

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

168

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Volume 168

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,  
from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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## Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

## Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Thomson Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *TCLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* Yearbook, which was discontinued in 1998.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Morrison, Jago. "Narration and Unease in Ian McEwan's Later Fiction." *Critique* 42, no. 3 (spring 2001): 253-68. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 127, edited by Janet Witlec, 212-20. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." In *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 73-82. New York: Roof Books, 1990. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 127, edited by Janet Witlec, 3-8. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof Books, 1990. 73-82. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witlec. Vol. 127. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 3-8.

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# Zbigniew Herbert

## 1924-1998

Polish poet, essayist, playwright, and scriptwriter.

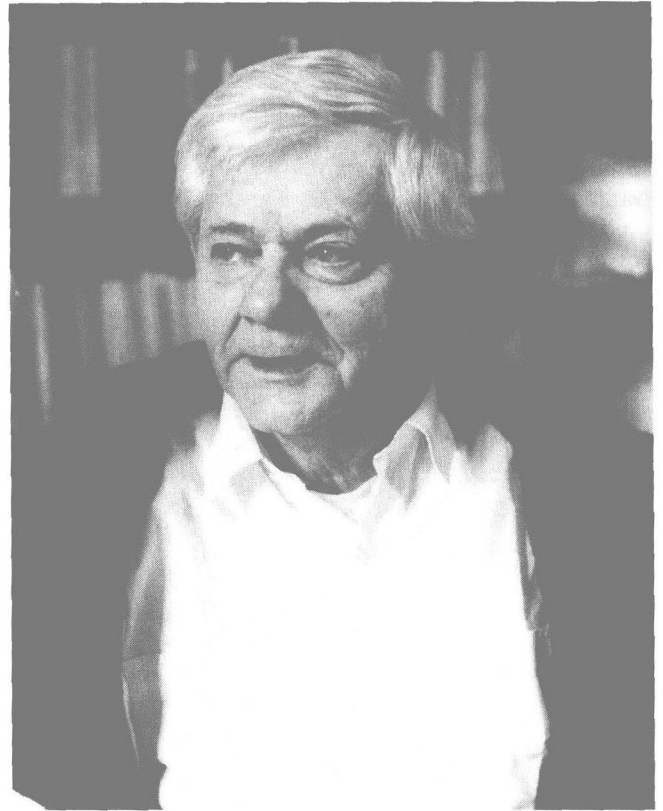
The following entry provides an overview of Herbert's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC*, Volumes 9 and 43.

### INTRODUCTION

Herbert is best known as a poet whose works parallel his experiences during World War II and the Communist occupation of his country. His deeply held convictions are translated into powerful works that celebrate humanistic values in the face of oppression and adversity.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Herbert was born on November 29, 1924, in Lwów, Poland. By his fifteenth birthday, the country was embroiled in World War II, during which his native city was seized by the Russians. He lived through two other occupations of Poland—by the Germans in 1941 and again by the Russians in 1944. Deeply affected by life under occupation, Herbert joined anti-Soviet resistance groups and studied at an underground university. Beginning in 1944 he attended schools in Kraków, Torun, and Warsaw, studying painting, economics, philosophy, and law. In 1947 he received a master's degree in economics from the Academy of Commerce in Kraków. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he worked at a variety of nonliterary jobs, publishing little at a time when Communist-approved social realism was the only acceptable form of literary expression in his country. He published his first volume of poetry, *Struna światła*, in 1956, during a time of liberalization. In 1958 Herbert traveled to England, France, Greece, and Italy. From 1965 to 1971 Herbert traveled to many countries, including the United States, where he had a brief teaching post at Los Angeles City College. He settled in West Berlin in 1973, finally returning to Poland in 1981 in the midst of the emergence of the Solidarity movement. Herbert was recognized as an able chronicler of those times and as one of the most important poetic voices in Eastern Europe. Herbert lived abroad from 1984 until 1993, when he again returned to Poland. He died on July 28, 1998.



