Porównania 1 (39), 2026
DOI: 10.14746/por.2026.1.3

Robert Kusek
Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie

Herbert in Cape Town: From the History of Reading (and Canonising) Post-WWII Polish Literature in South Africa*

1. Introduction: Canonising Polish Literature in South Africa

It could well be argued that over the last fifty years, in South Africa, Polish literature has enjoyed prominence and reverence that can hardly be matched by any other non-English literary tradition. Generations of South African writers – from Lionel Abrahams, Dan Jacobson, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, Lewis Nkosi, and J.M. Coetzee to the likes of Denis Hirson, Jan Glazewski, Douglas Reid Skinner, Stephen Watson, Peter Horn, Robert Berold, Mangaliso Buzani, Kobus Moolman, Mark Gevisser, and Fiona Zerbst[1] – have, in various forms and shapes, responded to Polish literature and acknowledged its influence on their own work: sometimes through a subtle reference or allusion, sometimes through a more direct quote or an elaborate tribute.[2] The reasons for the

* This research was funded in whole by the National Science Centre, Poland, grant no. 2020/39/B/HS2/02083. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a CC-BY public copyright licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version arising from this submission.

1 This list is by no means exhaustive – for instance, it does not include a number of amateur/unpublished poets (e.g. Jos Koetsier) or visual artists (e.g. William Kentridge) who have engaged in a creative dialogue with selected writers or works of Polish literature.

2 Some notable discussions of such South African-Polish literary encounters include Chapman; Popescu 2010; Popescu 2012; Kusek 2021; Kusek 2023a; Kusek 2023b; Kusek 2025; Jarzyńska.



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above-mentioned writers' developing a considerable interest in Polish literature, especially poetry by Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Różewicz, Adam Zagajewski, and Wisława Szymborska are manifold and resist any single classification – although, in many instances, they should be seen as parallel to a much larger and global turn towards Central- (or middle-)European literature which, in South Africa, began in earnest in the 1970s (cf. Popescu 2010). In his seminal inquiry into the parallels between South African and Central European poetics and poetry, Michael Chapman has argued that what continues to attract South African writers to Polish poetry (as opposed to Romanian or Hungarian poetry) is the latter's diction, which is largely absent from South African verse and which is characterised by "the *gravitas*, the virtu, the classical, masterly ironic wisdom" (55), as well as a "shared, civic… sensibility" (56). By referring to Szymborska's lines, Chapman also insists that the entire post-WWII generation of Polish poets accedes to the ethical (and aesthetic) demand that commands "the I of ego, of individualism" to be "pressed upon by moral responsibility" (65). In his forthcoming essay about various Polish resonances in late- and post-apartheid South Africa, David Attwell has reiterated several of Chapman's observations (e.g. Polish poetry's directness, avoidance of ego, imbuement with irony, humanistic/classical tradition) but, at the same time, has corrected some of the latter's claims and added his own explanations regarding the potential causes of the ongoing attention which has been paid to the works of Polish literature by South African writers and academic circles. These include: an anxiety over authenticity which makes South African post-colonial literature question its authority and results in the search for an alternative "anchorage" which would not be bound by local historical and political contexts; admiration for post-WWII Polish literature being "unremittingly political" – yet not in the recognisable sense of the term (Auden- or Spender-like) but, instead, permeated by the sense of disillusionment; and, finally, a fascination with specific aesthetic inclinations that characterise Polish literature – in particular, "aesthetic responsiveness" understood as "becoming alive" to the "fullness and completeness of objects"[3] – to name but a few (2026).

3 Attwell's argument is based, among others, on a series of interviews conducted with the likes of Douglas Reid Skinner and Robert Berold, as well as study of Stephen Watson's archive. Some of their views are also echoed by William Kentridge who in a series of conversations with Denis Hirson admits to having recognised in Polish poetry a special kind of "sensibility […] so close to [him]" that it becomes a "familiar sensation," as well as a "particular" way of expressing the very sensibility: one that is rooted in the "palpable connection to the world" (220).

