loss of dissident freedom.

Yet his final strength lies in the fact that he refuses the consolations even of being exclusive and apart. In one of his finest poems it is Fortinbras, the soldier and politician, who writes an elegy for Hamlet, the idealist, dreamer, poet and tragic hero. It is, in its way, a kind of love poem, and its poignancy lies in Fortinbras's acceptance of his unromantic limitations. The more necessary his practical ruthlessness seems to be, the more urgently he yearns towards Hamlet's unworldliness, and the more utterly separate the two men become:

Adieu prince I have tasks a sewer project
and a decree on prostitutes and beggars
I must also elaborate a better system of prisons
since as you justly said Denmark is a prison
I go to my affairs This night is born
a star named Hamlet We shall never meet
what I shall leave will not be worth a tragedy

It is not for us to greet each other or bid farewell we live on
archipelagos
and that water these words what can they do what can they
do prince

In 'Elegy of Fortinbras' Herbert tenderly and regretfully acknowledges the ascendancy of worldly sanity over poetic idealism. It is the inevitable choice of a poet who, like all his compatriots, has lived through a violent historical nightmare. I have written elsewhere that 'Herbert's steadily detached, ironic and historically minded style represents, I suppose, a form of classicism. But it is a one-sided classicism, based not on order matching order, a regulated style displaying the regularity of the world, but on a strict and wary attitude to a situation which is at best prone to romanticism and at worst a violation of all sanity. It is a way of coping coolly with facts which could easily slide out of control.'¹ Classicism of this order is political; in his poetry Herbert is creating a minority politics of sanity and survival.

A. Alvarez

1. *Under Pressure*, Penguin Books, 1965, p. 31.

Translators' Note

In making Herbert known to the English reader, the two translators had motives as different as their backgrounds. Peter Dale Scott, a Canadian, became acquainted with Herbert's poems when working with his embassy in Warsaw; his Polish friends pointed to Herbert as the most representative of the generation of poets who made belated débuts around 1956. Herbert's poems struck Scott as so original in their intellectual astringency that no Western counterpart came to mind. Insofar as they were composed according to trains of thought rather than language, these poems seemed more cosmopolitan than some Polish poetry, without paying the price of being abstract or commonplace. Their delineation of a poetic world stripped of mediocre illusions, in which irony could nonetheless prevail without loss of sensitivity or order, seemed far more incisive than that of analogous Western poets. Thus Scott had decided, even before meeting Miłosz, to make Herbert's poetry more accessible to the international audience it asked for and deserved.

Czesław Miłosz, himself a Polish poet and essayist, greeted the first poems of Herbert as continuing an important tradition in Polish poetry: an historical awareness nourished by that kind of dramatic event which forces the individual to recognize the power of collective destinies. This found in Herbert a new voice adapted to our somewhat disillusioned sensitivity of the last decades. Preoccupation with history may lead to excessive pathos or self-indulgence; but it may also express itself through a quiet irony which does not necessarily mean indifference or betrayal of humanist values. Herbert's lineage can be traced back to the Polish poetry of the 'catastrophists' in the 1930s, and further to the nineteenth century, while the experience of the last war and of subsequent social

revolution makes him economize words and images lest he be submerged by overabundance of things seen and touched. Nor is he an exception among Polish poets in his constant points of reference: Greek mythology, ancient Rome and Shakespeare helped many to interpret the overwhelming present through more distant and universal patterns.

We feel that Herbert's poetry is eminently sane. The word is no longer necessarily a recommendation – often the reverse. Nevertheless, perhaps because we also know the man himself, we are inclined to cling to it. Critics in Poland have called him the most classical among his peers, though like most of them he has come to rely little on traditional metres or rhymes. Everything he writes testifies to his refusal to be carried away by language conceived as a universe of its own, or to abandon logical structures for the sake of the ineffable. He is 'classical' also in his perceptions, both of the frailty of humans and also of 'the fidelity of things'. Control, conciseness, honesty and soberness are not always to be condemned, least of all when these are qualities of a poet who received a proper European initiation into horror and chaos. In these times sanity may become as much of a corrective to normalcy as the absurd was in an earlier era.

Herbert is easier to translate than those poets who experiment more with syntax and with metre, though we are aware of how much is lost from his careful handling of Polish idioms. Our main concern was to remain as casual and whispering as he is in the original, never to raise the intentionally subdued tone. We also had to think of the wit of Herbert's word order, whenever a surprise or epiphany was held back for the end of a passage. And we tried to preserve a no less intentional clumsiness and coarseness of some lines, in which he attempts to revivify common language and clichés.

