

‘To look until your head starts spinning’¹

ANDRZEJ FRANASZEK²

Pedagogical University of Cracow

Instytut Filologii Polskiej
Wydział Nauk Humanistycznych
Uniwersytet Pedagogiczny im. Komisji Edukacji Narodowej
Podchorążych 2
30-084 Kraków, Poland

Abstract: The article describes what kind of meaning the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert drew from his many encounters with the Netherlands, its 17th-century painting, its history and a specific form of social norms. It provides the reader with a closer look at the subjective vision of Dutch culture presented by Herbert in the volume of essays, *Still Life with a Bridle*. It indicates that the poet has constructed a kind of utopia here, describing, among other things, the role of the artist and his commitment to society, and it confronts the

¹ This essay is based on partially revised parts of my book *Herbert. Biografia* (vol. 1-2, 2018). The following abbreviations are used throughout the text: ASA (Alexander Schenker Archive, National Library, Warsaw), EANCU (Emigration Archive, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń), JCzA (Józef Czapski Archive, National Museum, Kraków), JJSa (Jan Józef Szczepański Archive, National Library, Warsaw), ZHA (Zbigniew Herbert Archive, National Library, Manuscript Department, Warsaw), GH (Zbigniew Herbert, *Głosy Herberta*, ed. Barbara Toruńczyk, 2008), HNR (Zbigniew Herbert, *Herbert nieznan. Rozmowy*, ed. H. Citko, 2008), MD (Herbert, *Mistrz z Delft i inne utwory odnalezione*, ed. B. Toruńczyk, H. Citko, 2008), SLB (Zbigniew Herbert, *Still Life with a Bridle in The Collected Prose: 1948–1998*, Kindle Edition, 2010), WG I (Zbigniew Herbert, „*Węzeł gordyjski*” oraz inne pisma rozproszone 1948–1998, vol. 1, ed. P. Kądziała, 2008), ZHCM (Zbigniew Herbert, Czesław Miłosz, *Korespondencja*, ed. B. Toruńczyk and M. Tabor, 2006), ZHTC (Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Chrzanowski, *Mój bliźni, mój bracie. Listy 1950–1998*, ed. Z. Baran, 2016).

² Dr hab. Andrzej Franaszek (1971) is a literary critic associated with the Pedagogical University in Kraków. He is the author of the book *Miłosz: Biografia* (2011), which earned him, among others, the Kościelski Foundation Award, *Gazeta Wyborcza*’s Nike Readers’ Award, the Kazimierz Wyka Award and the Award of the Polish Minister of Culture and National Education. He has also authored *Ciemne źródło. Esej o cierpieniu w twórczości Zbigniewa Herberta* (2nd edition: 2008) and *Przepustka z piekła: 44 szkice o literaturze i przygodach duszy* (2010). In 2018, Znak published Andrzej Franaszek’s two-volume biography of Zbigniew Herbert.

poet's vision with the opinions of contemporary art historians. Finally, it discusses two of Herbert's unfulfilled intentions: books devoted to the works of Vermeer and Rembrandt, as well as reconstructing the chronology of Herbert's subsequent journeys to the Netherlands: from 1967 to 1994.

Keywords: Zbigniew Herbert; Polish reception of Dutch culture; 20th-century Polish poetry; 20th-century Polish essay; *Still Life with a Bridle*

Zbigniew Herbert had numerous contacts and engagements with the Netherlands, its painting, history, culture and communal rules of coexistence. What did those encounters represent to him? A source of wonder and awe for the mastery of Dutch painters? A pretext to reflect on the artist's place in society? A model of patriotic attitude, of the love of freedom that does not eschew sacrifice yet is free from Polish bombast? A peculiar utopia, or myth, which the poet constructed for himself and for us, his readers, in essays published in *Still Life with a Bridle*? In all likelihood, the answer is: all these things at once.

Zbigniew Herbert first visited the homeland of Vermeer and Rembrandt in 1967, urged by the Polish immigrant painter Józef Czapski, who perhaps not only intended to call his friend's attention to the context of Dutch painting but may have hoped that both the art and the new corner of the world would strike Herbert's fancy, distract him from his pain, help him out of depression. Many years later, the poet himself would write that the Dutch landscapes and still lifes depicting everyday life and objects "have the power to purify the soul, the promise of forgiveness – a yellow wall with traces of many autumns and clumps of weeds on top, a piece of land, a tilted alder, a peeling grey-blue river and a fisherman under a sunset sky, a few apples scattered on the table and a jug, and a knife, and a crumpled cloth – as if they could express a longing for the unsurpassed, contingent order of the universe" (MD: 54).

He was particularly hungry for such a "purification of the soul" during his journey to the Netherlands in the 1960s, as he was slowly recovering from a nervous breakdown, so severe that, for the first time, he had to seek help of a French psychiatrist, accept his unmistakable diagnosis and admit – also to himself – that he was one more artist suffering with bipolar affective disorder. As he was slowly surfacing from the crisis, Herbert tried to come to terms with his predicament through humour – he took a long time choosing a postcard that he planned to dispatch to another friend of his, Czesław Miłosz. Finally, he chose one with a view of 1900's Paris, which probably depicted the then in-vogue Restaurant du Coucou, on the back of which he wrote: "I've been feeling pretty miserable lately,

but I'm better now. I can write 'Ala has a cat'³, I can even borrow money. Sucking my own finger is hard now, but perhaps I'll get used to it," signing his name as "Zbigniew Coucou/na Mougnu" (ZHCM: 72).⁴

Herbert sought the peace and tranquillity offered by solitary contact with nature, with the sea, so he left Paris and went to Provence, to Le Lavandou, a town he knew from his earlier, more enjoyable trips. The letter he then sent to Czapski and his sister, Maria, was meditative in tone: "I missed nature, which is the best medicine [...] Cicadas. Reeds. Palm trees. Dogs barking somewhere. Frogs croaking in the ditch. [...] I draw a bit. Today I tried reeds (splendid plants), but it was windy and my attempts were unsuccessful. Tomorrow I won't use my drawing pen but ink and brush like the Chinese." He signed the letter with "Yours, Zbigniew the Pilgrim"⁵ (JCzA).

1. The immensity of the world and the heart of things

In a conversation with Czapski the author of "Barbarian in the Garden" stated firmly that for him "only the Italians count" in the history of painting, while the Dutch in the Louvre "disturb" him a little: "And then Czapski said with his glorious, genius simplicity: 'Go to the Netherlands, then'" (HNR: 205). And indeed, in 1967, the somewhat convoluted route that took Herbert the pilgrim from Provence to London, Paris and Brussels, included Leiden, where the poet was hosted by Henk Proeme, a Dutch Slavist and Czapski's friend. To make the biographical clues more entangled, let us add that Proeme, or, as Miron Białoszewski referred to him, 'Dutch Bear,' was in a close relationship with Leszek Soliński, a partner of the author of *Revolutions of Things*, and, years later, he married him in the Netherlands. At the time, however, all this was still a distant future, and Herbert, fascinated, looked out of the train window and saw a landscape that was completely new to him:

an enormous plain, a civilized steppe, the road as smooth as an airport runway amid endless meadows similar to the flat green paradise [...]. My eyes of a city dweller, unused to the expansive landscape, fearfully and uncertainly check the faraway horizon as if learning to fly above an unattainable surface [...] I had a feeling the smallest hill would be enough to take in the entire country: all its rivers, meadows, canals, its red cities, like

³ Translator's note: "Ala has a cat" (Polish "Ala ma kota") is a famous phrase from the classic Polish reading primer by Marian Falski.

⁴ Z. Herbert's letter to Cz. Miłosz, Paris, stamped on 11 May 1967. Translator's note: "Coucou/na Mougnu" (mock-French spelling of the Polish phrase 'kuku na muniu') can be roughly translated as 'cuckoo pants.'

