



## Canadian Slavonic Papers

---

The Faces of Mr. Cogito

Author(s): George Gömöri

Source: *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 35, No. 1/2 (March–June 1993), pp. 1–12

Published by: [Canadian Association of Slavists](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40869455>

Accessed: 05/10/2014 15:46

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Canadian Association of Slavists* and *Canadian Slavonic Papers* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

*George Gömöri*

## The Faces of Mr. Cogito

Zbigniew Herbert had already published four books of poetry when towards the end of the 1960s he began to experiment with the “lyrical persona” named Mr. Cogito. While in his earlier poetry he often employed both “direct” and “dramatic” monologues (the latter becoming a characteristic “Herbertian” form of expression manifested in poems such as “Tren Fortynbrasa” [“The Lament of Fortinbras”] and “Powrót prokonsula” [“The Return of the Proconsul”]), he now decided to shift his attention from history and cultural history to philosophy. This did not mean taking up the task of writing “philosophical” poetry; in an interview given to Zbigniew Taranienko in 1971 Herbert stressed that such a thing did not and could not exist. What he was after was the “philosophical experience,” that emotional tension which fills the artist when he is close to solving a specific problem.<sup>1</sup> In other words one can provide an artistic response (in the case of the poet with the help of images and metaphors) to a problem which in some ways can be defined as “philosophical.” This could be the transience of time, the impossibility of stepping out of one’s own skin, or the limitation of human will. So the “Cogito cycle” (because with the passage of time it became clear that Herbert grew fond of his persona and would write more in this vein) simply denotes a more, though not exclusively philosophy-oriented approach to poetry in Herbert’s work.

Before looking at the increasing diversity within the Cogito cycle (forty-odd poems included in the collections *Pan Cogito (Mr. Cogito)*, *Raport z oblężonego miasta (Report from the Besieged City)* and *(Elegia na odejście (An Elegy for Departure))*, it may be instructive to consider the origins and the implications of the title. Why “Mr. Cogito”? René Descartes in his *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) stated that “the proposition *I experience (cogito) therefore I am* is the first and the most certain of those we come across when we philosophise in an orderly way”.<sup>2</sup> Note that the word “cogito,” often translated as merely “to think” is rendered here as “to experience”—a translation probably closer to the intention of the philosopher than the form in which it is generally quoted. If so, “Mr. Cogito” would stand not simply for a Thinking Person, but for a human intellect who meditates on his experiences. Clearly, these experiences will not be “pure,” but will relate to the person’s mind and body,

<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Taranienko, *Rozmowy z pisarzami* (Warsaw, 1986) 426.

<sup>2</sup> Descartes, *Philosophical Writings* (The Open University, 1970) 182–183.

past, present and future. Herbert's hero speaks about not only his own, but of all human experience from a poetic vantage point.

Mr. Cogito also had literary antecedents. Whether they can be called models, is difficult to say; if they do not acknowledge their debt to another author directly, poets tend to camouflage influences which they have absorbed. Ryszard Przybylski pointed out a possible connection between Mr. Cogito and Paul Valéry's "Monsieur Teste"<sup>3</sup> and Valéry was certainly an author not unknown to Herbert. Of course, Monsieur Teste is much more a "fixed persona" than Herbert's Mr. Cogito; he is defined by a critic as "the outward sign of significant thought, the symbolic image of a desired state of mind."<sup>4</sup> Herbert's hero cannot be thought of as a personification of abstract thought, he is more flexible and changeable, and, indeed, appears in very different positions. On the other hand, Valéry's message in his various prose writings concerning Monsieur Teste is not that one should strive for "pure thought" but rather that "it is wrong to oppose sensibility to intelligence, for sensibility...is the moving power of intellectual perceptions".<sup>5</sup> This, I think, Herbert would accept.