As a rule, we did not translate poems jointly: these are individual translations examined and corrected together with

Herbert's text before us. Miłosz would like to thank his students, participants in his seminars on poetry translation, where several of his versions were debated, and also Scott for his suggestions. Scott would similarly like to thank Miłosz, particularly for his help in elucidating more difficult passages in Polish. In the end we were often faced with a seemingly unsurpassable obstacle and the lines which emerged after long discussion bring credit or discredit to both of us as a team.

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

PETER DALE SCOTT

Stool

In the end one cannot keep this love concealed
tiny quadruped with oaken legs
o skin coarse and fresh beyond expression
everyday object eyeless but with a face
on which the wrinkles of the grain mark a ripe judgement
grey little mule most patient of mules
its hair has fallen out from too much fasting
and only a tuft of wooden bristle
can my hand feel when I stroke it in the morning

— Do you know my darling they were charlatans
who said: the hand lies the eye
lies when it touches shapes that are empty —

they were bad people envious of things
they wanted to trap the world with the bait of denial

how to express to you my gratitude wonder
you come always to the call of the eye
with great immobility explaining by dumb-signs
to a sorry intellect: we are genuine —
At last the fidelity of things opens our eyes

A Parable of King Midas

At last golden deer
quietly sleep in the glades

and mountain goats as well
their heads on a stone

aurochs unicorns squirrels
in general all game
predatory or gentle
and also all birds

KING MIDAS DOES NOT HUNT

once he got it into his head
to lay his hands on a Silenus

Three days he chased him
till at last he caught him
hit him with his fist
between the eyes and asked:
— what is best for man?

The Silenus neighed
and said:
— to be nothing
— to die

King Midas returns to his palace
but gets no pleasure from the heart of a wise Silenus
stewed in wine
he paces pulls at his beard
and asks old men

– how many days does the ant live
– why does the dog howl before a death
– how high would a mountain be
piled from the bones
of all past animals and humans

Then he summoned a man
who painted on red vases
with a black quail feather
nuptials parades and hunts
who asked by Midas
why he set down the life of shadows
answered:
– because the neck of a horse galloping
is beautiful
and dresses of young girls playing ball
are like a stream alive and inimitable

Let me sit down beside you
entreats the painter of vases
we will talk about people
who in deadly earnest
give to the earth one grain
and gather ten
who repair a sandal and a republic
count stars and obols
write poems and lean down
to pick up from the sand a lost clover

We will drink a little
and philosophize a little
and perhaps we both
who are made of blood and illusion
will finally free ourselves
from the oppressive levity of appearance

Fortune-telling

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 forth overthrowing obstacles
and nothing is more beautiful more powerful
than this striving forward

How helpless compared to it is the line of fidelity
like a cry in the night a river in the desert
conceived in the sand and perishing in the sand
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 mineshafts wells chambers
full of dark names

This hill was not here — after all I remember
there was a nest of tenderness as round as if
a hot tear of lead had fallen on my hand
After all I remember hair the shadow of a cheek
frail fingers and the weight of a sleeping head

Who destroyed the nest who heaped up
the mound of indifference which was not here

Why do you press your palm to your eyes
We tell fortunes Who are we to know

A Tale

The poet imitates the voices of birds
he cranes his long neck
his protruding Adam's apple
is like a clumsy finger on a wing of melody

when singing he deeply believes
that he advances the sunrise
the warmth of his song depends on this
as does the purity of his high notes

the poet imitates the sleep of stones
his head withdrawn into his shoulders
he is like a piece of sculpture
breathing rarely and painfully

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

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

A Knocker

There are those who grow
gardens in their heads
paths lead from their hair
to sunny and white cities

it's easy for them to write
they close their eyes
immediately schools of images
stream down from their foreheads

my imagination
is a piece of board
my sole instrument
is a wooden stick

I strike the board
it answers me
yes – yes
no – no

for others the green bell of a tree
the blue bell of water
I have a knocker
from unprotected gardens

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

The Seventh Angel

The seventh angel
is completely different
even his name is different
Shemkel

he is no Gabriel
the aureate
upholder of the throne
and baldachin

and he's no Raphael
tuner of choirs

and he's also no
Azrael
planet-driver
surveyor of infinity
perfect exponent of theoretical physics

Shemkel
is black and nervous
and has been fined many times
for illegal import of sinners

between the abyss
and the heavens
without a rest his feet go pit-a-pat

his sense of dignity is non-existent
and they only keep him in the squad
out of consideration for the number seven