### MAJOR WORKS

The Stalinist takeover of Poland, and Herbert's stubborn refusal to publish state-approved literature, prevented him from publishing during what should have been his early productive years. His first two volumes of poetry, *Struna światła* and *Hermes, pies i gwiazda* (1957), published during a brief period of cultural liberalization, express the artist's frustrations over the physical and emotional destructiveness of war, and explore his struggles over the meaning of art during oppressive times. His third volume of poetry, *Studium przedmiotu* (1961), deals in part with the impossibility of earthly perfection. Herbert's travels in Western Europe in 1958 led him to write a book of essays on Western art, *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie* (1962; *Barbarian in the Garden*). His fourth volume of poetry, *Napis* (1969), includes the important poem "Dlaczego klasycy"—a defense of Herbert's view of classicism. During the late 1960s and early 1970s he published several collections of poems and a volume of plays. In 1974 he published

*Pan Cogito* (*Mr. Cogito*), perhaps his best known and most reviewed work. The poetry in this volume for the first time uses a single persona to explore Herbert's own sense of identity. Some of its major themes are a critique of the idea of transcendence, a rejection of theoretical approaches to reality, and a plea for individual heroism in the face of life's absurdities. *Pan Cogito*'s message became a kind of manifesto for activists in the Solidarity movement. Herbert's 1983 collection *Raport z oblężonego miasta i inne wiersze* (*Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems*) reflects a cyclical view of history as it recalls the period of martial law in Poland. The poems in *Elegia na odejście* (1990; *Elegy for the Departure and Other Poems*) address such philosophical and ethical questions as the nature of evil and the need for human compassion. Herbert's volume of essays on the history of Dutch seventeenth-century painting appeared in English as *Still Life with a Bridle: Essays and Apocryphas* in 1991, two years before the Polish version was issued as *Martwa natura z wężem*. A volume of poems, *Rovigo*, appeared in 1993, and another, *Epilog burzy*, was published just before Herbert's death in 1998. Several collections of his works have been published posthumously.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

More than one critic has remarked that Herbert deserved a Nobel Prize. Often compared with his famous compatriots, Czesław Miłosz and Władysław Symborska, Herbert has been hailed by many as an important influence on the post-World War II literary world and as the one of the great contemporary Eastern European poets. Herbert's stark poetry continues to be cited as emblematic of the dilemma of the artist in a totalitarian environment. Critics have praised Herbert's independence from ideology and institutions; his compression of expression and detached, ironic style; and his uncompromising moral code. Many have called Herbert a modernist but have distinguished him from other modernists because of his frequent use of historical or mythological references. Translations of Herbert's work have precipitated a great deal of English-language criticism, much of it focused on *Mr. Cogito*. With its refusal to romanticize life and its suggestion that an ordinary person can act heroically in difficult circumstances, this work has been called a significant commentary on the contemporary human condition.

### PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Struna świata* (poetry) 1956  
*Hermes, pies i gwiazda* (poetry) 1957  
*Stadium przedmiotu* (poetry) 1961

*Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie* [*Barbarian in the Garden*] (essays) 1962  
*Selected Poems* (poetry) 1968  
*Napis* (poetry) 1969  
*Dramaty* (plays) 1970  
*Poezje wybrane* (poetry) 1971  
*Wiersze zebrane* (poetry) 1971  
*Wybór poezji: Dramaty* (poetry and plays) 1973  
*Pan Cogito* [*Mr. Cogito*] (poetry) 1974  
*Selected Poems* (poetry) 1977  
*Wiersze zebrane* (poetry) 1982  
*18 Wierszy* (poetry) 1983; enlarged as *Raport z oblężonego miasta i inne wiersze* [*Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems*] 1983  
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*Rovigo* (poetry) 1993  
*Still Life with a Bridle: Essays and Apocryphas* (essays) 1991; published in Polish as *Martwa natura z wężem*, 1993  
*89 Wierszy* (poetry) 1998  
*Epilog burzy* (poetry) 1998  
*Poezje* (poetry) 1998  
*The King of the Ants* (essays) 1999  
*Labirynt nad morzem* (history) 2000  
*Król mrówek: prywatna mitologia* (essays) 2001

### CRITICISM

Larry Levis (essay date winter 1987)

SOURCE: Levis, Larry. "Strange Days: Zbigniew Herbert in Los Angeles." *Antioch Review* 45 (winter 1987): 75-83.

[In the following essay, Levis reminisces about his brief acquaintance with Herbert in the 1970s.]