⁵ Z. Herbert's letter to J. and M. Czapski, Le Lavandou, 15 June 1967.

a huge map that one can bring closer or move farther from the eyes. It was not at all a feeling accessible to lovers of beauty, or purely aesthetic. It was like a particle of the omnipotence that is reserved for the highest beings: to embrace the limitless expanse with its wealth of detail, herbs, people, waters, trees, houses, all that is contained only in God's eye – the enormous magnitude of the world and the heart of things. (SLB: 180)

Perhaps a thought occurred to him that some day he would like to describe the Dutch landscape, light and, above all, the paintings produced in the Netherlands in the 17th century. In any case, he loved the new country, but he could devote much too little time to it back then – on a piece of paper sent to the essayist and critic Konstanty Jeleński, he wrote self-mockingly: “I am visiting the Netherlands like a drunken American, I did three big cities and one and a half scores of museums in three days,” adding: “I am writing this postcard on a train rather than in a state of delirium as my calligraphy might lead you to believe”⁶ (EAN-CU). It was probably not during this first, hurried journey that the poet stopped for the night in the small town of Veere, but the description of his wandering around the town, which, years later, he would include in the essay “Delta,” can be quoted now, as it reflects the feeling of strangeness but also of the perspicacity of vision that the poet experienced as he visited new places that he had yet to “tame,” become familiar with:

the eyes react quickly to objects and banal events that do not exist for the practical eye. I am surprised by the color of mailboxes, tramways, different shapes of copper doorknobs, knockers on doors, stairs always winding in a dangerous way, wooden shutters whose surface is crossed by two straight diagonal lines, a big ‘X’, and the four fields of the big ‘X’s alternatively filled with black and white, or white and red paint.

I know I waste too much time listening to a painted street organ huge as a gypsy’s wagon, and also on the steps of the post office where I stand staring at a green vehicle coming out of the Moses and Aaron Street. It stirs up clouds of dust by setting brushes in its chassis into a whirling motion, which might not be the ideal way of cleaning a city but is a serious warning that dust will never find peace here.

Petty events, small street-fragments of reality. (SLB: 182)

The first visit was followed by others, with Dutch art not only becoming a counterbalance to Italian, but even overbearing the old fascination. The poet himself said that every new love – and thus also his love of painters – should eclipse earlier feelings: “the deeper I immersed myself into the paintings of the Dutch, the more the paintings of the Italians faded for me – they appeared too

⁶ Z. Herbert’s postcard to K.A. Jeleński, Gravenhagen, 9 October 1967, Konstanty Jeleński Archives, EANCU.



Zbigniew Herbert, [szkic pejzażu z wieżą i ruinami / Landscape Sketch with Tower and Ruins], June 1976, marker pen, pencil, 16 × 24 cm, Rps BN akc. 17 953 t. 111 k. 30
Rps = manuscripts; BN = National Library; akc. = access; t. = volume; k. = sheet

sweet, at once ostentatiously colourful and superficial. Only the greatest ones – Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Bellini – did not yield to the process transforming my vision” (MD: 65). The Italians, he notes elsewhere, are “lucid, cool, transparent systems, surface of the mirror, delight, *bel canto* of colours, decorativeness, lightness, clear calligraphic drawing, emphatic outlines,” while the Dutch offer “warmth, grappling with the material, thick paint, limited chromatic scale, low horizon of the Earth’s gravity” (Smolińska-Byczuk 2006: 128ff).

Dutch landscape, for which Herbert developed a fondness too, crops up in these words. In addition to his love of Greece and the Mediterranean, he was always fond of the North, its chill, the cultures arising in these conditions. After the azure of Italy, he was surprised by the light, it was so different. He would later give it a beautiful, compelling description in the opening essay of *Still Life with a Bridle*:

I decided once to devote a whole day to meteorological studies. In the morning the weather was nice but the sun seemed suspended in an opaque, viscous liquid similar to a soft light bulb, without a trace of a

l'azzurro. The clouds appeared and quickly disappeared. Exactly at one-thirty in the afternoon it suddenly cooled off, and in half an hour torrential, heavy-grained, dark-blue rain began. It struck with fury against the ground and seemed to be returning to the sky to fall with greater implacability. It lasted about an hour. Exactly at seven in the evening I left for Scheveningen to pursue my studies further. The rain had already stopped. Piles of clouds all over the west. The resort, the cabins, the casino now dazzlingly white were covered with a coating of violet. A moment before eight everything changed: a staggering festival began, of water vapor, forms, colors, metamorphosis difficult to describe because even the evening sun sent out frivolous pinks and farcical gold. The spectacle finished. The sky was clear. The wind stopped. Faraway lights went on and off, and all of a sudden without warning, without a breeze or anticipation, a huge cloud the color of ash appeared, a cloud in the shape of a god torn apart. (SLB: 190)

In June 1970, Herbert was invited to the unpretentiously named Poetry International festival in Rotterdam, where he read his poems in the company of a poets' International whom he had met before: Horst Bienek, Lars Gustafsson and Vasco Popa.⁷ Six years later, during the next iteration of the festival, he would dance a Hassidic dance with the Israeli poet Dan Pagis, meet another Jewish author, Abraham Suckewer, and exchange a few words with Reiner Kunz and Elizabeth Bishop (cf. ZHA, ref. 17927). A poignant reminiscence of the Hungarian poet János Pilinszky, who, like Herbert, suffered from a sickness of the soul survives: "I became prone to depression, to a horrible and unbearable sense of guilt. Hermann Hesse writes about one of his protagonists, who is the Hesse himself, that he lived with self-contempt [...]. Whoever writes a sentence like this has to know what depression is, like Zbigniew Herbert at the Rotterdam airport where we met. We looked at each other, he embraced me and said: 'Brother'" (Simonyi 2008: 147). Judging from Herbert's notes at the time, he also understood his Hungarian colleague perfectly well, even noting that their immediate connection "plunged us into a proud loneliness of two." It did not sit well with either of them that the priority of Dutch artists was to amuse their audiences – they seemed to dread any philosophy, ideology or pathos (even a modicum of it), which, according to Herbert, was a mistake. When sketching in his notebook the outline of a conversation on poetry, he stressed that it was important not to give up the most serious themes (ZHA, ref. 17955, vol. 104). As was his custom, the author of *Inscription* extended his stay. After the festival ended, he spent many a moment at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and then in autumn he travelled to

⁷ Cf. e.g. <<http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/aboutus/index/en>>, last accessed on 3 May 2015.

Belgium and the Netherlands to stay longer. In his September notes he records a string of towns and cities: Leuven, Brussels, Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Mechelen and, once again, Leiden (ZHA, ref. 18030, vol. 3). Of course, each of these names also meant museums and paintings.

In 1988, the poet spent another June in Rotterdam. The festival organisers also invited Ryszard Krynicki, who was two decades younger than Herbert. Through the eye of his camera we can see Herbert seated on a bench, relaxed and, behind him, despite it being an afternoon, an utterly deserted square. The reason of this curious fact becomes obvious when we add that on that day the Dutch football team played a game against the Soviet Union (cf. *Kwartalnik Artystyczny*, 2008, No. 2).⁸ The Dutch took the lead, which was announced by a scream of joy from a nearby café, which was not without effect on the subtle smile on the face of the author of "Report from the Besieged City." As Krynicki reminisces, his master wanted to "visit the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum": "I was lucky to accompany him on that expedition [...]. Time and again he would write something down in his little notebook [...] Unfortunately, he couldn't find the painting that was the primary reason he was there: ter Borch's *Procession of Flagellants*" (Krynicki 1998). The author of the lost painting will soon resurface in *Still Life with a Bridle*.

"I fled the Warsaw-area hospital with inflamed lungs. It took me two days to pen a tiny essay, which was immediately printed. I was paid more than for the book (which has just been published in Dutch) and I lived the life of a lawyer in pre-war Lwów (suite, beautiful view, excellent service, fine old furniture, silence)," (ASA)⁹ this is how Herbert sums up his last visit to the Netherlands, which was his last foreign trip. In the first half of October 1994, when a Dutch translation of his essays appeared, under a different title than the original (*Bitter Taste of Tulips*), *NRC Handelsblad* invited him to visit an exhibition of the national symbol and devote more attention to the flowers, this time by writing a piece for the newspaper. Gerard Rasch, Herbert's translator, saw him at the Amsterdam airport "in a wheelchair pushed by a stewardess." The poet was ill, he "breathed asthmatically." He was admitted to hospital for a short while but demanded to leave so firmly that the doctors did not dare to oppose him. For a few days in the Ambassade Hotel "he could not walk, got up only occasionally and not for long." Yet spiritually, at the beginning at least, his shape was good, he spoke for hours, or rather lectured to his companion "about civilisation, culture, the world, the Poetry International in Rotterdam, the dissolute life of a certain Italian professor and about tulips" (Rasch 2000: 43).

⁸ Cf. <http://kwartalnik.art.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Kwartalnik-Artystyczny-dodatek-2008_2.pdf>, last accessed on 15 July 2020.

⁹ Z. Herbert's letter to A. Schenker, Warszawa, 20 October 1994.