As for poetic parallels or possible models, I don't think T.S. Eliot's Sweeney, sometimes mentioned as a hero who might have influenced Herbert, is relevant. He is a wholly negative figure and cannot be regarded as the poet's alter-ego. There is, on the other hand, a German poet, Christian Morgenstern (1871–1914) whose poetic ideas may have influenced Herbert. I have in mind here the Palmström poems. Palmström is an intelligent, slightly weird and often playful character who (with his friend Korn) often acts out Morgenstern's fantasies or hidden impulses. There is, for example, a poem entitled "Palmstroem in Animal Costume" (*Im Tierkostüm*) the structure of which is reminiscent of the poem "Pan Cogito a długonieczność" ("Mr. Cogito and Longevity"), with the obvious difference that while Morgenstern speaks of Palmström's desire "to copy animal creatures" and behave like a raven, a Saint Bernard dog or a stork,<sup>6</sup> Herbert only compares the different ages of human life to the actual limit of life of various animals. In another poem "Palmström wird Staatsbürger"<sup>7</sup> ("Palmstroem will be a Citizen") Morgenstern's hero becomes a pacifist and is imprisoned for not fulfilling his duty to the Fatherland, but this is the way in which he fully becomes a "citizen." Now pacifism is not something

<sup>3</sup> Ryszard Przybylski, *To jest klasycyzm* (Warsaw, 1978) 145–155.

<sup>4</sup> A.E. Mackay, *The Universal Self. A Study of Paul Valery* (London, 1961) 82.

<sup>5</sup> Mackay 84.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Morgenstern, *The Daylight Lamp and Other Poems*, trans. Max Knight (Boston, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Morgenstern, *Galgenlieder, Palmström und andere Grottesken* (München-Zürich, 1977) 197–199.

Herbert would advocate, but the moral courage to stand up both to the State's abuse of power and to anarchy which could completely destroy the community, and the courage of a pre-1914 pacifist to defy the State are somehow compatible.

The Cogito cycle opens with poems dealing with the problem of identity.<sup>8</sup> In "Pan Cogito obserwuje w lustrze swoja twarz" ("Mr. Cogito looks at his own face in the mirror") the poet seems to be asking the question: to what extent am I responsible for my face? It is a face moulded by genetic and family history which neither education nor the eager absorption of culture could radically change? In this sense, and only in this sense Herbert self-irony is right when he concludes: "tak to przegrałem turniej z twarzą" (and so I have lost the tournament with my face). In the next poem the poet's attention is directed to his feet—from reflection to reality—but as these two feet are so different, the left one "optimistic" and the right one "nobly rigid," the poem encapsulates personal history and experience to achieve ironic self-definition: Mr. Cogito hobbles (with a slight limp) across the world, all the time balancing between an attitude of a Sancho Panza and of a Don Quixote, between pragmatism and idealism.<sup>9</sup> In these first few poems of the cycle placed at the beginning of the collection *Mr. Cogito* (1974), Herbert's voice is very personal and, indeed, the three "family poems" (devoted to Father, Mother and Sister) have no particular reason of being "labelled" as "Cogito poems." One might surmise that perhaps Herbert needed the distance provided by the fictitious persona of Cogito to be able to handle his very intimate perceptions and memories of his family.

In these first poems of the Cogito cycle the speaker remains a passive character. The divisive nature of time is noted in several poems ("Rozmyślenia o ojcu" ["Reflections about my Father"], "Siostra" ["The Sister"]) but no action takes place to regain time lost. That is, not until the poem "Pan Cogito myśli o powrocie..." (Mr. Cogito Thinks about Returning to his Native Town) which Stanislaw Barańczak chose for analysis in his book *A Fugitive from Utopia*<sup>10</sup> do we notice the intervention of the analytical mind into the poet's own experience. The poem opens with the description of the speaker's likely disappointment

<sup>8</sup> Bogdana and John Carpenter, "The Recent Poetry of Zbigniew Herbert," *WLT* 51.2 (Spring 1977): 210.

<sup>9</sup> Zbigniew Herbert, *Pan Cogito* (Warsaw, 1974) 8.

<sup>10</sup> Stanislaw Barańczak, *A Fugitive from Utopia* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1987) 105–106.

which would result from a (so far imaginary) return to his native town:

Gdybym tam wrócił  
 pewnie bym nie zastał  
 ani jednego cienia z domu mego  
 .....  
 ani też żadnej rzeczy która nasza jest.