Although I fully endorse the validity of Chapman's and Attwell's claims and hail the perspicacity of their observations, given their exclusive interest in the works of Polish poetry and its specific aesthetic qualities which have evidently appealed to South African poets, I would like to suggest a slightly different reading of South African response to Polish literature. My reading – which I consider supplementary rather than alternative to Chapman's or Attwell's – proposes that it is possible to identify three major models of reception of Polish literature in translation in South Africa.

The first one is based on selected South African writers' recognising a form of kinship with their Polish equivalents and, to use Leela Gandhi's term, "transnational or affiliative solidarity" (10) that is capable of crossing the South-North (East) divide and, consequently, annuls the well-established communities of belonging contingent on the categories of nation, ethnicity or race. This transnational or transcolonial Polish-South African "ecumene" would not, however, be primarily based on acknowledging the latter as the former's ideological allies (i.e. fellow comrades committed to a similar cause and trying to reach a common goal – as Kris Manjapra's reading of "transcolonial ecumene" would imply [172]) – but, instead, on affirming a trans-geographical "comradeship" (Dean 12, 39) of subjects implicated in their specific (yet strikingly similar) histories of oppression and violence. An example to support this argument is the 1969 poem "Place" by Lionel Abrahams, which opens with the following bracketed note of introduction: "A party of white Johannesburgers reads Zbigniew Herbert, Holub and other poets near a mine-dump, Summer 1969" (24). Crucially for the present reading, the speaker of "Place" dismisses the lines of Abrahams' (supposedly) "fellow" poets such as Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali or Sylvia Plath, with whom he selectively shares his nationality, ideology and political beliefs, or language. Instead, the speaker welcomes the "humane affirmative thrust" of Herbert, whose "translated lines / we there, with voice and ears and hearts / lent scope and life, brought strangely home" (25). The poem thus turns into an invitation to endorse a "transnational solidarity" that exists between the writers of the South and of the East and bring together not only two distant topographies (of South Africa and Poland) so as to overlap one landscape ("weathered to bones and muscles" post-industrial ruins of Johannesburg [25]) with another (Herbert's war-ravaged Warsaw) but also two subject positions. In the act of an imaginative leap, the poem's speaker – "at home" in both Herbert's words, as well as in his "unimaginable" city (25) – overlays the "heart of the country" with the core of Europe, as well as juxtaposes his own experiences with those of a "scientist-poet out of Europe's East" (25) – both buried under the rubble of historical and political circumstances.

The second mechanism of literary reception of post-WWII Polish writing in South Africa that I would like to suggest herein has been inspired by the conceptual model of global cultural exchange and literary networks proposed by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih in their seminal work *Minor Transnationalism* (2005). It could be defined as a process of de-provincialisation which one should understand as initiating and sustaining a creative conversation by a minor literature or culture with a culture and literature that the former considers major – oftentimes, despite the latter's actual position as a minor phenomenon. This mechanism (which, alongside Coetzee, one might also call "sociocultural" [2002a: 9]) is certainly to be observed in the case of Stephen Watson, who in his letter to Douglas Reid Skinner makes a direct comparison between his relation with Miłosz and Miłosz's own relationship with the writers of the West in the 1930s: the kind which he describes as "the semi-colonial relation that the eastern European intellectual [had to] **bigger** and supposedly **wiser** and **more cultured brothers** in the West" [emphasis added] (qtd. in Wylie 86). Several decades later, it is Watson, this South African intellectual, who (via such works as "Still Life" [2000] or "Late Milosz" [2010]) acknowledges the Polish poet as the "bigger," "wiser," and more "cultured brother" of his and identifies himself as the latter's disciple. De-provincialisation considered a positive response to global literary fashions is also identified as a primary reason for the appearance of Polish writers in both South African literature and the study of literature at South African universities in the 1970s by Jonathan Crewe. Of Herbert's appeal at the time he speaks in the following manner: "At a time of Marxist academic enthusiasm, it was salutary to encounter an Eastern Bloc writer who was neither a Stalinist nor a freedom-loving poster-boy of the US State Department" (19). Coetzee himself partly endorsed this interpretation of what I shall call the "self-de-provincialisation via Warsaw" when he referred to his early election of Herbert in "What is a Classic?" In this essay, he was asking semi-rhetorically: "Was I […] symbolically electing high European culture, and command of the codes of that culture, as a route that would take me *out of* what I must have felt, in terms however obscure or mystified, as an historical *dead end*?" (2002a: 9; emphasis mine).