The recollections of the Dutch translator show a man who forces his body to obey him, somehow managing to get to the tulip show on his own, and then dictating a piece about it: “When I did not catch his exact words or misread what he had dictated to me a moment before, he became irritated, but almost immediately a forgiving smile or complement appeared on his face, and then his face became very kind and exuded kindness; as if his mask of pain had dropped for a moment” (Rasch 2000: 44). On another day, says Rasch, when he arrived at the hotel at noon, Herbert,

still in his bathrobe, was just finishing breakfast; the night had been difficult. He was in the bedroom, sitting up on his bed; while he was changing, I was waiting in the living room [...]. These hours – we were not ready until about three – made a big impression on me. [...] I remembered he said (teasingly?) that he would never have become a poet, had he known what lifestyle it involved; anguish, suffering, drudgery. He talked about his masculinity, his ‘hot coldness,’ his temperament. [...] he was ill, relying on the help and kindness of others. He knew it and bore it with dignity and humour. He was embarrassed, but he was great enough not to hide his embarrassment. (Rasch 2000: 46)

The author of “Barbarian in the Garden” performed many ritual acts for the last time. For the last time he entered a museum shop, which happened to be in the Maritime Museum in the Amsterdam harbour, where quickly, just before closing, he “haphazardly, judging by nothing but the cover, bought, at rather high discounts, a number of books on maritime history.” For the last time, at least for a moment, he vanished from his guardians’ sight, which he loved to do. On the day of Herbert’s departure, Rasch and another translator of the poet’s work, Karol Lesman, who were supposed to take the writer to Schiphol, were told by the hotel receptionist that the ailing guest from Poland “went to the Maritime Museum on his own; his luggage was waiting in the hall. We waited for a long time. Three quarters of an hour before departure, he arrived in a taxi that stopped in front of the hotel, we loaded the luggage and set out at once for the airport where he was the last passenger to go through passport control” (Rasch 2000: 47).

2. Neatness raised to the dignity of a virtue

“I wrote a book about the Dutch, but when I read the manuscript, it seemed overwrought, long and boring. Now I am writing a new version after all my publishers lost hope and patience,” Herbert informed one of his friends at the end of December 1988 (JJSA).¹⁰ *Still Life with a Bridle*, which is the book in ques-

¹⁰ Z. Herbert’s letter to J.J. Szczepański, Paris, 27 December 1988.



Zbigniew Herbert, [szkic: profil głowy króla / Sketch: Profile of King's Head], 19 December 1991, pencil, 17 × 24 cm, Rps BN akc. 17 953 t. 117 k. 12



Zbigniew Herbert, [szkic detalu, dłoń na kolanie / Detail Sketch, Hand on Knee], June 1976, pencil, 16 × 24 cm, Rps BN akc. 17 953 t. 111 k. 6

tion, was composed over twelve years. In 1976, after visiting the Rotterdam festival, Herbert came up with the idea for a collection of essays, and soon set to work. The poet could travel, do research, even get help to have his passport extended and, of course, enjoy unwavering trust, thanks to Siegfried Unseld(ow), editor-in-chief of Suhrkamp, who had been publishing the Polish poet's successive volumes for many years. The researcher claims that judging from their extant correspondence, had it not been for the assistance of the German publishing house and its editor-in-chief, the book "would probably have met the same fate as Herbert's other abandoned publishing projects." Aware of the contribution of his German publisher, the author thanked him for the book, describing it as their "joint" creation (Zajas 2015).

He thanked him in February 1994, after the German translation had been published, eight months after the book's Polish launch. It seems that *Still Life with a Bridle* could have been completed much earlier. In the late 1979, Herbert submitted the first 100 pages of his manuscript to one of his German translators, Klaus Staemler, who set to work with brio, but after Herbert's return to Poland, the poet probably ceased writing. Suhrkamp never recouped the money he had invested in the book, even though he has released several editions of it. Once again Herbert's work sold better in Germany than in Poland but, in the big picture, this collection of essays was undoubtedly worth the wait.

It is not merely a book on 17th-century painting, which is often referred to as the golden age of Dutch art, as the poet combines his readings of paintings with a story about Dutch culture, tries to capture the spirit of the former inhabitants of the Netherlands, wonders about their desires, passions and the causes they were willing to die for. We might say that he makes references to sociology and history of ideas, but such statements do not do justice to the beauty of his story in which knowledge and historical facts fuse harmoniously with anecdotes, in particular with the poet's ability to build a narrative. Herbert the essayist writes in a chatty, storyteller's way, but his writing is disciplined. He starts his story with the Dutch landscape – which we mentioned earlier – creating, in all probability, a synthetic representation of many of his journeys, travelling with, or so he claims, a 1911 Baedeker guide. Again, like years previously in “Barbarian in the Garden,” he presents himself as a traveller from a slightly different era, veering off the beaten track, seeking genuine contact with the country he explores:

Just after crossing the Belgian-Dutch border, suddenly and without reason or reflection I decided to change my original plan. Instead of the classical road to the north I chose the road to the west, in the direction of the sea. I wanted to get to know Zeeland, even if superficially; I had never been there. All I knew was that I would not experience great artistic revelations.

Until now my travels through Holland had always followed the movement of a pendulum along the coast. That is, to speak graphically, from Bosch's *Prodigal Son* in Rotterdam to *The Night Watch* in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, a trajectory typical for someone who devours paintings, books, and monuments, leaving all the rest to those who, like the Biblical Martha, care only for earthly things.

At the same time I realized my limitations, because clearly the ideal traveler knows how to enter into contact with nature, with people and their history as well as their art. Only familiarity with these three overlapping elements can be the starting point of knowledge about a country. This time I allowed myself the luxury of leaving behind ‘essential and important’ things in order to compare monuments, books, and paintings with the real sky, the real sea, and real land. (SLB: 179)

Herbert studies the sky and light, the result of which we have just seen, but unlike in his earlier travel essays, he does not inform the reader of the people he meets, nor does he create scenes where, for example, he is seated behind an oak table in an inn, mug of beer in hand, making fleeting acquaintances. Northern reticence, so much unlike Italian and Greek customs, did not encourage such scenes, and the writer himself was of course older, more inclined to keep his distance when looking at the world. In any case, he was mostly interested in someone he could not meet on a train or in a café, in – to quote his words –

“my collective protagonist: the Dutch burgher of the 17th century.” Therefore, he wanted to explore the places that his protagonist had seen and that had not changed for centuries, he touches the rough walls of buildings, discovers the secret life of a brick, which he examines as intensely as he once smelled the marble of the columns of the Acropolis: He lingers a long while in a 13th-century courtyard to discover that “the Gothic wall is like a fabric: perpendicular, taut, without any decorations, tightly woven with thick yarn and a narrow, stringy, pithy warp. The scale of colors is contained between ochre and umber with caprate added. The tint of the bricks is not uniform. From time to time a fawn-brown appears like a half-baked roll or the color of a fresh, crushed cherry, then again a mysterious violet covered with glaze” (SLB: 183).

His ability of contemplation seems unmatched, as does his prowess in naming things, vividly describing colours and shades, which are never reducible to general terms such as red or blue. He is alert and precise, his attachment to the touchable being a perfect match for the culture of a country that appears to him as “the kingdom of things, great principality of objects.” He says contentedly that

In Dutch, *schoon* means beautiful and at the same time clean, as if neatness was raised to the dignity of a virtue. Every day from early morning a psalm of washing, bleaching, sweeping, carpet beating, and polishing hovers over the whole land. What has disappeared from the surface of the earth (but not from memory), what the ramparts of attics have protected is found in five regional museums with fairy-tale names: Ede, Apeldoorn, Lielvelde, Marssum, Helmond. One can find there hundred-year-old coffee grinders, kerosene lamps, machines for drying marshes and irrigating fields, shoes for weddings and every day, instructions for polishing diamonds and forging harpoons, models of grocery stores, tailor shops, pastry shops, recipes for baking and holiday cakes, a drawing representing a huge shark on an ocean beach, and three ominous meteors [...] The attachment to things was so great that pictures and portraits of objects were commissioned as if to confirm their existence and prolong their lives. (SLB: 183)

The son of a banker, he is an heir to bourgeois tradition, prizing conscientiousness, fine craftsmanship and hard work, which, by the way, are virtues only rarely appreciated by Polish nobility culture. He discovers them in the Netherlands, a country built by burghers and peasants who valued moderation and common sense. Interestingly, when visiting the Netherlands, the author of “The Message of Mr Cogito,” an heir to the Polish Romantics and their mythology, became fascinated by the level-headedness and down-to-earthness of Dutch merchants, who, even when fighting for their freedom, for liberation from the Spanish yoke which had continued for nearly a century, did so, so to speak,

conscientiously and reliably and, most importantly, did not glorify war, did not give it even a hint of dark allure, at least in Herbert's perception. In the poet's view, the key thing here is the Dutch love of both personal freedom and civic democracy, which, fortunately, does not have to assume the mantle of martyrdom and is not doomed to failure.

