
POETRY

Z B I G N I E W H E R B E R T

Selected and Introduced by Joseph Brodsky

Modern poetry has a reputation for being difficult. It's hard to follow, harder still to scan, and there's almost no way to memorize it. The last job is so hard it gives you the impression that modern poetry doesn't want to be remembered, doesn't want to be poetry in the traditional sense. To know a modern poem by heart is unthinkable; to quote one at length in a drawing room, impossible. There is a universal outcry that poetry is losing its readers, a rumor that poets these days write not for the public but for one another, or, worse still, for themselves. On top of that, it looks as though this is thought to be true of poetry not only in our country but all over the world, in Europe especially.

Let's check to see whether this is true, starting first with Europe. Let's unfold the map and randomly poke our finger at it. Most likely our finger will find itself in Poland, since it lies on the latitude of Massachusetts. With our finger still stretched, let's buttonhole an average Pole and ask him to name the greatest modern Polish poet. "Czeslaw Milosz," the Pole will say, "although he's lived for the last 40 years in Berkeley, California." And in Poland proper, we may persevere? "It's Zbigniew Herbert, although for 10 years he's been mostly in Paris." So you've got two great poets, we might press on. Which is greater? "On these heights," the Pole may retort, "there is no hierarchy."

Herbert is less well known in the West than Milosz, who, although he won the Nobel Prize in 1980, is not a household name here either. If Herbert is known outside Poland at all, it is because Milosz translated his poems into English. Greatness, you may say, like poverty, looks after its own. And you may be right: Every society designates just one great poet per century, since having two or more dooms the society to greater ethical subtlety, to a greater degree of spiritual intelligence than it thinks it can endure.

But Nature sometimes confounds what society wants, and Nature is inconsistent, if not cruel. Within a 10-year span, it saddled Poland not only with Milosz but with Zbigniew Herbert as well.

What kind of poet is Zbigniew Herbert? Is he difficult? Is he hard to follow, hard to scan, impossible to remember? Look at "Pebble," the first

poem of this selection, and decide for yourself.

What kind of poem is this, and what is it all about? About nature, perhaps? Perhaps. I, for one, though, think that if it is about nature, then it is about human nature. About its autonomy, about its resistance, about, if you will, its survival. In this sense it is a very Polish poem, considering that nation's recent, more exactly, modern, history. And it is a very modern poem, because Polish history, one may say, is modern history in miniature—well, more exactly, in a pebble. Because whether you are a Pole or not, what history wants is to destroy you. The only way to survive, to endure its almost geological pressure, is to acquire the features of a pebble, including the false warmth once you find yourself in somebody's hands.

No, this is not a difficult poem. It is easy to follow. It is a parable: very reticent, very stark. Starkness, in fact, is very much Herbert's signature. My impression of his poems has always been that of a geometrical figure pressed into the marshmallow of my brain. One does not so much remember his lines as find one's mind being branded by their ice-cold lucidity. One does not chant them: The cadences of one's own speech simply yield to his level, almost neutral timber, to the tonality of his reserve.

Though Polish, Herbert is no Romantic. In his poems, he argues not by raising the temperature but by lowering it, to the point where his lines begin to burn the reader's grasping faculties, like an iron fence in winter. He is a modern poet not because he uses *vers libre* but because the reasons for which he uses it are very modern. Born in 1924, Herbert belongs to the generation of Europeans that saw the native realm reduced to rubble—and, as was his particular case, to rubble. Somewhat naively perhaps, people of this generation came to associate strict meters with the social order that brought their nations to catastrophe. They sought a new, unadorned, direct, plain form of speech. In other words, unlike its Western counterpart, East European modernism appears to have been historically motivated.

Herbert's modernism is, indeed, as one very perceptive critic put it, a modernism without experimental hoopla. His idiom is forged by necessity, not by the oversaturated aestheticism of his predecessors. When he was young, Herbert fought in the underground resistance against the Nazis; as a grown-up he had to deal with the monolith of the communist totalitarian state. While the former were murderous, the latter was both murderous and ethically corrosive. In order to survive and to temper the reader's heart, a poet's statement had to be at once self-contained and opaque: like a pebble.

Yet it would be myopic to reduce this poet to the role of resistance fighter against those two formidable systems of political oppression our century has known. His real enemy is the vulgarity of the human heart,

which always produces a simplified version of human reality. This inevitably results in social injustice at best, in utopia-turned-nightmare at worst, and more often. Herbert is a poet of tremendous ethical consequence because his verse zeroes in on the cause, not just the effects, which he treats as something incidental. Which they always are. Symptoms are not the malaise.