Finally, the third model of reading Polish literature in South Africa is one whose underlying principle is the search for patrimony (or, in some instances, *matrimoine*) – not only literary but also historical, geographical or genetic. This model is particularly pervasive in the narratives by writers whose ancestors (parents or grandparents mostly) emigrated to South Africa from Central Europe either at the turn of the 20th century (Jews from present-day Lithuania and Latvia) or after WWII (mostly Poles). Two noteworthy examples of the way in

which Polish literature is mobilised by South African literature are memoirs by Dan Jacobson (*Heshel's Kingdom* [1998]) and Mark Gevisser (*Dispatcher: Lost and Found in Johannesburg* [2014]). In both books, it is Czesław Miłosz, especially his *Native Realm* (1959 [1968]) and "Notes on Exile" (1976), that becomes the South African writers' guide for learning about their heritage and the lens through which they perceive their homelands. Most importantly, Miłosz's probing analysis of the 1930s helps them to acknowledge their own implication in present-day forms of injustice; in short, a crucial instrument in their search for self-definition. As descendants of the victims, Jacobson and Gevisser return to the lands of their ancestors not only to learn and understand their own difficult inheritance but, most importantly, to scrutinise their own connections to the suffering and exploitation of others in their native South Africa. Thanks to Miłosz, Poland and Lithuania appear as the "stand-in" for contemporary South Africa, while South Africa as the "ersatz" of the pre-WWII Polish Republic.

Undeniably, all three mechanisms and strategies discussed herein have, in turn, contributed to the gradual process of canonisation of Polish literature in translation in South Africa. As a matter of fact, a double canonisation: both internal (or domestic) and external (international). The former manifests itself not only in the South African writers' reading choices and habits or the dialogue that they have been conducting with specific works of Polish literature in their own oeuvre (via citation, allusion, intertextual transformation, inspiration, etc.) but also in the process of institutionalisation of Polish literature as a subject to be studied: academically (i.e. in literature departments at South African universities[4]), as well as autodidactically and professionally (e.g. a poetry circle hosted by Robert Berold and Mangaliso Buzani[5]). The latter can be traced to various

4 E.g. the English Department and the Centre for Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town where first Coetzee and then Watson taught courses on writing associated with the effects of totalitarianism and which included the study of Polish poets such as Różewicz, Herbert, Miłosz, Szymborska, and Zagajewski, as well as the College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu Natal in Durban where Michael Chapman referenced Polish literature as part of his comparative study of South African and East European poetry.

5 David Attwell reports that once a year the group reads selected works by Central and Eastern European poets, including the Polish poets, from *The Poetry of Survival: Post-war Poets of Central and Eastern Europe* (1991), a collection by Daniel Weissbort. This implies that the body of Polish writing read in South Africa is not limited exclusively to the above-mentioned (i.e. Różewicz, Herbert, Miłosz, Szymborska, and Zagajewski) but also includes such figures as Jerzy Ficowski, Tymoteusz Karpowicz, Artur Międzyrzecki, Leopold Staff, and Anna Świrszczyńska (cf. Weissbort 17–26).

activities undertaken by selected South African writers of international stature who have actively contributed to making the works of Polish literature enter and persist in the Western literary field; in other words, it can be seen in their considerable input to the emergence and durability of the "transatlantic canon," to use Bożena Shallcross' apt term (278). Two notable examples of this practice are Nadine Gordimer (in particular, her homage to Miłosz paid in her globally celebrated 1983 essay "Living in the Interregnum") and Coetzee (especially with regard to Herbert and Bruno Schulz [cf. Kucała; Geertsema; Ziemann]).