While the collection opens with a look at the Dutch sky and the earth threatened with flooding, its last words focus on freedom. Herbert casts his mind back to the painting *Allegory of the Dutch Republic*, in which he did not see a robust girl whose strength and severity bring to mind Pallas Athena, but a shepherdess, momentarily adorned with a helmet and spear. "This is precisely what is most attractive in the painting: the contradiction between its elevated subject and its modest expression, as if a historical drama was played by a country troupe at a fair." He goes on to conclude approvingly:

Freedom – so many treatises were written about it that it became a pale, abstract concept. But for the Dutch it was something as simple as breathing, looking, and touching objects. It did not need to be defined or beautified. This is why there is no division in their art between what is great and what is small, what is important and unimportant, elevated and ordinary. They painted apples and the portraits of fabric shopkeepers, pewter plates and tulips, with such patience and such love that the images of other worlds and noisy tales about earthly triumphs fade in comparison. (SLB: 264)

3. The Orpheus of still life

Within that framework, Herbert places a number of images. Not for the first time does he consider art from the most practical perspective, ostentatiously rejecting all "the ideas of aesthetes," demonstrating that in the 17th-century burgher republic, which was unique in Europe at the time, paintings were exhibited at fairs next to goats and vegetables, and the painter was seen as an artisan who was unlikely to make a living from art – he would earn his livelihood as an innkeeper or social servant. The presence of painting in everyday life – just like that of freedom and tolerance – seemed to be completely natural, nearly everyone bought paintings, while the artists – here the poet builds a beautiful metaphor – "tried to augment the visible world of their small country and to multiply reality by the thousands, tens of thousands of canvases on which they recorded seashores, floodwaters, dunes, canals, distant vast horizons, and the views of cities" (SLB: 193). When "ordering market scenes from his favorite painter," the buyer sometimes even "requested that they have an ever-larger number of slabs

of meat, more and more fish and vegetables. O the insatiable, never satisfied hunger of reality!" (SLB: 196).

Interestingly, there was no court patronage of the art market, the prices of canvases tended to be relatively low, determined by size and subject matter rather than by the painter's reputation. Herbert seeks to unravel the intricacies of monetary exchange rates, studies the purchasing power of the guilder, checks how many wineskins and loaves of bread could be bought by the hours spent at the easel. They usually bought little, the artists were haunted by the spectre of bankruptcy, many a painting went to pay off their debts to the baker.¹¹ And yet, the poet writes:

They can only be envied. Whatever their greatness and miseries, the disillusionments and failures of their careers, their role in society and place on earth were not questioned, their profession universally recognized and evident as the profession of butcher, tailor, or baker. The question why art exists did not occur to anyone, because a world without paintings was simply inconceivable. It is we who are poor, very poor. A major part of contemporary art declares itself on the side of chaos, gesticulates in a void, or tells the story of its own barren soul (SLB: 204-205).

The concept of *Still Life with a Bridle* changed repeatedly over the years. Among the outlines drafted by Herbert is one listing a series of essays entitled "Mali mistrzowie" [Little Masters], charmingly described by the poet: "Deaf Kampen 2. Extremely meticulous Mr Saenredam 3. Sombre Seghers, 4. Vermeer's rival (P. Hooch) 5. Great Goyen 6. Discreet charm of the burgher class, or Duyster 7. Ruisdael, or nature full of spirits 8. Sophisticated Mr ter Borch 9. Heroic Fabritius 10. Sea" (Herbert 1999: 26). Most of these essays, however, were not completed or included in the book. For instance, Jan van Goyen appears most prominently as the protagonist of the beautiful sentence about a painter who "had the cheapest elementary props in his atelier you can imagine: clay, brick, lime, pieces of plaster, sand, straw. From these leftovers, rejected by the world, he created new worlds" (SLB: 187-188). After Herbert's death, pieces on Avercamp, Pieter Saenredam and Willem Duyster were found in his archives and included in the volume *Mistrz z Delft* [The Master of Delft]. Again, the shadow of incompleteness cast a pale on the author's concept – the book includes only two essays on individual painters.

¹¹ Incidentally, the essayist could draw on his experience from decades ago, the memory of the lectures on economics he attended at the Kraków Academy of Commerce just after WWII. Although, just like the painters, he always had trouble planning his own budget, his past studies may have given him an interest in market forces and money circulation, which he would pay note to when writing about art, which, in his view, is never completely cut off from its social and economic roots. In the conclusion of one of his essays, he declares: "We have tried to look at the life of [...] painters from the banal and very striking point of view of the balance sheet: 'He owes,' 'He has' – that is, petty bookkeeping. It is better and more honest than [...] pathos and sentimental sighs" (SLB: 204).

The first of them is Gerard ter Borch. In Herbert's opinion, ter Borch's *Procession of Flagellants*, which he finally found, is remarkably reminiscent of the style and savagery of Goya, making the poet wonder "how can it be that a painter from a northern country, where other tastes and traditions govern art, has anticipated by a century and a half the great Spaniard" (SLB: 233-234), and then reach a conclusion that is worth keeping in mind, also by biographers: "A lesson in humility. We will never solve all the secrets of the imagination" (SLB: 233-234). Yet the writer is very close to his protagonist, who mostly paints portraits, uses a noble ascetic palette of effects, foregoing "violent coloristic compositions" for "gradations of gray all the way to the majestic black" (SLB: 233). We might add here that Herbert referred to "grey, silver grey" as his favourite colour (HNR: 256). The poet appears to talk to the painter's models, and finally stands face to face with ter Borch, closely studying the self-portrait where the artist gazes out with

irony, as if he were saying, Yes I knew well the world of poverty and ugliness, but I painted the skin, the glittering surface, the appearance of things; the silky ladies and gentlemen in irreproachable black. I admired how fiercely they fought for a life slightly longer than the one for which they were destined. They protected themselves with fashion, tailors' accessories, a fancy ruffle, ingenious cuffs, a fold, a pleat, any detail that would allow them to last a little longer before they – and we as well – are engulfed by the black background. (SLB: 234)

The book's title essay, dedicated to Czapski, tells the story of the mysterious Torrentius (Johannes van der Beeck) and of the investigation that the writer undertook, seduced by a small painting from the Rijksmuseum, the titular *Still Life with a Bridle*, which, from the moment he first saw it, filled him with the conviction that "something very important had happened; something far more important than an accidental encounter in a crowd of masterpieces [...] I experienced an almost physical sensation as if someone called me, summoned me" (SLB: 235).

Somewhat like with ter Borch's self-portrait, the essayist's attention is drawn to the background, which is "black, deep as a precipice and at the same time flat as a mirror, palpable and disappearing in perspectives of infinity. A transparent cover over the abyss" (SLB: 235). However, this is where the similarities end, for the author of the noble grey portraits is a semi-ironic eulogist of the bourgeois world, while Torrentius, the "Orpheus of still life," is a provocateur who, unlike his fellow painters, had a drama-filled life which included an accusation of impiety, arrest, torture and imprisonment, an astonishing fact considering all this happened in the tolerant Netherlands. Following Torrentius' adventures and studying descriptions of his lost works, which, at the time, must have seemed perverse, Herbert shows that his protagonist lacked the hypocrisy necessary to

live in an egalitarian culture, since not only did he contravene the generally accepted norms of the day, but he “did it systematically, from conviction, and ostentatiously as a confession of faith. Therefore the artist’s main guilt is not his exuberant and dissolute life but the atmosphere of scandal and notoriety he gave to his vagaries. Bourgeois morality does not excuse this” (SLB: 240). Having not only Torrentius in mind, Herbert adds that “only simpletons and naive moralizers demand exemplary harmony of life and work from the artist” (SLB: 255).

The essay culminates in an interpretation of the esoteric canvas depicting a glass, two cups, a sheet of music and, of course, a bridle, which makes a surprising appearance in this context. Herbert reads the inscription above the stave, consults the history of Rosicrucian mystics, with whom the painter may have been associated, waits for years for the imagination or life to offer him a new lead. He studies the music immortalized in the painting and, in the end, goes back on his original intuition, concluding that the work only seems to be an “allegory of moderation, while in reality, in an intricately camouflaged way, it is the praise of a man liberated from bonds, uncommon, standing high above the crowd of petty philistines” (SLB: 255).