The early 1970s. Even now, they still seem to me a strange and extreme time in America. Nixon had just invaded Cambodia, and in Kent, Ohio, on one idyllic spring afternoon, a few nervous National Guardsmen began shooting kids on a college campus. In L.A., late at night on one FM channel, Charlie Manson's "girls," his acolytes, would come on live to tell you drive immediately to Death Valley to join them because, in the exhausted slang of the times, "it's all . . . you know, coming down out there." On the Sunset Strip, the spirit scavengers of all sects were scooping up the penniless and strung-out young as quickly and easily as grunion. And although a large quake brought down some of L.A. and twisted a few freeways into new and inventive

shapes, much more remarkable were those homes in the San Fernando Valley that had been simply evacuated afterward—breakfasts congealed on the tables. Those vacant houses . . . what stories they told of the times by saying nothing at all about a past or a future.

What *was* “coming down”? Nixon was, gradually, and in a few years Saigon would fall to those who, evidently, cared most about it. But those events were hidden then. In those first years of the 1970s, each day felt a little like the day after a revolution that had not happened. Phrases like “the summer of love” and “the gathering of the tribes” were used sarcastically. The Haight looked windswept and evacuated when I walked through it one afternoon in 1970.

What *was* “coming down” was Time in the Absolute Present, a Present dressed in so many distracting styles that it was possible, in the boundless vanity of the moment, to believe that history was irrelevant. To many people, history meant the literature of failure. Some welcomed its erasure. Some were boasting of having become “post-literate.”

During these strange days, I was honored to drive, more or less regularly, the poet Zbigniew Herbert just about anywhere he needed to go. If poets had chauffeurs, I suppose I would have been happy to have been merely his chauffeur. But he never treated anyone like a chauffeur. We quickly became friends. I was young and knew so little that I must have seemed then to possess that innocence peculiar to Americans; in the world it is known simply as ignorance. I was twenty-four and trying to live authentically in the Present. I had no idea that I wasn’t, that I was simply living in some benign erasure of the past. But I was lucky. In Zbigniew I had found a friend who was almost a classical isle of sanity.

I remember complaining to him one day as we drove through the suburbs east of downtown L.A. that Whitman now seemed to me a poet exclusively of the nineteenth century. Zbigniew smiled as if the name Whitman carried with it a fragrance of pleasure, like the name of a liberated city. And he kept smiling as he looked directly at me and said: “No, I think he is eternal.”

That is the kind of sanity I mean, a radical sanity in which the word *eternal* is made wild once again and authentic. He said it without any trace of condescension or arrogance. Yet the answer was precise and uncompromising.

One doesn’t compromise with a word like *eternal*. The term is negotiable only in the mouths of the falsely fashionable *guru* or the well-intentioned revolutionary who doesn’t know he is merely the instrument of death. Zbigniew was neither.

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At Zip and Go University, where we both taught, Zbigniew was largely unknown. But in Europe he was famous, and even in L.A. he was known in the more worldly circles.

One day, when I picked up Zbigniew to drive him to class, he told me he had gone to a party the night before.

“Where?” I asked.

“In Hollywoooed,” he said. That was how he pronounced it: “woooed.”

“I didn’t know you knew anyone in Hollywood.”

“It was at Polanski’s,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“Really? You mean you *know* him? You knew him in Poland?”

“In Warsaw. Yes, since his student days. He asked if I had seen *Rosemary’s Baby*. But then he asked me if I liked it. I had to say: ‘of *course* not.’ He nodded. He still . . . understands. And Roman is a nice boy, good boy.”

There was a pause, I wondered if he wished to qualify that last statement, but no, he did not.

“I go make pee-pee, and then we go to the college; yes?”

Ten minutes later we were stuck in traffic on Fair Oaks Boulevard.

The slightly mischievous beaming smile came over his face again. It was the kind of smile that assured anyone in his presence that good fortune was just around the corner for both of you, and that Zbigniew could not imagine being happier in any other company. It was one quality he had in common with Fitzgerald’s Gatsby, and it seemed, in the poet, less a matter of style than of his nature. From the scrupulous, terse classicism of his poems I had imagined the poet must look something like Robinson Jeffers. But Zbigniew was slightly short, slightly plump—and most amazing and disarming of all was his face. His face looked like a sleepy, happy, fledgling bird’s face, a wide-face bird—the face of an adolescent barn owl, an owl.