A comprehensive study of these readings and canonisations inevitably needs to address a complex infrastructure of the reception of Polish literature in South Africa, including its heterogenous trajectories and modes of transmission shaped by personal friendships (e.g. Nadine Gordimer and Vladimir Ledochowski; Stephen Watson and Basha Ledochowska), professional relations (teacher-student [e.g. Coetzee and Alissa Valles], senior colleague-junior colleague [Coetzee and Watson]), academic institutions (e.g. the University of Cape Town, the University of Chicago), or specific spatial and topographical configurations (e.g. the cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg, the homes of the Ledochowskis and Rozwadowskis). However, given the brevity of this paper, I have decided to restrict my discussion to only one episode from the history of the reception of post-WWII Polish literature in South Africa: its moment of inception and the latest manifestation of its canonisation – both concerned with J.M. Coetzee's lifelong study of Zbigniew Herbert's poetry.

2. Zbigniew Herbert in Cape Town (and Adelaide)

Although Herbert arrived in South Africa either via the first issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* published in 1965 (which contained four of his poems) or via the 1968 *Selected Poems*, translated by Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott and published in the Penguin Modern European Poets series – as the already-mentioned Lionel Abrams poem "Place" unambiguously testifies to, the very beginning of his fully-fledged presence in South African literary canon should be placed in 1973 when Coetzee started teaching Herbert as part of extramural classes held at the University of Cape Town.

As a matter of fact, Coetzee discovered Herbert much earlier – in truth, well before any other "Western" writer or literary critic. In *Youth* (2002), the second volume of his auto/biographical trilogy, he confesses to having first encountered Herbert's poetry not in print but on the radio when he moved to London in the early 1960s. What he clearly refers to are three radio productions of Herbert's plays, i.e. *The Other Room*, *The Philosophers' Den*, and *Reconstruction of a Poet* which were broadcast on the BBC Third Programme in 1962, 1963, and 1964

respectively (Taborski 78). In the aftermath of this discovery, Herbert becomes Coetzee's aesthetic ally, who speaks to him "from lone rafts tossed on the dark seas of Europe" (2003, 91). His lines are:

> release[d]… into the air, and along the airwaves the words speed to [John's] room, the words of the poet of his time, telling him again of what poetry can be and therefore of what he can be, filling him with joy that he inhabits the same earth as they. "Signal heard in London – please continue to transmit": that is the message he would send [him] if he could (91).

However, it took approximately a decade for the signal to reach a wider audience and be heard (as well as positively valorised) by South African institutions of literary studies. In July 1973, Coetzee, together with his colleague Jonathan Crewe, launched a literary course within the framework of extramural studies offered by the University of Cape Town: the kind that was open to all enrolled in the programme and did not require any entrance qualifications or examinations (with the exception of a course fee of R7,50). Every Monday, at 8 p.m., those interested in contemporary literature would gather to learn about "selected modern poets," as the name of the course implied. The reading list included the works by Hugh MacDiarmid and Ted Hughes (taught by Crewe), as well as Pablo Neruda and Hans Enzensberger (discussed by Coetzee). However, the main "star" of the course was Zbigniew Herbert – Coetzee's pick, of course.

A testament to this act of granting a very special status to Herbert is to be found today in the J.M. Coetzee Papers held at the Amazwi South African Museum of Literature in Makhanda (Coetzee 2002b). A folder with Coetzee's teaching materials contains not only the course brochure with syllabus details but most importantly the draft version of the writer's Herbert lecture (one that he delivered within the framework of the course), as well as notes on the poet and Polish poetry created while working on his talk – in themselves, an invaluable source of information on Coetzee's understanding of Herbert's poetry and the way the latter was studied in the South African academia.

The fact that the whole course ends with Herbert should come as no surprise – after all, Coetzee evidently saw Herbert's poetic oeuvre as a crowning achievement of "modern poetry" and one from which all other (and already discussed) types of poetic diction should learn. The lecture thus starts with a brief juxtaposition of Neruda's (the subject of Coetzee's previous talk) and Herbert's status as political poets and concludes with the dismissal of the former as speaking from an "advantaged" and "easy" position, i.e. someone coming

from an "underdeveloped" country, identifying oneself with the "oppressed" people, being a bona fide Marxist (2002b: 1). Neruda's position is contrasted with Herbert's, whose talent, as Coetzee notes, had to grow "somewhere untidily in between"; it had to grow in a "neither/nor" country (neither developed nor underdeveloped, neither oppressed nor free) where one – unlike a "New World" citizen – has seen "too much exploitation in too many forms" (2002b: 1) This complex and essentially "implicated" subject position (Rothberg) attributed to Herbert clearly reverberates with Coetzee's own understanding of his own status as a "deformed" white South African (Coetzee 1993: 1; cf. Attwell 2015: 4) and his overall sense of disillusionment. A hopeful anticipation of the "triumph of the oppressed" and liberation which he identifies in Neruda and other writers of the "New World" is contrasted with the situation experienced by Herbert's subject:

> Behind him lies a nightmarish, absurd retrospect of suffering and death, and nothing he can see of the present and future convinces him that all the death has led to anything. He is simply unable to give meaning to that horror, unable to believe that it is part of a massive dialectic of history that will eventuate in Paradise regained, or even in just a better world (1).

This "Warsaw's perspective" is very much Coetzee's own.

In the light of Coetzee's Herbert lecture, it can be asserted that his interpretation of Herbert's life and work situates the latter as a valid alternative to the majority of other modern voices that can be read and studied in apartheid South Africa. What is more, the seriousness with which the artists and their works are approached in Communist countries (something that Coetzee admires and, possibly, also envies) should be the optimal mode for the way Herbert's poetry should be read in Coetzee's native realm, too.

The remaining part of Coetzee's papers created while preparing for the poetry course comprises his detailed discussion of a wide array of Herbert's poems, six of which are referenced and discussed in the notes: "From Mythology," "Apollo and Marsyas," "Elegy of Fortinbras," "At the Gate of the Valley," "Five Men," "Report from Paradise," and "Why the Classics." Those readings reveal some unprecedented breadth of his (and, eventually, his students') engagement with Herbert's poetry – especially with its "internal revolt," "veiled speech," and accounts of one's struggle to "retain [one's] self-respect and integrity" regardless of circumstances (4, 5), as well as Herbert criticism – not to mention Polish pre- and post-WWII history. However, two aspects of Coetzee's study of Herbert deserve to be singled out. One is Coetzee's overt self-identification

with the condition and poetic credo of the Polish poet – so conspicuous that even at one point, in a fragment of the notes that should be read as Coetzee's own intimate conversation with Herbert, he writes "you" (meaning himself) instead of "he" (Herbert) – the word that is later crossed out and substituted by the right pronoun.[6] The other is the poems' resonance in South Africa – in particular its potentiality as a way out for South African literature heavily burdened by the principles of realism and political agendas. With his "pessimistic, unrevolutionary view of history,… his dry, restrained temperament,… his ideal of an art which contents itself with the truth, no more, no less" (6, 7), and, most importantly, with his putting himself on the side of "the powerlessness of foolish, sentimental, gullible, sheepish humanity" (7), Herbert becomes the patron of a different South African literature, a founding father of a different canon – one which was to emerge a year later with Coetzee's publication of *Dusklands* (1974). The canon inhabited by the likes of Michael K, Señor C or Elizabeth Costello – no less than Coetzee's version of an old woman from Herbert's poem "At the Gate of the Valley" studied in late 1973 in Cape Town, who carries the dead body of the canary while waiting for the "final division" (6).

In the decades to come, the "transmission" which started in London and in 1973 reached Cape Town continued to evolve. In the 1980s, Coetzee repeatedly read and studied Herbert's poetic oeuvre, including the Mr Cogito series, as well as kept himself informed on the latest contributions to Herbert's criticism – as testified to by his research materials housed in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin (Coetzee 2009). Herbert also provided him with much needed inspiration in the early stages of conceiving *Age of Iron* (1990). In November 1988, while trying to establish the nature of the relationship between the female narrator and Pratt (a prototype for the character Vercueil), as well as the latter's status in the narrative, he reminds himself that he should "re-read Z. Herbert" (Coetzee 1988). In the 2000s, when acting as a curator of Berlinde de Bruyckere's exhibition displayed in the Belgian Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennial, he responded to the artist's plea to provide her with a literary text she could draw inspiration from by sending her Herbert's poem "Apollo

6 The fragment reads: "what is the point of getting away with criticism of the political system, the 'barbarians,' under which, more or less against your will, you live, when your criticism has no effect. What is the final value of an irony which magically allows you to say and not to say what you think of the system? After respect for the old gods had vanished, you will remember, ~~you wr~~ he wrote, superstitious neurotics still went on carrying in their pockets little statues of salt representing the god of irony" (5; crossed-out text in the original).

and Marsyas" (later reprinted in the show's catalogue, together with Coetzee's and de Bruyckere's correspondence; see Kusek, Szymański 27). Finally, in 2023, Coetzee released *The Pole* whose main character, Witold, carries strong signposts of Herbert's life and work (cf. Kusek 2023b: 272–85).