but he is not like the others

not like the hetman of the hosts
Michael
all scales and feathery plumes

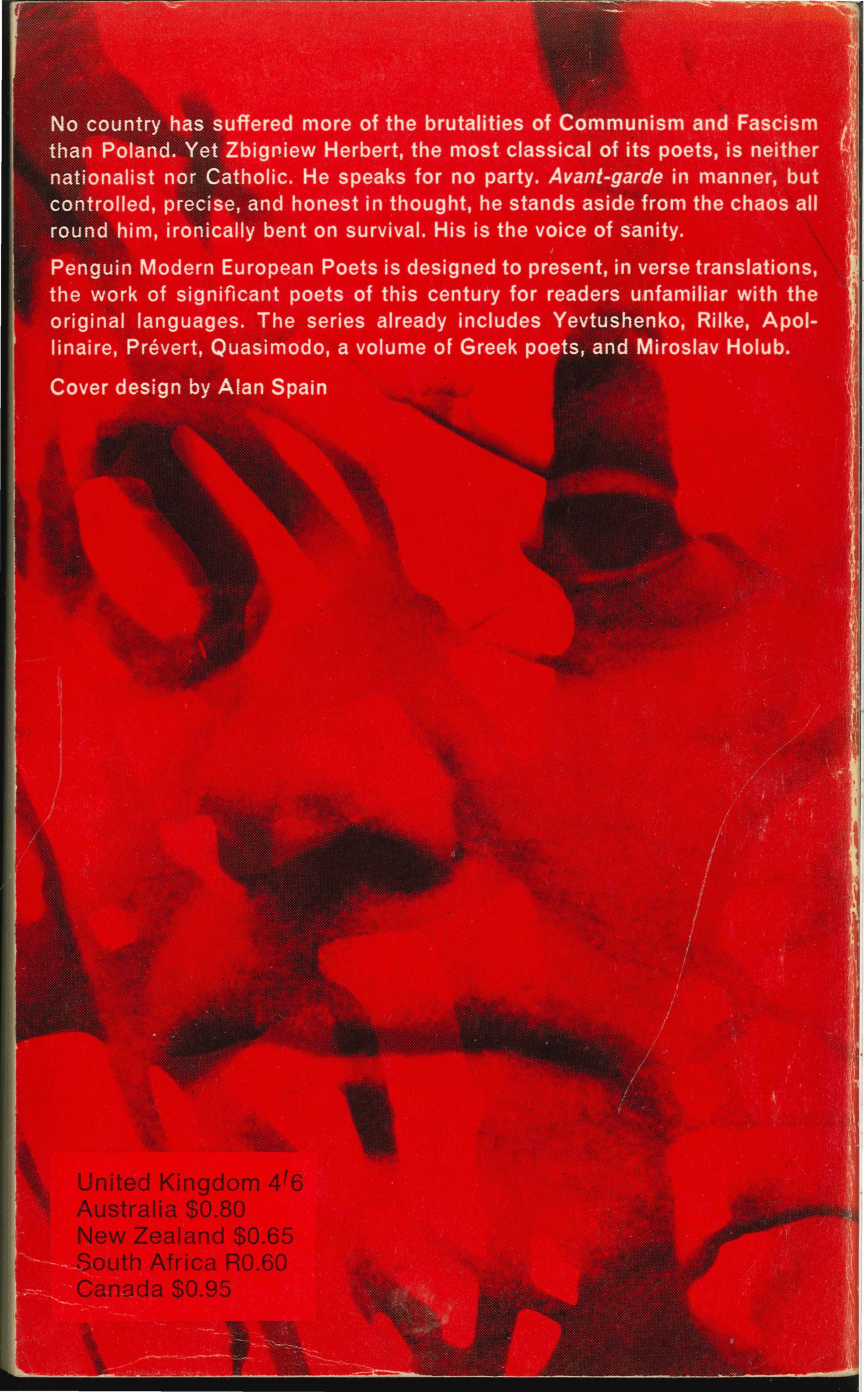
nor like Azrafael
interior decorator of the universe
warden of its luxuriant vegetation
his wings shimmering like two oak trees

not even like
Dedrael
apologist and cabalist

Shemkel Shemkel
— the angels complain
why are you not perfect

the Byzantine artists
when they paint all seven
reproduce Shemkel
just like the rest

because they suppose
they might lapse into heresy
if they were to portray him
just as he is
black nervous
in his old threadbare nimbus

The background of the entire page is an abstract artwork by Alan Spain. It features a vibrant, textured red field with dark, almost black, gestural brushstrokes and shapes. These dark elements are concentrated in the upper right and lower right areas, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is one of intense color and expressive form.

No country has suffered more of the brutalities of Communism and Fascism than Poland. Yet Zbigniew Herbert, the most classical of its poets, is neither nationalist nor Catholic. He speaks for no party. *Avant-garde* in manner, but controlled, precise, and honest in thought, he stands aside from the chaos all round him, ironically bent on survival. His is the voice of sanity.

Penguin Modern European Poets is designed to present, in verse translations, the work of significant poets of this century for readers unfamiliar with the original languages. The series already includes Yevtushenko, Rilke, Apollinaire, Prévert, Quasimodo, a volume of Greek poets, and Miroslav Holub.

Cover design by Alan Spain

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