But Zbigniew walked, often enough, with a limp that plagued him. Sometimes it was more noticeable than it was at other times. I had the distinct suspicion, though I couldn’t even now say why, that it had something to do with his participation in the Polish Underground. Sometimes the limp was quite pronounced, as if his leg from

the knee down were asleep and would not wake, and then somehow he looked as if he both resented and respected its deep sleep. I never asked him about it.

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What T. S. Eliot once said of Blake was true of Zbigniew as far as I knew him: "There was nothing of the superior person about him." Zbigniew was perhaps the most civilized poet I've known. His sense of decency was both unstinting and unshakable.

A student poet, John Bowie, a young man naturally shy around everyone he didn't know well, especially if they were famous, finally got up the nerve to ask Zbigniew if he could show him some of his work. Zbigniew replied, "Only if you will have lunch with me." A look almost approaching awe came over Bowie's face then, a look that suggested, sadly enough, that Bowie had never been treated quite as well by anyone else in his entire life. Four years later John Bowie would be dead in Iowa City of a weak heart he never knew he had; and so, looking back upon that little meeting between the two of them, the kindness there, and the pleasure Bowie took from that moment into the rest of his short life, it no longer seems to me that such gestures of open decency and welcome are at all insignificant. If, like John Bowie, you only live to be twenty-five, and if you spend most of that time growing up in a little, bleak, monotonous, stucco suburb like Alhambra, where your father is a television repairman, a lunch like the lunch John Bowie had that day with Zbigniew may be something you take with you all the way to the abrupt, breathless end.

Or think of decency in Nazi-occupied Warsaw: What it means is that you never know if the way you treat a friend today may be the last way you treat him at all.

How different Zbigniew's attitude was from that of a colleague who once said to me, in the corridor where we taught: "Let's use this key and grab the elevator; we'll have to see fewer students that way."

In corridors honeycombed with faculty offices, my colleagues smiled and nodded and said hello repetitively to each other throughout the day. If they stopped smiling and nodding and helloing it usually meant that they planned to kill you. I had to explain this curious custom, which I had just figured out, to Zbigniew, and so I told him when he dropped in after his class.

"My face is tired; it has been weight-lifting smiles all day," he said. "My voice also. The Hello Variations. They are extremely difficult, I think, particularly in the *scherzo*; just two notes! Elo? Yellöe. Hélo. And yet, I don't agree. What is more treacherous than one too

many smiles?" He paused and looked directly at me for a second. "You don't know, do you? I will tell you then. Five too many smiles; ten too many smiles."

\* \* \*

One day Zbigniew and I were driving through Monterey Park, a tedious little town east of L.A., another suburb. Its unvarying barracks of ranch style houses floated by outside. Zbigniew looked out the window at the pale shades of yellow and green and pink, at the nothing that was there. You couldn't see the nothing that was not there, for that was Alhambra, or San Gabriel, or Altadena. But we did pass a park of some kind with a few scrawny trees that looked exhausted and as if they had been recently planted. On the other hand, they looked ancient too, as if they had been trying to grow there, straining at the hard-pan soil under them, since Drake sailed by. Somehow a developer had achieved a look of defeat so permanent that even the future had no future in Monterey Park.

"Sometimes," said Zbigniew, "in communist countries . . . beauty is possible . . . in . . . what do you call it? I forget."

"Architecture?" The word suddenly seemed so grand somehow.

"Yes. Sometimes the State says, O.K. But here is not possible."

"Well, sometimes it is."

"But there is only one solution for L.A."

"A solution? For L.A.? What?"

"Burn it," said Zbigniew, as if the idea was clear to everyone, had been clear for some time now, as if the wholesale torching of everything from Pomona to Hermosa Beach was already on the drawing boards of urban planners. I looked over to see if he was merely kidding, but he kept staring out the window. Perhaps I had not heard him correctly.

\* \* \*

Another afternoon, after work. We were waiting for a light to change.

"I cannot drive. If only I could drive a car, then I, even I, not a citizen, I could *buy* a car!" The innocent light of that smile came over his face again. So he wanted to buy a car. Well, I thought to myself, wheels can make arson a lot easier.

"You never drove, Zbigniew?"

"Once. I drove once, yes."