[If I were to return  
 I probably wouldn't find  
 a single shadow of my house  
 .....  
 nor anything that is ours.]<sup>11</sup>

While this description could still refer to Lvov (or Lwów as it is known in Polish), Herbert's real home town, the next stanza already generalizes the place by narrowing it down to a specific spot where children's games (e.g. hopscotch) take place—to a chalk circle on the pavement. The child in the chalk circle who is standing on one foot and is ready to jump is immortalized in "Mr. Cogito's" memory—he will stay there motionless, although in the sky "planets and wars resound" and in the last stanza heaps of ash start growing rapidly to threaten the figure of the child with extinction. Here memory challenges reality, "lost innocence" (the child is unable to grow up or to jump) is surrounded by the imagery of external, perhaps cosmic catastrophe. The growing heaps of ash evoke the image of a present-day Pompeii, and, indeed, after the Second World War many values and customs seemed to have been taken over by a volcanic eruption of violence and brutality. In some ways this is a very pessimistic poem—it is not only reality that was altered inexorably by history, but even one's memory of a "happier" childhood is threatened with annihilation. Or at least this is one of the possible interpretations of this unusually evocative poem.

There are more "philosophical" poems to follow: the next three in a row are entitled "Pan Cogito rozmyśla o cierpieniu," (Mr. Cogito's Reflections About Suffering) "Przepaść Pana Cogito" (Mr. Cogito's Precipice) and "Pan Cogito a myśl czysta" ("Mr. Cogito and Pure Thought"). The first one considers the problem of suffering (I take Herbert thinks mainly of physical suffering) and how to overcome it by simultaneous acceptance and "containment" and how to transform it into a kind of toy. This meditation leads to a paradoxical conclusion but then the next poem ("Mr. Cogito's Precipice") is also paradoxical enough,

<sup>11</sup> Herbert, *Pan Cogito* 14–15. I could not find an English poetic translation of this poem.

inasmuch as it describes a small (metaphysical?) precipice which at moments appears to be a mere crack. We are told that it is neither a Pascal-type nor Dostoevskian precipice, but something that suits Mr. Cogito, a less deep thinker. What could it be? To me the first line is indicative: “W domu zawsze bezpiecznie”—it is always safe at home. In other words, the so-called “precipice” is something that is outside the home, it is a Thing that one “comes across” on the street. Could it be not so much a philosophical, but a political “abyss,” or “crack” in the fibre of reality? Herbert’s alter-ego feels safe and of one piece only at home, while in the company of other people (“outside”) he encounters this living “precipice” which is a strange chimera: at times it is but a small nuisance, but depending on the occasion it can grow and become threatening like a strange beast. Still, it is possible to leave it in front of the door, “carefully covered / with a piece of old material.” While this precipice could be Mr. Cogito’s “otherness” from people who are not of his close family, I suspect that it is rather the “otherness” from a society moulded by the Official Lie. If my reading is correct, the idea of this poem is fully developed and realized only later, in “Potwór Pana Cogito” (“The Monster of Mr. Cogito”) one of Herbert’s most accomplished political parables.

The poem “Mr. Cogito and Pure Thought” brings us into the realm of pure philosophy—or at least this is what the title suggests, but the exposition of the theme is full of irony. It begins with a qualification: “stara się Pan Cogito / osiągnąć myśl czystą / przynajmniej przed zaśnięciem” (Mr. Cogito tries to / reach pure thought / at least before falling asleep). Though Mr. Cogito (not Herbert himself!) thinks it may be desirable or possible to achieve “pure thought,” the very effort is doomed because of the constant interference of thoughts and sensations connected with life. The conclusion is that one can achieve pure thought only if one is completely empty of desires (i.e. Life)—but is it a state worth achieving? Certainly not for the average human being.

This raises the question—already partly answered by the brief analysis of the previous poems: to what extent is Mr. Cogito the poet himself, the “little man” in the street, or an intelligent observer of reality whose experiences do not necessarily coincide with that of the poet? I think Herbert was not quite sure about this himself, because the one “explanation” he gives in a letter to his translator, Bogdana Carpenter, does not apply to all the Cogito poems. According to this Mr. Cogito was “an attempt to isolate, to ‘objectify’ what is shameful, individual, subjective.”<sup>12</sup> If this definition were applicable, it would simply have over-subjectivized the so-called “lyrical hero” who constitutes the traditional speaker of poetry. Even if the above description would fit such poems

---

12 *WLT* 51.2: 211.