4. I am a poacher

Herbert travels through the Netherlands with a near-century-old Baedeker. When referring to his work method, he casts himself as belonging to the past or at least as different from contemporary art historians. His essays have no footnotes or references to the latest publications. If he directly refers to other authors, they are figures from the past, such as Eugène Fromentin, a 19th-century French painter and critic who rediscovered Dutch painting with his 1876 book *Les Maîtres d'autrefois* (published in English as *The Old Masters of Belgium and Holland*). This is hardly surprising because, in the introduction to his book, Fromentin states, very much like the author of *Still Life with a Bridle*:

I am here to see Rubens and Rembrandt in their own country and at the same time the Dutch School in its natural setting. It is a setting that never changes, with its life on the farms and the sea, its dunes, pasture-lands, huge clouds and fine-drawn horizons. [...] I shall merely describe, in the presence of certain pictures, the effects of surprise, pleasure, astonishment, and no less exactly of disappointment, which they happened to cause me. In so doing, I shall be only describing truthfully the quite unimportant impressions of a pure dilettante, I warn you then to expect no method of any sort or continuity in these pages. [...] my method of work will be to forget all that has been said on this subject. (Fromentin 1913: 1-2)

Although constantly rummaging through libraries, Herbert did not want to be a 'professional' scholar in the academic sense of the word; he did not seek objective knowledge which to him seemed illusory. When confronting art, he was ostentatiously subjective, emotional – simply put, he fell in love with a succession of canvases. Paintings seemed to speak to him only when, as he puts it, "I feel a thrill along my spine, it is a sign that the painting is good. [...] A sign must come to me, addressed directly to me" (Simonyi 2008: 166). In one of his early notebooks, perhaps just after his first arrival in Paris in 1958, when he could at last easily read *Kultura*, he copied an excerpt from *Notatnik nieśpiesznego przechodnia* [Notes of an Unhurried Passerby], published in Giedroyc's magazine. The author of *Notatnik*, Jerzy Stempowski, argued that "the non-employed have been the curators of our world of fiction, of symbols, of the imaginative models for action and their corresponding hierarchies of values. When the non-employed are gone, all these things will be erased [...] from the memory of organized societies" [ZHA, ref. 17955, vol. 62]. The "non-employed," who engage in passions of their own free will, not out of professional duty, can also be called "amateurs" in the noblest sense of the word, deriving from love. This is what Herbert did. The poet stated convincingly: "I side with the dying race of amateurs, because I myself am one of them. [...] I would like to live among the dead artists, just as I live among the people around me, driven by affection, antipathy, fervent reverence, ardent aversion, with little regard for the theoretical justifications of these arbitrary opinions" (MD: 55).

Such criteria could not have been fully accepted by historians, and the poet was aware of it, as evidenced by his letter to a professional, Tadeusz Chrzanowski, where, semi-ironically, at Christmas time in 1978, he wrote: "I mistreat my Dutch protagonists, just as Kasia mistreats her carp and pierogi. I hope that both the carp and pierogi are more palatable than my manuscripts. I dashed out a mini-essay on Duyster (Willem), whom I like very much, but who seems to be given short shrift by your colleagues, so I seized my chance. My two good Angels, Ignorance and Insensitivity, keep on guiding me" (ZHTC: 264).¹² Nearly two decades on he said: "art historians are not too fond of my writing" (MD: 153). It is so because they "are hunters, they own sections of the forest, they know the whereabouts of the boar, and of the deer, they hunt methodically. I am a poacher, I venture where no one asks me to go. I've got no license and I hunt the game that catches my eye" (HNR: 216). Some of this tension stems from the very genre of essay, which is not an academic dissertation, so its author does not have to follow the infamous "methodology," the bane of doctoral students. Herbert himself – in his essay on Duyster, which he mentions to Chrzanowski – fortified his position.

¹² Z. Herbert's letter to T. Chrzanowski, Berlin, 23 December 1978.

And he “positions” his opponent too, using straw man tactics, attributing dry pedantry to him, but also arguing convincingly that the practice of art history, when reduced to recording forms, styles, techniques and conventions is nobly vain and solemnly boring. What seems fruitful is to make an effort to enter into dialogue with the author, with his unique inner world, love, passion, dilemmas [...]. Amateurs, namely those who engage with works of art for their own pleasure [...] feel an irresistible need to come in contact with the artist, simply put, the long dead man, through objects that are the only material trace of his presence. I know that this is almost impossible [...] it is at odds with the discipline and sacred methods of knowledge, so scholarship, aware of its gravity, ignores similar longings and desires of simpletons. [...] One dreams of an extremely subjective history of art, freed from ‘scholarly’ terminology, based on the rational eye. (MD: 54ff.)

It seems that from the perspective of art history, the author of *Still Life with a Bridle* is only an amateur obviously endowed with a visual sensitivity, capable of noticing and brilliantly naming details, things that escape the attention of “professionals”; an erudite seeking his own path to the paintings he loves. At the same time, the poet sought to change established hierarchies, to salvage from oblivion artists who were somewhat – in his view, unjustly – forgotten, but his efforts do not seem to have been met with much interest from critics or curators. They may have been concerned about the fact that the line between Herbert’s own contribution and what the essayist takes from other sources is not always clear, and so some of the final opinions, especially those voiced in recent years, may sound rather harsh.

“His ideas do not add anything to the findings of the researchers of Rembrandt’s oeuvre,” (Smolińska-Byczuk 2006: 141) concludes an art critic after examining Herbert’s notes to his uncompleted book on the painter of *The Nightwatch*, which we examine in greater detail below. Another commentator concurs:

The historian’s eye detects in the poet the hallmarks of an amateur dilettante. Herbert is very well read but chooses his idols rather nonchalantly and selectively [...]. He is a diligent reader and draws on the work of historians but overturns existing authorities with relish and praises the ‘unbiased’ eye of the amateur. He adopts rules of description but does not always observe them himself [...], his aesthetic judgments sometimes seem naive and rebellious and, above all, insufficiently substantiated. (Workowski 2006: 227) ¹³

¹³ For the sake of balance, let’s quote a different opinion: “In his reviews, Herbert acts like a professional art critic – he analyses the painting’s texture, colour arrangements, general form; he builds a critical world of reception, doing away, as much as possible, with personal tangents and digressions regarding the colour of the artist’s life” (Mańkowski 2006: 196).

Unfortunately, there are more serious charges, or perhaps more direct ones. Piotr Oczko, the author of a lengthy essay revealingly titled "Still Life in the Bridle of the Stereotype," stresses his personal, and thus poignant perspective, his trajectory from worship to at least partial disappointment:

Zbigniew Herbert's *Still Life with a Bridle* was one of the most important books for me – had I not read it in 1993, I would probably never have developed an interest in the Netherlands and its culture. Back then, Herbert's essays showed the fascinating, 'singular' and near-exotic world of the Low Country to a secondary school student. All my earliest pieces were about the Netherlands, written 'with Herbert on my mind' and under his overwhelming influence, but with time my trust and admiration gave way to disappointment and rebellion. As I was slowly turning into a Dutch scholar, reading more and more about Dutch culture and art, and studying the language and literature, I kept on pointing out the author's errors.

While translating Johan Huizinga's work into Polish, I was irritated to discover passages I had read 'somewhere,' and then I found numerous sentences, even paragraphs, lifted by Herbert without specifying his source. (Oczko 2016)

The scholar then meticulously calculates that Herbert's book contains "over 200 errors and inaccuracies on just 181 pages, including distorted facts, erroneous dates and names, false simplifications," Oczko (2016) points out some misunderstandings, both concerning such general questions as the spirit of Dutch culture, and specific ones, e.g. the interpretation of the aforementioned Torrentius painting.¹⁴ Finally, he concludes that the Polish writer is *de facto* in thrall to 19th-century ideas, stereotypes and myths about the Netherlands, as his principal intellectual sources "are [...] Eugene Fromentin, Theophile Thore-Burger, Hyppolyte Taine, a 1911 Baedeker, as well as Johan Huizinga, who is firmly rooted in the 19th-century paradigm. In them, the poet finds everything he holds dear and cultivates, that is, subjective judgment, anecdote, the Positivist focus on the relationship between author's work and life, eloquent style, in other words, everything he does not find in contemporary researchers" (Oczko 2016). *Still Life with a Bridle* thus becomes not so much a source of objective knowledge but a kind of creed, Herbert's personal

¹⁴ "Trying to explain the initial letters of 'E R,' the author delves into esotericism, hermeneutical books and the Rosicrucian sect: *Equus Rosae Cruris*. He also invokes Pieter Fischer's sensational and rather implausible musicological theory [...], which prompts the poet to decipher these letters as *Extra Ratione*. However, if Herbert had looked more closely at the painting that he has so much admiration for, he could have noticed two small characters – the inverted commas of the day. Quite possibly, he would have discovered that he was looking at a quotation. 'E R' stands for 'Erasmus Roterodamus' and the text itself is a very loose Dutch version of the humanist's two Latin adagios: 'Dimidium plus toto' (The Half is Better than the Whole) and 'Extrema extremorum mala acciderunt' (The Greatest of the Greatest Evils Happened). These adagios were part of the educational canon in the Republic at that time, they were widely known and quoted; they had many Dutch versions" (Oczko 2016).

declaration of artistic intent, exquisitely written, but close to saying more about him than about his protagonists, while we, the poet's readers, are left with the critic's recommendation: "Let's bow before his pen, but let's keep in mind that discovering the 17th-century Netherlands through Herbert's essays often turns out to be no different than learning about the culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from a novel by Józef Ignacy Krasiński" (Oczko 2016).