"When?"

He was silent for a moment. Then he began, "It was after a meeting of the Underground. The boy who drove for me was waiting in the car. But dead. The Nazis shot him. Just one shot, a style they had. I came out later . . . I saw him. I had to learn fast. I pushed the boy over to other side of car seat. I drove. Just one time. With the dead boy beside me. I drove."

He said all this without any visible emotion. It was stated as fact only. That was his way, or one of his ways. It was all a matter of carving out a style so impermissible of the merely and suspiciously personal, a style so lean and scrupulous and classical, that the poem cast out the poet, and what was said cast out the sayer.

I thought of all the above much later, years later. At the moment of the anecdote, hearing it for the first time, I could think of nothing else but that image. Driving for the first time with a dead boy beside him.

\* \* \*

Zbigniew was reading the personal ads in the back of the *L.A. Free Press*. Now and then I would explain the various terms, the abbreviations for gay, black, bisexual, sado-masochism. But some were new to me.

"What does this word mean here, *revolution*? They use it on every page. It means hashish. It means sex. It means these sex oils."

It was 1971. They *were* using it on almost every page, even though it meant nothing now. "Sex oils?" I asked.

"Here," he said, handing me the paper.

"Oh, scented oils. Sure, people use that stuff, some people do."

"Girls in my classes, I think. But where is this *revolution*?"

"They just use it. It sounds exciting, and if you were born yesterday, it sells papers, I guess."

"But hashish, free love, sex oils. That is *fun*. Revolution is not. I was in only one revolution. Against the Nazis. It was necessary. I hated it. I hated them more."

I felt that sudden and peculiar tiredness Americans feel when they have to explain a word their culture has corrupted beyond recognition.

"Zbigniew, over here, in L.A. especially, if the phrase *viva la muerte* made a product sell, like . . . say soap, for example, they'd use it."

"Really? *Viva la muerte*. *Long Live Death*. For the name of a soap? Yes, I like it. It's O.K. *Long Live Death Soap*."

Zbigniew had turned on the T.V., and now sat before it with the rapt and attentive expression of a child on his face. In Poland, he said, no one owned televisions. I could hear the canned laughter behind a "Lucy" re-run. It sounded like swirling water. Suddenly it felt as if the television had been on all my life.

"Is Ford a good car?" Zbigniew suddenly asked.

"Some of them are," I said.

"Is . . . possible to find, here, *used* Ford?"

Oh, boy.

"Zbigniew, I think you've come to the right place," I said, then watched him turn back to the flickering screen, this man from a country with no televisions and no Fords—where thousands knew his poems by heart.

When Zbigniew's wife, Katrina, arrived from Paris they bought a 1960 light blue four-door Fairlane sedan. Katrina drove it at a more or less unvarying fifty miles per hour through city streets, school zones, alleys, campus parking lots, and posted boulevards throughout the San Gabriel Valley. But on the freeways she held it to an understated seventy-five. Beyond that, I felt, the car would change into something else. Riding with them I'd hold on to the arm rest, and hope. Zbigniew sat in the back seat, answering letters, drawing in his sketch book. Oblivious, absorbed as a child in what he was sketching, his wide face held something both birdlike and very peaceful within it. He seemed happy with Katrina there, and happy with life. When Katrina had the Ford moving fast enough so that I could hear every hose and gasket singing under the hood and the rods beginning to chatter, she would suddenly turn to us, speaking either in Polish or French, since she knew no English. It was as if the road no longer held much interest for her. Above forty-five, the whole car shook, but neither of them seemed to notice.

I remember hearing the utterly incomprehensible Polish rising above the engine noise of that moment. I remember, too, feeling utterly happy.

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After a week or so, the Ford went in for repairs. I went to pick them up at the university. Usually they were full of smiles, but today they were silent and preoccupied. I asked Katrina what was wrong.

"De Gaulle est mort," she replied. They rode home in silence, reading about it in the paper. De Gaulle? But were they *mourning* De Gaulle? They were, after all, Europeans. They lived *in* history. For Poles of their generation, for a very brief moment, De Gaulle once must have meant a possible future. Their shared memory of this moment might be, someday, all they had left of him after the erasures of history had taken place.