as e.g. “Pan Cogito biada nad małością snów” (“Mr. Cogito Bemoans the Pettiness of Dreams”), it certainly does not fit poems with a ‘message’ such as “Pan Cogito o postawie wyprostowanej,” (“Mr. Cogito on Upright Attitudes”) or “Przesłanie Pana Cogito” (“The Envoy of Mr. Cogito”) which closes the first cycle in 1974. It seems to me that Herbert’s ideas about what Mr. Cogito represents changed with the development of the cycle itself, so this “persona” could exhibit different faces in rather different contexts. These “faces” depend mainly (but not entirely) on the poet’s distance from his creation. Barańczak rightly distinguishes between them, naming at least three different approaches: when the poet uses the first person, when he uses the third person, and when he is an “overt” rather than a “hidden” speaker.<sup>13</sup> But there are differences in empathy even between poems which belong to the same “distance category.” For example “Gra Pana Cogito” (“Mr. Cogito’s Game”) and “Mr. Cogito on Upright Attitudes” present somewhat different attitudes. In the first one Cogito is engaged in his favourite pastime “the game Kropotkin,” the aim of which is to smuggle out the revolutionary anarchist Peter Kropotkin of the Petropavlovsk Fortress. This is a charming poem which invokes an episode from the past, from the mid-nineteenth century, but it ends with an allusion to the present situation in the U.S.A where Herbert lived at the time (in Los Angeles, to be precise). For the twist in “Mr. Cogito’s Game” is the admission that while he could identify with any participant in Kropotkin’s successful escape (even with the horse which pulled the fugitive’s carriage), he would not like to identify with “the prince of anarchists” himself. He wants to be “the intermediary of freedom” not its loud propagandist or exploiter. Hence: “he accepts an inferior role / he won’t inhabit history.”<sup>14</sup>

The second poem is not about past history, but about an unworthy present which may be moving towards a tragic future. It was not only written in the U.S.A. but it is also about the lack of will of a democratic society to defend itself against the barbarians. In the first part of “Mr. Cogito on Upright Attitudes” Herbert seems to have taken a leaf out of Cavafy’s famous poem (*Waiting for the Barbarians*), only to juxtapose it with his own strong determination to die “in an upright attitude.” Now this may be the poet’s own wish, but he has to “disguise” it as Mr. Cogito’s determination, because the imaginary future (what happens if the barbarians come) is beyond his control. It is the citizens of Utica who will have to make the choice whether they want to resist or give in to the enemy—the decision simply creates a situation for “Mr.

---

<sup>13</sup> Barańczak 103–104.

<sup>14</sup> Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter, (OUP: Oxford, London, New York, 1977) 60.



Cogito,” a very limited space in which he may make a gesture. So while in this poem Zbigniew Herbert reiterates an important moral principle, he is still more distanced from the situation by the severe limitations on his choice than in the first poem where he can play any role imagining the past and can freely make his own choice. So amongst the distance factors we can introduce the concept of “personal space”—in situations which exist only in the poet’s imagination the identification with “Mr. Cogito” will always be closer when “personal space” is less limited and circumscribed by adverse circumstances.

The ironic and self-ironic approach to philosophy observed in “Mr. Cogito and Pure Thought” can also be observed in another poem of the cycle “Pan Cogito a ruch myśli” (“Mr. Cogito and the Movement of Thoughts”). The latter reminds one of the often-cited “Kołatka” (“A Knocker”) which begins with the lines: “There are those who grow / gardens in their heads...” a poem stressing Herbert’s relative lack of imagination, his “minimalism.” In “Mr. Cogito and the Movement of Thoughts” we find that in Mr. Cogito’s case only few thoughts actually *cross* the speaker’s mind, most of them are just stuck there without a river to cross, starved and hopeless: “they don’t cross / because there is nowhere to go”<sup>15</sup> What is interesting here is how the phrase “something crossed my mind” can activate Herbert’s imagination and spark off imagery which “furnishes” the mind with thoughts perceived as living creatures. Although ostensibly not part of the Cogito cycle (it could conceivably be entitled as “Mr. Cogito Contemplates the Ordinariness of the Soul”), the poem “Codzienność duszy” (“The Soul on Weekdays” or, possibly, “The Ordinariness of the Soul”) also belongs to the category of “minimalizing” poems, showing the behaviour of the Muse of the Home (“domowa muza”) who, though boasts of the visit of “guests of quality” such as Herakleitos or the Prophet Isiah, is really longing for the visit of her gendarme-boyfriend with a splendid red moustache.