5. "A strange predilection for depicting madness in temples of reason"

One thing is unquestionable: when writing about Dutch culture, Herbert, like a seasoned hunter, captures the reader's attention, making his text a page-turner, proving that one's contact with art, with the personality of a long dead artist, is first and foremost a great adventure. Besides, when studying the history of the burgher republic, he identifies events and motifs that are a far cry from the quiet and – let's be honest – somewhat boring conscientiousness, even admitting that he has "a strange predilection for depicting madness in temples of reason, and is fond of examining disasters set against gently-rolling landscapes" (MD: 59). The poet gives a spectacular example of such an event in "The Bitter Smell of Tulips." Brilliantly constructed with escalating tension, the essay tells the story of the tulip mania that gripped the rational Dutch in the third decade of the 17th century when speculation with tulip bulbs and cultivation of new, increasingly expensive varieties of the flowers became widespread, with highly prized varieties being sold for as much as the cost of a comfortable house with a garden. It is as if conscientiousness and common sense had to have a reverse side. The poet tells us not without a shade of self-irony that "mania is an elevated state of mind. Those who have not experienced it at least once are the poorer for it" (SLB: 218).

In the main portion of his book, Herbert is true to the facts, drawing on chronicles and archives, but the appendix, which comprises ten apocrypha first published in 1979 in the Polish monthly magazine *Twórczość*, brings a fundamental change of tone. The writer's intention seems to be to demonstrate the axiological precariousness of human life with its ever-present temptation of evil, but also simply to engage his imagination, as if the apocryphal form resonated with the part of his mind that had previously given rise to micro-prose pieces, often referred to as "fairy tales." In the late 1970s, the writer wrote more "selflessly" than in the following decade. Thus, unlike the eponymous essay from the book *Król mrówek* [The King of Ants], the prose of *Still Life with a Bridle* cannot be reduced to a political parable. Quite to the contrary, it stresses mystery, or at times – paradox, like "The Mercy of the Executioner," which depicts the

execution of one of the republic's dignitaries, to whom the executioner, prior to his lethal administration of earthly justice, says:

'Here, Your Honor, you will have sun on your face.' One might ask the question whether the executioner who cut off the head of the Great Pensionary was a good executioner. The goodness of the executioner depends on his ability to carry out his task quickly, efficiently and in an impersonal way. [...] Barneveldt's executioner [...] became an ambiguous figure filled with potential meaning when to the condemned man – in his last moment – he threw a crumb of helpless goodness. (SLB: 268)

Much like the story of Torrentius, "Long Gerrit" is a reminder that bourgeois society does not accept those who are bigger than it (also literally). "The Captain," which chronicles the story of a group of survivors who are starving on a drifting boat and barely managing to stop themselves from eating the most defenceless person among them, ends with the bitter thought that what keeps us from slipping into savagery is the fear of punishment, the "image of civilization: its foundation of food, money, and a wooden pole with a cross-beam at the top" (SLB: 270). The story of one of the conquistadors (they, too, were the sons of a merchant republic) – whom we may imagine as not dissimilar to Kurtz of *The Heart of Darkness*, who revels in his power and would not hesitate to commit any atrocity – features an eternal human type that, Herbert tells us, "for long centuries [...] took the shape of other predators, all the way up to those I met in bars, coffeehouses and park benches" (SLB: 275). Similarly, the naturalist Jan Swammerdam is in Herbert's account confronted with the chaos of the world of insects, their fearsome fertility, and their existence that seems bereft of even the slightest spark of divine light. The famous inventor Cornelius Drebbel, in turn, does not stop at inventing the microscope and the submarine but wants to defy the void by building a perpetual motion machine. In the prose piece "Home," another group of survivors, trapped in the ice of the Arctic, build a survival shelter and try to observe civilised rituals in order to preserve their humanity. They even repair a clock salvaged from the wreck, which "was consolation that time is not an abyss or black mask of nothingness but can be divided into a human yesterday and a human tomorrow into a day without light and a night without glimmer, seconds, hours, and weeks, into doubt that goes away and hope that is born" (SLB: 282).

Once again Spinoza becomes Herbert's hero, this time not as a character in the marvellous poem "Mr Cogito Tells of the Temptation of Spinoza," but as a participant in a dispute over inheritance, fiercely fighting in court for every item left behind by his father, only to forego, eventually, the property recovered from usurpers. It is as if, the poet tells us, in accord with his own most heartfelt beliefs, Spinoza "wanted to say that virtue is not at all an asylum for the weak. The art of renunciation is an act of courage – it requires the sacrifice of things

universally desired (not without hesitation and regret) for matters that are great and incomprehensible" (SLB: 285). The book closes with an epilogue, in which "Cornelis Troost, textile merchant and unknown hero of history, is dying" (SLB: 291). Like Mr Cogito, he does not want to accept the posthumous world empty of touch. He is depicted as a Dutch burgher, craving for materiality but, above all, as one of us, a man who

could not understand the Other World at all. The empty blue skies frightened him. Very likely it was an impious rebellion of the imagination, above all of the pagan senses. He was absolutely unable to understand how one can exist without a house, without creaking stairs and a banister, without curtains and candelabra, also without the cloth that had surrounded him throughout his life. What implacable force takes away from us the coolness of coarse silk, black wool flowing through the hands like a gentle wave, linen recalling the surface of a pond covered with ice, velvet tickling like moss, laces that seemed to whisper women's secrets? [...] Not much time remained. Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow a servant would enter with breakfast and give a short cry. Then they would cover all the mirrors in the house, and turn all the pictures to the walls so the image of a girl writing a letter, of ships in open sea, of peasants dancing under a tall oak, would not stop the one who wanders toward unimaginable worlds from going on his way (SLB: 298-300).

6. "Was Rembrandt a Great Painter?"

"my life / should come a full circle / close like a well-composed sonata / now I see clearly / a moment before the coda / the torn chords / mismatched colours and words / the clamour and dissonances / languages of chaos," writes Zbigniew Herbert (2008e: 640) in "Brewiarz [Panie, wiem że dni moje są...]," one of his final poems. We might add that tragic incompleteness and abrupt changes were the poet's near-constant companions throughout his life, full of anxiety, travel and symbolic, or even literal, homelessness. On many occasions did the writer begin and abandon various essayistic projects, apparently due to his occasionally uncertain financial situation and even more so because of mental illness that occupied long stretches of his life. As we have already noted, *Still Life with a Bridle* only partly corresponds to Herbert's original idea and, from a perspective that goes beyond his interest in Dutch art, it is particularly poignant that he completed neither of his two books on the two greatest masters: Rembrandt and Vermeer.

For many years the poet strove to turn both of these ideas into reality, sometimes with great determination – also when, at the turn of 1987, with his health

definitely failing, he travelled to Germany to study paintings of the masters in museums in Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Kassel and Brunswick. During his journey he often sent letters to his wife, so we know his daily work routine when he stayed for a while in a Berlin flat. He reports in considerable detail:

If I sleep well, I wake up between seven and eight, I traipse around the house, have a hearty English breakfast: eggs, ham, coffee, and between nine and ten I go to the library [...]; between one and two Dahlem, open until five. Then shopping and, if I have the strength, the library. I come back around eight or nine, rather tired, so I don't order my notes, I don't write, but I do the washing, I keep everything clean, then it's dinner time. I indulge myself a bit; tartare, vegetable soup, Joco cheese – I devour it in great quantities; around midnight I go to bed and fall asleep, on a pill or without it. (GH: 51)¹⁵

He must also have felt a sense of responsibility, anxiety and writerly dilemmas, but at least the hours spent in the presence of paintings were the source of sheer joy for him. The report he sent from Brunswick reads:

I was alone in the museum. What a delight! They brought me a folding stool, and the cafeteria lady gave me a hot coffee and a cone with the admonition '*sie sollen nicht den ganzen Tag so arbeiten ohne etwas zu trinken*' (You shouldn't work like that all day without something to drink). Then the curator turned up and asked if I would like to see the Rembrandt drawings they were preparing for an exhibition – I did not really want to, but being a hypocrite I went [for 15 minutes] and began impressing him: this is the Leiden period, this is the middle Amsterdam one, this looks like the late period. I saw his jaw drop a little. (GH: 55)¹⁶

A few days later he wrote a letter on the train from Kassel to Hanover, saying that his stay in Hessen "paid off," because the collection of the local pinacothèque included "the most beautiful Rembrandt I have ever seen: *The Blessing of Jacob*. I saw it coming, but the painting swept me off my feet." He adds with acute accuracy that the history of the Kassel collection "is interesting. In the 16th century a Hessian prince took part in the war against Holland, and fell in love with Dutch paintings, which he then steadily and expertly bought [...]. I have gloomy thoughts about our princes. They gave me no chance" (GH: 57).¹⁷

He analyzed his own writerly ability, and wrote from Berlin: "I am not satisfied with myself for two reasons. Firstly, you cannot experience something very intensely and then immediately sit down and commit it to paper. The spirit does not like it. Secondly, I discovered that the bug of perfection is gnawing at me. [...] I am not satisfied with second best. This makes life extremely difficult." It was

¹⁵ Z. Herbert's letter to K. Herbert, Berlin, 10 December 1986.