We passed a Shell station, a Taco Bell, a 7-11, Carpet World . . . what was there to remember here? Burn it? Vote with a flame? That was one way, but in Watts, there was at least a history of misery and outrage. But Alhambra? Rosemead? San Gabriel? You can't burn something that isn't there. But of course this is all metaphor. I'd never torch anything larger than a pile of trash.

And yet, I thought, in L.A. or in Warsaw, no one escapes the time into which he is born. It is a particular violation done precisely to him, precisely *now*. In a way we *all* live in history, just as, in another way, we begin to live in a future serenely composed of the erasures of that history.

We passed the small roadhouse near the freeway interchange, the marquee advertising: Live Sex on Stage. For the first time I did not cynically imagine the performers as a tired, strung-out hippy couple going through the motions for car salesmen, small-time executives, bitter housewives, professors who had stopped reading. I imagined that they were both beautiful, that they loved having sex on stage and being watched as they did so, that their orgasms were simultaneous, that their hair styles were reminiscent of no period of time. Strangely enough, they seemed even less interesting when I thought of them that way.

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On their last day in America, Zbigniew and Katrina drove to Yosemite National Park in a rented car. Around one of the curves above the valley's floor they hit a mule deer, a doe. I imagine that it got up just after it was hit, wobbled for a few steps along the roadside, then fell again. I imagine that it kept lifting its head to one side and its still graceful, supple, but slowly benumbed and stiffening neck as it tried to rise again and again—and the blood that had begun to appear a few seconds earlier on its lips now spilled from them, spattering the highway in different, random patterns. And because the deer kept swinging its head slowly upward and to one side, I imagine the flecks of blood beginning to appear on its withers, its back, and even on the delicately shocking white of its underbelly. I imagine Zbigniew and Katrina standing there beside it, unable to do anything—until a ranger came and ended it all with one shot from a revolver held to the doe's temple.

They were both, said Phil and Franny Levine later, sick about it. After all, it was their last day in the United States; they had wanted to stay longer, and the death of something that wild must have seemed to hold, for both of them, wider and larger and more mysterious implications.

I don't know because I never heard from either one of them again. We promised to write each other, and one night I sat down and wrote a three-page letter to Zbigniew. Then I tore it up. Perhaps some friendships are meant to exist only in a certain place, at a certain time—three people driving casually around L.A. in a blue Ford. I don't know. I don't know if I was ever meant to know.

Soon after that, I left L.A. I never tried to write to him again.

But my chronicle of these strange days does not end quite yet. I hadn't heard any news of Zbigniew for years, and then, about six years ago, at a party in Berkeley, someone said that Czeslaw Milosz had been in Warsaw and, at a reception for him, Zbigniew came up and asked Milosz if he knew of anyone who could turn down the heat in the room.

"And . . . ?" I asked the man telling the story.

"That's it; that's all I heard," he said, sipping a glass of wine.

"That word *heat*—I wonder if it has some cryptic significance," said a woman standing beside him. Her remark was meant to be adequately clever, and I suppose it was. I had often wondered about Zbigniew, especially with the news of Solidarity. Now I was thinking about him again. I had been afraid the anecdote ended there.

And then, shortly after that, at a reception after he had read in Iowa City, I asked Milosz if he knew how Zbigniew was. Since I was a complete stranger to him, I didn't expect much in the way of a reply, and the party was fairly noisy. I'm not sure he heard me, or, if he had heard me, whether he understood my question. At any rate, he did not answer and a few seconds later someone began speaking to him in Polish.

Even more recently someone wrote me to say that he had heard Zbigniew was in "bad shape," suffering from severe depression and dividing his time between Warsaw and Berlin, where he was in the care of a psychiatrist.

But after all, these are rumors. Poets collect them the way they collect lint, and trouble, and eternity.

After all, the future can't erase everything—can it?

Stanislaw Baranczak (review date 15 November 1993)

SOURCE: Baranczak, Stanislaw. "The Thinking Man's Guide." *New Republic* 209, no. 20 (15 November 1993): 28-31.

[In the following review of Mr. Cogito and *Still Life with a Bridle*, Baranczak emphasizes Herbert's sense of irony and his underlying moral code.]