The poem “Pan Cogito obserwuje zmarłego przyjaciela” (“Mr. Cogito observes his dead friend”), not included in the Carpenters’ *Selected Poems* of 1977, is interesting for two reasons. First of all for the contrast it draws between the concept of “living in body” and “not present in body but (perhaps) surviving in spirit,” i.e. between physical and non-physical existence. Secondly, this poem introduces a new kind of construction which here is not yet formally indicated. It is the division of the poem into two or three constituent parts which appears (indicated by numbers) for the first time only several poems later in “Pan Cogito a pop” (“Mr. Cogito and Pop Music”), but what is clearly present already in “Mr. Cogito observes his dead friend.” In the former poem there is a clear caesura after the fifth passage just before the words “kiedy powrócił / nie zastał już

---

15 Herbert, *Selected Poems* 42.



przyjaciela” (when he returned / he did not find his friend any more) and there is also a possible caesura once again after the words “porzucony jak kokon” (abandoned as a cocoon). The poem moves from the description of a physiological condition—the breathing of the terminally ill friend—to a “reified” one (the friend’s body seems “abandoned” after exitus) only to soar from there up to the spiritual sphere of the Upanishads, finally tracing the possible route of the soul after death to the gates at the valley of the dead. This poem, by the way, stands in clear contrast to a much later one in the Cogito cycle, to “Dusza Pana Cogito” (“Mr. Cogito’s Soul”) which may be interpreted in different ways. Barańczak puts the emphasis on the antinomy between past and present,<sup>16</sup> but I think this is of minor importance, for it happens to be one of Herbert’s recurrent devices which he uses here to some extent ironically. What is more significant is the behaviour of Mr. Cogito’s Soul which seems to live an (almost) independent life. It “leaves” the body suddenly and is thought to live abroad, perhaps in someone else’s body; Mr. Cogito bears no grudge against her and when she returns makes no reproaches. Because of the gender of the word in Polish, “dusza,” one can imagine the speaker’s soul as his wife or partner; on the other hand the “Soul” could stand here for simply Mr. Cogito’s thoughts which often stray outside the frontiers of his homeland, especially when he is preoccupied with a cultural phenomenon of another country. While it fits into the pattern of “disinheritance” (according to Barańczak “the central topic of Herbert’s work”<sup>17</sup>) “Mr. Cogito’s Soul” is an interesting commentary on the flexibility and possible transformations of a substance which we traditionally call the “soul.” At this point I would like to indicate that Herbert, though a Catholic by upbringing and tradition, probably believes in the possibility of reincarnation of the human spirit. This is quite clearly suggested in the fascinating poem “Przeczcucia eschatologiczne Pana Cogito” (“Eschatological Forebodings of Mr. Cogito”), the final lines of which are as follows: “who knows / perhaps he will manage / to convince the angels / he is incapable/ of heavenly service // and they will permit him to return / by an overgrown path / at the shore of a white sea / to the cave of beginning.”<sup>18</sup>

“Herbert jest przede wszystkim ironistą, nie moralistą”<sup>19</sup> states Andrzej Kaliszewski in his book on Herbert. This is a sentence hard to render in English, for the word “ironist” hardly exists; but it also makes little sense to offer this distinction. An “ironic moralist” would be better, though from Juvenal onwards most satirical poets tried to serve a moral purpose with their verse. But Herbert

16 Barańczak 20.

17 Barańczak 11.

18 Herbert, *Report from the Besieged City* 31.

19 Andrzej Kaliszewski, *Gry Pana Cogito*, (Cracow, 1982) 238.

is definitely NOT a satirical poet. Irony is only a spice he uses in his broth, not the dish itself. On the other hand, the moralistic intent is obvious throughout the Cogito cycle. In the collection *Mr. Cogito* Herbert's critique seems to be almost even-handed—he finds many things in the West not to his taste, including the shallowness of mass-culture and moral laxitude (“Pan Cogito a pop”; “Pan Cogito o magii” [“Mr. Cogito About the Magic”]) as well as cowardice to stand up to those who threaten democracy (“Mr. Cogito on Upright Attitudes”). Resistance to Communist ideology and practice in this volume is expressed in two parables (“Stary Prometeusz” [“The Old Prometheus”]; “Co myśli Pan Cogito o piekle” [“What Does Mr. Cogito Think About Hell”]) and in the solemn “The Envoy of Mr. Cogito” with its emphatic reiteration of traditional moral values. This attitude perceptibly changes in the mid-seventies and early eighties, and it is also manifested in the later pieces of the Cogito cycle. In the collection *Report from the Besieged City* (Paris, 1983) while one might find poems such as “Pan Cogito o cnocie” (“Mr. Cogito on Virtue”) with its personified female figure of Virtue, which cut across the ideological divide between East and West, Herbert's fire is mainly directed against the less and less tolerable rule of post-Stalinistic Communism. This is quite dramatically demonstrated in the poem “Pan Cogito-Powrót” (“Mr. Cogito-The Return”) in which Mr. Cogito is described in the third person as somebody who has turned away from the consumer society of the West to be concerned “about his own wound,” as a result of which he returns “to the treasure-house / of all misfortunes,” his homeland.<sup>20</sup> Apart from loyalty to his dead friends and to his memories Herbert's persona perhaps returns “to give a reply...to the whisperings of fear...to the deadly question.” The deadly or murderous question (“zabójcze pytanie”) of the last line is not necessarily identical with the question asked earlier by Mr. Cogito's (presumably foreign) friends: “so why does he return”—it could be a question asked by an official of the Polish security police: “why do you return when we know that you hate *our* system?” Why, indeed?