But the process of Herbert's canonisation by the South African writer did not end with the publication of Coetzee's "Polish" novel. In fact, it was concluded a year later when Coetzee – now living in Adelaide and having just completed his fictional exploration of his "brotherly" relationship with Herbert (i.e. *The Pole*) – contributed to the Penguin Modern Classics series with a new collection of Herbert's poems – selected and with an introduction by himself and his former student at the University of Chicago Alissa Valles (who also translated 87 out of 152 of Herbert's poems included in the volume).

Needless to say, Coetzee's "brief" (in the spirit of Herbert's brevity) "Introduction" to the collection remains of special interest to this paper. Although it shares a lot with Coetzee's 1973 lecture (return to specific poems such as "Five Men," "Apollo and Marsyas," "Report from Paradise" or "From Mythology"; analysis of Herbert's diction, including the poems' directness, ironic tone, and mode of "sceptical interrogation" [2024: xii-xiii]; discussion of Herbert's understanding of political systems – to name but a few), it does not offer a straightforward repetition of claims and observations formulated five decades earlier in Cape Town. In truth, the volume marks a significant departure from Coetzee's previous reading of Herbert. Not only does he comment on a new set of poems (i.e. "Mr Cogito's Eschatological Premonitions," "Mr Cogito and the Imagination," "To Ryszard Krynicki," "The Monster of Mr Cogito," and "The Envoy of Mr Cogito," which he calls "one of the great poems of the twentieth century" [2024: xvi]) but also – and quite inevitably given the fifty-year hiatus – he changes the focus of his interest. To the eighty-four-year-old Coetzee, Herbert is no longer the master of the "neat irony and lapidary perfection" who specialises in detached interrogation of various man- (and, supposedly, God-)made systems (xiv) but a poet of the suffering body and the after-life: one who (like in "The Envoy of Mr Cogito") abandons irony, unmasks itself, and stands "at the gate" so as to confront his regrets ("at a life not fully lived") 'Still Life' and doubts (that one's work has "compensated for a failed life" [xvi]). Moral complexity which Coetzee so admired in early Herbert is substituted by the vision of the poet of "failing powers"[7] who finds it utterly impossible to establish any moral certainty in the contemporary world – especially the kind

7 "[T]he poetry of [Herbert's] late years lacked the old urgency, the old musical syntactical tensions," Coetzee concludes (xviii).

in which "slavery modulated into subtler forms of servitude" (xvii), a comment which equally applies to both post-Communist Poland and post-apartheid South Africa.

Most important, however, the very introduction conclusively confirms a special ethical and aesthetic comradeship between Coetzee and Herbert and the latter's major impact on the former's writing (and, in turn, on the larger body of South African literature created in the wake of Coetzee's literary legacy). Having read "late" Coetzee's thoughts on "late" Herbert, one is bound to conclude that the origin of Coetzee's auto-bio-fictional creations (i.e. John from his *Scenes from Provincial Life* trilogy, Señor C, and, in particular, Elizabeth Costello) is to be found in Herbert's self-deprecating Mr Cogito – "the poet's persona (mask)" (xiv) or "avatar" (xvi), as Coetzee describes him – who, just like Coetzee's own avatars, serves as a mouthpiece to voice the writer's concerns; or to determine that Elizabeth Costello's defence of animals on the grounds of them having suffering bodies or resistance to express what she believes in ("Yes. No, emphatically no. Yes and no. Both" [2004: 221]) is a reflection of Mr Cogito's belief in "the right to feel pain" (which Coetzee recognises in "Mr Cogito's Eschatological Premonitions" [xiv]) or him occupying a zone beyond "the moralist's yes/no" (xviii).