¹⁶ Z. Herbert's letter to K. Herbert, Brunswick, 20–21 December 1986.

¹⁷ Z. Herbert's letter to K. Herbert, Kassel–Hanover, 23–24 December 1986.

always his method – to wait rather than write at once. Interestingly, he was not afraid that the intensity of feeling would fade from his memory. He also planned to give a notable structure to his essay “on that awful and wondrous Rembrandt that (the essay, not Rembrandt) is growing inside me like quintuplets – it should be authentic, namely full of hesitations, question marks, even irritation” (GH: 55ff.).¹⁸ A few days later, he writes from another city: “I read too much in Berlin, so now I just look and look. Four hours in front of a Vermeer [...] my eyes were popping out – he is probably my greatest love in painting. And then, on my way back to the hotel, I saw all the details, colours, shades, refracted light, as if projected onto an illuminated screen. To look until your head starts spinning, that’s my method” (GH: 55).¹⁹

The first time Herbert wrote about the painter of *The Polish Rider* was exactly thirty years before that German journey. His article, published in *Twórczość*, was entitled, somewhat provocatively, “Was Rembrandt a Great Painter?” In his opinion, the exhibition in the National Museum in Warsaw, billed as a special event, featured “eight of the artist’s canvases, seven of which were bad” (WG I: 204). Besides, he suspected that some of the paintings were not by Rembrandt’s hand, and his intuition might have been right. Already in the late 1960s, art historians considerably trimmed the catalogue of the master’s paintings whose authenticity had been established beyond doubt. Keeping in mind the Hessian princes, we might add that the only such painting in Poland is *Landscape with the Good Samaritan*, once in Izabela Czartoryska’s collection. In 1956, Herbert stressed that the prints on display in the Warsaw exhibition were much more impressive, and at the end he ironically reminded the reader that it was “the Hermitage that had one of the richest collections of the master’s work”; the curators could have petitioned the museum to loan it. After all, “not so long ago many square meters of contemporary paintings of the Gerasimov school reached us from the Soviet Union” (WG I: 205).

This ambivalent attitude to Rembrandt – whom the poet, in his column on art, would call the “most human” painter (WG I: 360) – would always stay with Herbert. Still, uncertainty does not mean indifference – just the opposite, it means both admiration and rejection, which is facilitated by the plethora of works left behind by the Dutch artist. Herbert notes: “I have been interested in and written about Rembrandt for many years, my enthusiasm ebbed and flowed, and I admit that sometimes, as it happens with great passions, I was sick and tired of him” (Smolińska-Byczuk 2006: 148). He wanted to include these words in his essay, which, as we remember, was intended to be authentic, that is, forthcoming about his reluctance and doubts. On the other hand, in a letter to Czapski in the spring of 1986, Herbert argues:

¹⁸ Z. Herbert’s to K. Herbert, Berlin, 10 December 1986.

¹⁹ Z. Herbert’s letter to K. Herbert, Brunswick, 20-21 December 1986.

a friend from Berlin, who knows my tastes, sent me some books, one of which includes an essay on Rembrandt. As you know, I still don't get him [...]. In that essay I found confirmation of my worries that not all of Rembrandt's art is good. This is trite. But trying to explain why his work is uneven is interesting. Well, the author claims that the Master (basically, my own idea – though here, of course, it is a subtle and measured suggestion, typical of art historians) went through periods of adaptation and rebellion. Adaptation corresponds to his many portraits and partly *The Nightwatch*, a commissioned piece: *contre-coeur* [...]. This is quite convincing, because he is a torn, dramatic painter. (JCzA)²⁰

The writer did not complete his essay, or perhaps monograph. He left behind copious notes, full of exquisite sentences. They tell us that the paintings of the 17th-century genius “cannot be watched, one has to look at and grapple with them as if they were a real experience, tears in the eyes, muscle spasms, sudden pains in the chest” (ZHA, ref. 17857, vol. 2), and that writing about him is a nearly “suicidal act.” Herbert argues that “Rembrandt's early period is as dark as the birth of a star” and, in particular, that “in the entire history of painting, only Rembrandt has conveyed, to this degree and in such visionary intensity, the spiritual presence of man in addition to the corporeal one; not only sadness, sorrow, anger, reverie, because these are emotions, but also the inner darkness and light of the soul.” And, lastly, that the master “never painted the face of God, he gathered the crumbs of the absolute on the faces of anonymous models” (ZHA, ref. 17857, vol. 1). In places, single sentences or paragraphs morph into extensive passages; it is evident that the work reached an advanced stage and, in all likelihood, was finally halted by Herbert's deteriorating health after his return to Poland. The following passage about light and darkness, after which Herbert adds convincingly that “Rembrandt should be contemplated by candlelight,” may give the reader an idea of what the poet's essay might have looked like:

chiaroscuro. Rembrandt did not paint the final things, the judgment separating the saved from the condemned, the apocalypse, hell, paradise. His fluid line is not only a form of expression, but also marks the fluid boundary between good and evil, it seems to say that there is still time, and the verdict has not yet been passed. In biblical scenes, he tends to choose the middle of the story, not the epilogue. [...] Light and shadow in his paintings. Light befits the just, the wicked are devoured by the shadow – the formula that accords with our centuries-old habit. But in the wondrous ‘Hundred Guilder Print,’ the Pharisees are highlighted as intensely as the figure of Christ, while those who love him are wrapped in semi-darkness.

²⁰ Z. Herbert's letter to J. Czapski, Paris, 16 April 1986.

What is this light, the essence of Rembrandt's art? It is a light that goes its own ways, different from those of human morality, an arbitrary light, unpredictable like grace. (Smolińska-Byczuk 2006: 128ff)

If Herbert might have found the sheer volume and uneven quality of Rembrandt's work overwhelming, it was fundamentally different with Vermeer. The poet managed to see almost all of his paintings in real life, hardly ever voicing a moment of disappointment. He does, however – and unflinchingly so – write that “one has to go on pilgrimages to see Vermeer as one makes pilgrimages to holy places. As I said, the journey is long and leads through Vienna, Dresden, Berlin, Frankfurt, Paris, Amsterdam, the Hague, London, Edinburgh, New York, Washington.” Incidentally, this passage shows how difficult the task was in its most essential, logistical aspect. Herbert never received a grant that would allow his pilgrimage to take place within a year or two. On the contrary, he ‘collected’ the moments spent in front of the paintings of the master of Delft for more than a dozen years of work and travel. Ultimately, he concluded that “during those quarters of an hour when I stood patiently in front of his canvases, I experienced the grace not only of rapture but also of being let in on some of their secrets” (MD: 70).

The quote comes from an essay entitled “Mistrz z Delft” [The Master of Delft]. The poet completed 20-odd pages, which – like many of his works – did not see the light of day until after his death. After reading them, one may conclude that Herbert intended an extensive piece. He began to reconstruct the painter's life, which was modest yet full of question marks, devoted entirely, it seems, to the “building of an Oeuvre,” a life that left no room for “any great romantic passion that would reveal itself in an explosion of unbridled fancy” (MD: 62). He was interested in the 19th-century process of rediscovering the master and the van Meegeren affair scandal – a century later van Meegeren forged Vermeer paintings with such consummate skill that art historians were convinced of their authenticity. First and foremost, however, he described paintings which – a beautiful comparison – “look like dried flowers in a herbarium or, strictly speaking, not flowers but flower petals, individual leaves, pistils, pollen. A rose petal, a poppy seed petal, a golden petal of a buttercup, the intensely blue petal of a cornflower, a nettle leaf” (ZHA, ref. 17955, vol. 140). He tried to find a metaphor to describe the way paint is applied, and concluded that “Vermeer builds a town like a bricklayer. Unhurriedly, he places brick upon brick” (ZHA, ref. 17861). *The View of Delft* appeared to him as an “inviolable” painting “outside of time, like a recurring dream, like an eternally present myth” (ZHA, ref. 17955, vol. 140).