Mr. Cogito loves the richness and diversity of the world (see “Modlitwa Pana Cogito-Podróżnika” [“The Prayer of Mr. Cogito-Traveller”]) and has few illusions about the historical chances of his often betrayed and partitioned fatherland. But as a Pole (who is also a neglected and forgotten son of Europe) he feels responsible for the spiritual welfare of his nation and slowly becomes a “Guardian of the City.” The highest values of this City have to be defended at any cost; even when the fronts are unclear, even when there are few others who would undertake the same task. In the collection *Report from the Besieged City* there are, in fact, more than one central “programmatic” poems. The concluding

<sup>20</sup> Herbert, *Report from the Besieged City* 14-15.

poem of the same title certainly fits the above description, but from an earlier period I would single out “The Monster of Mr. Cogito” as Herbert’s most eloquently challenging piece. It is not a poem that everyone would immediately understand, though some of Herbert’s hints are broad enough. It opens with the traditional device of contrasting the past with the present: “Lucky Saint George / from his knight’s saddle / could exactly evaluate / the strength and movements of the dragon.”<sup>21</sup> Mr. Cogito is in a much worse position: not only that his monster cannot be seen, it does not even have measurements. It can hardly be defined, though “it is like an immense depression / spread out all over the country.” It cannot be killed or dispersed easily—in some ways it is like carbon monoxide, and; “the proof of the existence of the monster / is its victims.”<sup>22</sup> Having read so far, I think, most people familiar with the atmosphere of totalitarian regimes would (I think, correctly) conclude: Herbert is speaking about the Official Lie, which is but a poisonous emission of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism.

If in the first part of the poem Herbert defined what the Monster is like, in the second part he is investigating possible reactions to its menacing presence. “Reasonable people say” he continues “we can live together / with the monster,” that is, if we behave cautiously and with great circumspection or self-effacement. But Mr. Cogito “does not want a life of make-believe” (*nie lubi życia na niby*), so he challenges the Monster to a fight, though as the Monster is nowhere and everywhere, this challenge takes place at dawn in the empty street, Mr. Cogito shouting: “come out [you] contemptible coward.” The Monster does not take up the glove; it has time and invisibility on its side, and, anyway, as even Mr. Cogito knows, the battle would be “uneven.” It is a duel which the hero is eager to fight even without the remotest chance of success, but fight he will, for then at least his end will be heroic and not an ordinary death, a “suffocation from formlessness.”<sup>23</sup> Although it is in a metaphorical form, I find this poem Mr. Cogito’s most direct challenge to Communist (and, of course, by implication any totalitarian) ideology. Another poem from the same cycle “Pan Cogito o potrzebie ścisłości” is no less moralistic, but much less “committed” to the here and now. And in a sense, by the early 1980s, Herbert did not need Cogito’s persona any longer even to mask off politically provocative or explosive statements. The poem “Potęga smaku” (“The Power of Taste”) is a case in point. It operates with understatements, the first of which is the very opening: “It didn’t require great character at all / our refusal...”—the rejection of Communist

---

21 Herbert, *Report from the Besieged City* 39.

22 Herbert, *Report from the Besieged City* 40.

23 Herbert, *Report from the Besieged City* 42.

ideology—the temptation was not really “Faustian”: “it was really a matter of taste”<sup>24</sup> even if one could lose one’s head in this “aesthetic” confrontation. Just how “soft” Polish Communist power has become by the early 1980s shows the inclusion of “The Power of Taste” in Zbigniew Herbert’s *Wybór wierszy* (Selected Poems) published by PIW in 1983 in no less than twenty thousand copies!