In this sense, he is a historical poet. His pen often summons history, which is after all the mother of culture, in order to enable his reader to endure and, with luck, to overcome the vulgarity of the present. His poems show that most of our beliefs, convictions, and social concepts are in bad taste, if only because they are entertained at someone else's expense. He is a supreme ironist, of course; to me, though, his irony is but the safety valve of his compassion, since human tragedy is repetitive.

For the last 40 years, to say the least, the Poles would have fared worse without his poems than they did. I daresay what was good for them could be good for us, because our diet is better. Zbigniew Herbert, 68 years old, in poor health and extremely narrow circumstances somewhere in Paris, is a poet for this place; above all, for this time.

Pebble

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

*Elegy of Fortinbras**for C.M.*

Now that we're alone we can talk prince man to man
 though you lie on the stairs and see no more than a dead ant
 nothing but black sun with broken rays
 I could never think of your hands without smiling
 and now that they lie on the stone like fallen nests
 they are as defenseless as before The end is exactly this
 The hands lie apart The sword lies apart The head apart
 and the knight's feet in soft slippers

You will have a soldier's funeral without having been a soldier
 the only ritual I am acquainted with a little
 There will be no candles no singing only cannon-fuses and bursts
 crepe dragged on the pavement helmets boots artillery horses drums drums
 I know nothing exquisite
 those will be my maneuvers before I start to rule
 one has to take the city by the neck and shake it a bit

Anyhow you had to perish Hamlet you were not for life
 you believed in crystal notions not in human clay
 always twitching as if asleep you hunted chimeras
 wolfishly you crunched the air only to vomit
 you knew no human thing you did not know even how to breath

Now you have peace Hamlet you accomplished what you had to
 and you have peace The rest is not silence but belongs to me
 you chose the easier part an elegant thrust
 but what is heroic death compared with eternal watching
 with a cold apple in one's hand on a narrow chair
 with a view of the ant-hill and the clock's dial

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

From Mythology

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 thunderbolts. At the end only superstitious neurotics carried in their pockets 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 heels and add it to their dishes.

Why the Classics

1

in the fourth book of the Peloponnesian War
Thucydides tells among other things
the story of his unsuccessful expedition

among long speeches of chiefs
battles sieges plague
dense net of intrigues of diplomatic endeavors
the episode is like a pin
in a forest

the Greek colony Amphipolis
fell into the hands of Brasidos
because Thucydides was late with relief

for this he paid his native city
with lifelong exile

exiles of all times
know what price that is

2

generals of the most recent wars
if a similar affair happens to them
whine on their knees before posterity
praise their heroism and innocence

they accuse their subordinates
envious colleagues
unfavorable winds

Thucydides says only
that he had seven ships
it was winter
and he sailed quickly

3

if art for its subject
will have a broken jar
a small broken soul
with a great self-pity

what will remain after us
will be like lovers' weeping
in a small dirty hotel
when wall-paper dawns

The Return of the Proconsul

I've decided to return to the emperor's court
 once more I shall see if it's possible to live there
 I could stay here in this remote province
 under the full sweet leaves of the sycamore
 and the gentle rule of sickly nepotists

when I return I don't intend to commend myself
 I shall applaud in measured portions
 smile in ounces frown discreetly
 for that they will not give me a golden chain
 this iron one will suffice

I've decided to return tomorrow or the day after
 I cannot live among vineyards nothing here is mine
 trees have no roots house no foundations the rain is
 glassy flowers smell of wax
 a dry cloud rattles against the empty sky
 so I shall return tomorrow or the day after in any case I shall
 return

I must come to terms with my face again
 with my lower lip so it knows how to curb its scorn
 with my eyes so they remain ideally empty
 and with that miserable chin the hare of my face
 which trembles when the chief of guards walks in

of one thing I am sure I will not drink wine with him
 when he brings his goblet nearer I will lower my eyes
 and pretend I'm picking bits of food from between my teeth
 besides the emperor likes courage of convictions
 to a certain extent to a certain reasonable extent
 he is after all a man like everyone else

and already tired by all those tricks with poison
 he cannot drink his fill incessant chess
 this left cup is for Drusus from the right one pretend to sip
 then drink only water never lose sight of Tacitus
 go out into the garden and come back when they've taken
 away the corpse

I've decided to return to the emperor's court
 yes I hope that things will work out somehow

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