Certain collections of poems simply have to be reissued in their original shape once in a while. They seem to have lives of their own. It is hard to say exactly why. Formal mastery, or historic significance, or some unique principle of inner cohesion, may help to explain their special power; and yet there are plenty of collections that meet these same conditions without producing the same magic. There is no rational reason why we succumb to the temptation to buy a new edition of Robert Frost's *North of Boston*, even though we are perfectly aware that the whole of the volume is included in his *Collected Poems*, which has been read at home for years.

A slim book whose rust-colored cover surprised the patrons of Polish bookstores with its puzzling title in 1974, *Pan Cogito* belongs in this rare company. In Poland's recent history, the two decades just passed equal New England's eight; so it would be no stretching of chronology for me to say that *Mr. Cogito* is Poland's *North of Boston*. It was the 50-year-old poet Zbigniew Herbert's fifth book of poems. And in it the denizen of Poland in the mid-'70s found exactly what his or her Yankee counterpart found in the second book by the 40-year-old Frost sixty years before: his or her own reflection. No, more than reflection: definition.

The poems in *Mr. Cogito* finally forced critics to acknowledge Herbert as a major poet of contemporary and local experience. The specifically Polish dimension of his work may be obvious today, but it was far from clear before 1974, for since his debut in 1956, the critical consensus on Herbert had cast him as a poet of universal themes and all-encompassing human issues. Herbert's frequent recourses to Greco-Roman mythology, to Biblical motifs and to a Mediterranean stock of cultural allusions seemed to confirm that impression beyond any doubt. Owing to this seemingly cosmopolitan quality of imagination, Herbert's poetry weathered translation with relatively little damage. Since he also had the good fortune to find, early on, not only excellent translators but also energetic promoters—Karl De-deicus in Germany and in this country Czeslaw Milosz and later John and Bogdana Carpenter—his path to international success was smooth. Yet it remains the fatal mistake of most critics, in Poland and elsewhere, to take the image of Herbert the universalist, the neoclassicist, the Western-oriented connoisseur of myths and masterpieces of art, for the whole of him.

It is impossible to grasp the basics of Herbert's poetry—how its irony works and, even more crucially, when and where its irony stops—without taking into account its essentially divided, bipolar, antithetical nature. Just as an electric current cannot be found in the cathode or the anode but runs from the one to the other, as a function of their mutual opposition, so meaning in Herbert's poetry is always the result of a clash of opposites.

A helpful hint to Herbert's paradoxical imagination was available as early as 1962, when he published his first collection of essays, which traced his avid pilgrimage to the cathedrals and the museums of Italy and France, under the revealing title *Barbarian in the Garden*. Insofar as the Garden stood for the ancient, medieval and renaissance culture of the Mediterranean, Herbert's self-definition could not be clearer. He did not belong in that Garden; he was admitted as a visitor from a different, more brutish, less fortunate world. And yet—here is the crucial paradox—he did belong in the Garden; or rather, he knew that the Garden once belonged to him, too. As a human being, he was one of its heirs. He was one of those who had been disinherited by History, with all its barbed-wired frontiers and iron curtains, but had never recognized that act as just or binding.

Herbert shared what another wronged heir, Osip Mandelstam, once called the "yearning for world culture." Yet Herbert's imagination has never really been able to shake off the "grayness" (his favorite color) with which years of life outside the Garden had tainted it. He has never been able to forget the lessons that he was forced to learn as a modern barbarian. The almost religious reverence he has for Greek temples, Gothic cathedrals and the art of Piero della Francesca is always accompanied by his sober view of the dark sea of human bestiality and foolishness that surrounded those isolated islands. No conservative utopia for him; he has seen too many progressive utopias result in too many disasters to believe that human nature could have ever been, or can ever be, brought to perfection.

Herbert's Mediterranean essays have recently been complemented with their Northern counterpart, *Still Life with a Bridle*, a selection of essays on the art of seventeenth-century Holland. Written over many years, these essays (some of them called "Apocryphas" to indicate their greater admixture of imagination) also touch on the impossibility of human perfection, but they examine it in a different context. If any place or any time in the history of Europe ever deserved the name of a real-life utopia, it was seventeenth-century Holland. Yet the image of a wealthy nation of industrious and tolerant people, whose demand for culture spurred an endless supply of masterpieces, does not survive Herbert's scrutiny. He approaches it with the same "unmasking" attitude that led him, in one of his prose poems, to dis-