In Herbert’s last collection published in Paris *Elegia na odejście* (An Elegy for Departure, 1990) there are only two Cogito poems, so one has the feeling that the poet makes less and less use of his multi-faceted persona. Also, there is a return from the more active, morally and politically committed Cogito poems of the 1970s and early 1980s to a meditative, more “philosophical” tone which characterized the very first poems of the cycle. At the same time “Pana Cogito przygody z muzyką” (“Mr. Cogito’s Adventures with Music”) is much more elaborate in its structure than the early pieces of the Cogito cycle. This structural difference—in other words the changes discernible in Herbert’s technique as regards to the cycle—is worth looking at in some detail.

In the collection *Mr. Cogito* (where not all poems are parts of the cycle labelled with the name “Cogito”) the great majority of the poems were constructed on traditional “unitary” lines: beginning with the poet’s own thoughts or with a situation from which the poem evolved through a string of images or metaphors. Some of these poems contain “built-in” dialogues (e.g. “Pan Cogito opowiada o kuszeniu Spinozy” [“Mr. Cogito Tells about the Temptation of Spinoza”] or “Pan Cogito szuka rady” [“Mr. Cogito Seeks Advice”]) but ostensibly they keep their undivided structure. Out of the 31 Cogito-labelled poems in this collection only five are divided into two parts, or more: in fact, only “Pan Cogito a poeta w pewnym wieku” (“Mr. Cogito and the Poet of Certain Age”) adopts a mosaic-like structure known from some of Miłosz’s post-war poems, but rarely used by Herbert himself. In the collection *Report from a Besieged City* one can observe a significant change: out of 12 poems as many as six have a tripartite and four a dual structure; even those two poems which adhere to the old “unitary” model are internally divisible (“Mr. Cogito’s Soul” into two or three parts, and “The Prayer of Mr. Cogito-Traveler” into mosaics of axioms or of experience). Finally, in *An Elegy for Departure* the proportion of “unitary” and dual-constructed poems is 1:1. In my view, this shift towards the longer and more complex poem signals first of all that Mr. Cogito is becoming a “persona for all seasons,” in other words that apart from being the subject of self-analyzing or semantic meditations he also turns into a vehicle of cultural, social and political commentary. Secondly, there is a shift from the

---

<sup>24</sup> Herbert, *Report from the Besieged City* 69.

subjective lyrical mode of expression towards a mixed genre where descriptive (“epic”) elements appear alongside with moralistic generalizations. Such a poem is “Mr. Cogito’s Game” from the first collection containing Cogito poems, and “Pan Cogito z Marią Rasputin-Próba Kontaktu” (“Mr. Cogito and Maria Rasputin-An Attempt at Contact”) from the second, to give only two examples. For a poetry which is historiosophic in intent, as Herbert’s undoubtedly is, the mixed poem-structure is has its obvious attractions (unless we have an imaginary monologue of a historical figure). Both formally and in content the poem “Raport z obleżonego miasta” (“Report from the Besieged City”) (1982) seems to be a culmination of the tendencies of the Cogito cycle, although here the speaker does not any longer need a superimposed persona for his message.

Barańczak ends his book on Herbert with highlighting the paradox inherent in his moral message: the old, traditional values are lost, “in today’s world one can only try to revive them, but with uncertain results”<sup>25</sup> and he also states that Herbert’s hopes are not guaranteed by any external authority. The risk of failure is always present in this poetry, but the very act of facing the enemy, of standing up to it includes more than a hope, a near-certainty of salvation. Basic human values cannot be destroyed, they will be saved, if not by Mr. Cogito, by someone else: “and if the City falls but a single man escapes / he will carry the City within himself on the roads of exile / he will be the City.”<sup>26</sup> Mr. Cogito loathes the clean-cut perspectives of Utopia, and knows that there is no return to Arcadia. But for all his chastening experiences, he believes in the survival of familiar objects and values, and has compassion for his weak and vulnerable fellow-humans. For all his irony and deep-seated pessimism as regards to the historical process, Zbigniew Herbert is the poet of indestructible human hope.

---

<sup>25</sup> Barańczak 134.

<sup>26</sup> Herbert, *Report from the Besieged City* 77.