Voicing his own dream of vanishing into one's work, he proposes a somewhat tongue-in-cheek hypothesis:

Vermeer is the most mysterious among the great painters. [...] How could it be that no drawing, no sketch for a painting, no unfinished painting,

survive? The 'waste' would offer invaluable material, helping to discover the master's method. What about correspondence? Like others, he must have written letters, so why there is not a single letter discussing his family relations, friendships and animosities that survives? A suspicion arises that the artist himself rather than fate was deliberately erasing traces of his human existence. He was a painter of silence and light. Light remains in his paintings. The rest is silence. (MD 61)

Yet he decided to help the artist who lived centuries before him: on his behalf he wrote a letter to Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, a microscope builder who, in Herbert's prose, represents, as we are wont to call it, the objective knowledge of the world. It is one of Herbert's most beautiful apocrypha; when the scientist shows the painter a drop of water under a microscope, which turns out to be teeming with mysterious life, the painter comments with the words: "I understood what you wanted to say: that we artists record appearances, the life of shadows and the deceptive surface of the world; we do not have the courage or ability to reach the essence of things. We are craftsmen, so to speak, who work in the matter of illusion, while you and those like you are the masters of truth" (SLB: 135). In a few paragraphs, like in one drop of water, the poet encapsulates the subject of human loneliness in a world devoid of mystery, or as Max Weber calls it, "disenchanted," a world of the naive illusions of the Enlightenment, of technological progress which of course helps us to live our lives but does not make us happier. And once again, it reminds us of the meaning of art. Herbert's Vermeer warns:

I am afraid that you and others like you are setting out on a dangerous journey that might bring humanity not only advantages but also great, irreparable harm. Haven't you noticed that the more the means and tools of observation are perfected, the more distant and elusive become the goals? With each new discovery a new abyss opens. We are more and more lonely in the mysterious void of the universe.

I know that you want to lead men out of the labyrinths of superstition and chance, that you want to give them certain, clear knowledge, which according to you is the only defense against fear and anxiety. But will it really bring us relief if we substitute the word necessity for the word Providence? [...] If I understand my task, it is to reconcile man with surrounding reality. This is why I and my guild brothers repeat an infinite number of times the sky and clouds, the portraits of men and cities, all these odds and ends of the cosmos, because only there do we feel safe and happy. (SLB: 289)

As we recall, the last time Zbigniew Herbert visited the Netherlands was in 1994, during his last foreign trip. However, in order to conjure a scene that would symbolically conclude the story of a "pilgrim poet" travelling to see the canvases of great masters, let's go back to the autumn of 1991, when the author of "Mr. Cogito" lived in Munich for quite a while. At the time he was working on his Rembrandt essay while composing a poetic book, *Rovigo*. He informs his wife: "Nobody knocks on my door. Nobody disturbs." At the end he adds: "and please don't worry about me, because it's killing me. I've won all the wars, I feel great, I eat regularly and sleep like a bear" (ZHA, ref. 17974, vol 13).²¹

The reality was not so rosy. The writer was plagued by both spiritual nightmares and physical disease. He was frail, debilitated by all those 'wars' which had not necessarily been won. The Munich Pinakothek welcomes visitors with a monumental staircase seemingly extending into the sky. Once, Herbert tried to scale the stairs but was soon out of breath, stopped on the landing, went back down, rested, tried again, in vain. At least that's how he summed up these moments to his German friend, the poet and publisher Michael Krüger, who almost carried him upstairs the following day, because the poet refused to take the lift. The publisher then told him about the French writer Julien Green, whom he saw in the museum at a time when Green was approaching his nineties, leaning towards paintings and whispering to them. When asked what he was doing, the writer replied that he was saying goodbyes to his favourite canvases. Herbert liked the story, but he was quick to add that he had so many beloved paintings in his memory that he should start saying his goodbyes immediately, if he wanted to finish before he died.²²

Translated by Piotr Zazula

Bibliography

- Alexander Schenker Archive. National Library. Warsaw.
Emigration Archive. Nicolaus Copernicus University. Toruń.
Fromentin, Eugene. 1913. *The Masters of Past Time*. London / New York.
Herbert, Zbigniew. 1999. "Mali mistrzowie." *Zeszyty Literackie* 68: 11-22.
Herbert, Zbigniew. 2008a. *Głosy Herberta*. Ed. Barbara Toruńczyk. Warszawa: Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich.
Herbert, Zbigniew. 2008b. *Herbert nieznany. Rozmowy*. Ed. H. Citko. Warszawa: Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich.

²¹ Z. Herbert's letter to K. Herbert, Feldafing, 15 November 1991.

²² Rafael Lewandowski in conversation with Michael Krüger, Munich, 2016, made available to the author.

- Herbert, Zbigniew. 2008c. *Mistrz z Delft i inne utwory odnalezione*. Eds. B. Toruńczyk, H. Citko. Warszawa: Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich.
- Herbert, Zbigniew. 2008d. „*Węzeł gordyjski*” oraz inne pisma rozproszone 1948-1998. Vol. 1. Ed. P. Kądziała. Warszawa: Więź.
- Herbert, Zbigniew. 2008e. *Wiersze zebrane*. Ed. R. Krynicki. Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5.
- Herbert, Zbigniew. 2010. *Still Life with a Bridle in The Collected Prose: 1948-1998*. Kindle Edition. New York: Ecco.
- Herbert, Zbigniew, Tadeusz Chrzanowski. 2016. *Mój bliźni, mój bracie. Listy 1950-1998*. Ed. Z. Baran. Kraków: Znak.
- Herbert, Zbigniew, Czesław Miłosz. 2006. *Korespondencja*. Eds. B. Toruńczyk, M. Tabor. Warszawa: Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich.
- Krynicki, Ryszard. 1998. “Wspomnienie o Zbigniewie Herbercie.” *Tygodnik Powszechny* 32. Jan Józef Szczepański Archive. National Library. Warsaw.
- Józef Czapski Archive. National Museum. Kraków.
- Mańkowski, Zbigniew. 2006. “‘Uwierzyliśmy zbyt łatwo, że piękno nie ocala’. Zbigniewa Herberta obrazy sztuki współczesnej.” *Zmysł wzroku, zmysł sztuki. Prywatna historia sztuki Zbigniewa Herberta*. Vol. 1. Ed. J.M. Ruszar. Lublin: Gaudium. 185-210.
- Oczko, Piotr. 2016. “Martwa natura w wędzidle stereotypu. Wizje sztuki holenderskiej Zbigniewa Herberta i problem z ich recepcją.” *Biuletyn historii sztuki* 1.
- Rasch, Gerard. 2000. “Krucho piękno” (Transl. Jerzy Koch and Krzysztof Koch). *Upór i trwanie. Wspomnienia o Zbigniewie Herbercie*. Ed. K. Szczypka. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie. 38-51.
- Simonyi, Zoltán. 2008. “Krzyż miejsca i czasu – myśli o poezji Herberta i Pilinszky’ego.” *Strażnik pamięci w czasach amnezji. Węgrzy o Herbercie*. Eds. C.Gy. Kiss, J. Snopek, Warszawa: Studio EMKA. 144-166.
- Smolińska-Byczuk, Marta. 2006. “Życie martwej natury. Malarze holenderscy XVII wieku w oczach Zbigniewa Herberta.” *Zmysł wzroku, zmysł sztuki. Prywatna historia sztuki Zbigniewa Herberta*. Vol. 1. Ed. J.M. Ruszar. Lublin: Gaudium. 42-151.
- Workowski, Adam. 2006. “Wzrok i obecność. Spór historyków sztuki z historykami literatury. Uwagi filozofa.” *Zmysł wzroku, zmysł sztuki. Prywatna historia sztuki Zbigniewa Herberta*. Vol. 1. Ed. J.M. Ruszar. Lublin: Gaudium. 225-245.
- Zajas, Paweł. 2015. “Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie Suhrkampa. Zbigniew Herbert i jego niemiecki wydawca.” *Teksty Drugie* 5: 386-410.
- Zbigniew Herbert Archive. National Library. Manuscript Department. Warsaw.