Still, a word which most often appears in Coetzee's account of Herbert's life and work is the adjective "faithful." Herbert and his Mr Cogito are put on a par with other great heroes of the "*faithful life*": Don Quixote, Gilgamesh, Hector, and Roland (xii, xviii). For Coetzee, Herbert's greatest legacy is the poet's "stubborn" and "monotonous" faithfulness to the human: "not a timeless, classical ideal of the human, but the flesh-and-blood human, stumbling in the dark across a landscape littered with the bones of other brave men" (xviii). Coetzee positions himself as an heir of this legacy. Like his Polish "brother," he also stumbles across a landscape filled with dust and bones – including, as his reading of Herbert's poems confirms, the bones of Zbigniew Herbert.

3. Conclusion

The publication of Herbert's selected poems in 2024 and Coetzee's introduction to the volume should certainly be perceived as the apogee of the reception of Polish literature in South African writing and the role the former has played in the latter's development over the last fifty years. But should it also be considered its final chord? Especially, given the fact that the generation of readers and writers who recognised and cherished the relevance of Miłosz's, Herbert's or Szymborska's lines is slowly disappearing, while the sense of comradeship between the present-day Polish and South African subject positions is growing

more and more tenuous as political, ideological, and economic discrepancies rapidly increase?

Although, at this stage, no conclusive and final judgement seems to be available, it is reasonable to surmise that the heyday of Polish literature in South Africa is, indeed, over. However, the rumours of its death appear to be greatly exaggerated. After all, Mangaliso Buzani continues to read Różewicz, Deborah Levy repeatedly points up the influence of Tadeusz Kantor's plays onto her fictional and auto/biographical work, while Damon Galgut not only acknowledges the impact of Polish-Jewish literature, culture, and history on his writing but also in *The Promise* (2021) turns his dybbuk character Rachel Swart into a South African version of Yente from Olga Tokarczuk's *The Books of Jacob* (2014). It is the likes of Buzani, Levy, and Galgut that today seem to be sending the following message to their Polish equivalents: "Signal heard [in South Africa] – please continue to transmit" (Coetzee 2003: 91).

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| Abstract

ROBERT KUSEK

Herbert in Cape Town: From the History of Reading (and Canonising) Post-WWII Polish Literature in South Africa

The paper discusses various models of reading post-WWII Polish literature in South Africa. Having investigated the trajectories of individual encounters with Polish literature and their after-effects, the paper formulates specific claims about the mechanisms of literary reception of Polish writing in South Africa during and after the Cold War/apartheid (e.g., transnational affinity/comradeship, de-provincialisation, search for patrimony) Special attention will be paid to the horizontal and transnational transfer of Polish literary production to South Africa and its infrastructure (e.g. the role of mediating institutions and agents), as well as the role of selected South African writers in enabling the works of post-WWII Polish literature to enter not only South African but also global "canon." As to illustrate its claims, the paper focuses on one episode from the history of the South African reception of Polish writing, i.e. J.M. Coetzee's dialogue with Zbigniew Herbert – in particular its inception and the dialogue's climactic moment.

Keywords: Polish literature; South African literature; reception history; canon; transnationalism

| Bio

Robert Kusek (Ph.D, D. Litt), Jagiellonian University Professor, Department of Comparative Studies in Literature and Culture, Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland. His research interests include life writing genres, the contemporary novel in English, new nature writing, queer heritage, as well as a comparative approach to literary studies. He is the author of two monographs, including *Through the Looking Glass: Writers' Memoirs at the Turn of the 21st Century* (Jagiellonian University Press, 2017), and several dozen articles published in books, academic journals, and magazines, as well as co-editor of fourteen volumes of articles, most notably *Travelling Texts: J.M. Coetzee and Other Writers* (Peter Lang, 2014). He was a researcher in a number of Polish and international projects – currently he is a principal investigator in the National Science Centre funded project entitled "(Un)accidental Tourists: Polish Literature and Visual Culture in South Africa in the 20th and 21st Centuries."
E-mail: robert.kusek@uj.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0001-9969-0221