THE PROSE POETRY OF ZBIGNIEW HERBERT: FORGING A NEW GENRE

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The prose poetry of the contemporary Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert, is a distinct although integral part of his poetic output. It represents an attempt to enlarge the limits of poetry. But Herbert's prose poems do not abolish the distinction between literary genres; on the contrary, he constantly sharpens the distinction, and in this respect his practise is considerably different from that of his contemporaries.[1] In recent Polish criticism the relationship of the two genres has received special attention. Stanisław Barańczak has spoken of the "fluid and unstable frontiers" of contemporary Polish poetry,[2] the poetry of Tadeusz Różewicz has often been called "anti-poetry,"[3] and Miron Białoszewski's poetic prose has been seen as a new literary genre intermediary between prose and poetry,[4] labeled "small narrations" ("*małe narracje*").[5] While the use of poetic prose is an equally significant aspect of Herbert's poetry, the subject has not attracted the attention of critics. In this article I would like to examine the intentions behind Herbert's use of this form. If we carefully look at the subjects of his poems and the different ways he approaches them, we arrive at a number of surprising conclusions both about the nature of the genres of poetry and prose, and about the act of writing itself. One of the main reasons why Herbert's prose poetry has great significance is that in using this form, he is re-thinking many of the common assumptions we make about our relation to experience, and the written form we apply to that experience whether prose, poetry, or prose poetry.

Herbert's first volume of poems *Struna światła* (*Chord of Light,* 1956) contained no prose poems, but his second volume, *Hermes, pies i gwiazda* (*Hermes, Dog and Star,* 1957), published almost simultaneously with the first, contained a large number—sixty out of ninety-five poems are prose poems. From this point on, prose poems are present in all of Herbert's collections of poetry. In *Studium przedmiotu* (*Study of the Object,* 1961) the ratio of prose to verse poems is eighteen to twenty-eight, in *Napis* (*Inscription,* 1969) it is fourteen to twenty-six, and in *Pan Cogito* (*Mr. Cogito,* 1974) it is five to thirty-five. Although their number varies in individual volumes

and significantly decreases in *Pan Cogito,* they are a constant feature of Herbert's poetry. When they first appeared in *Hermes, pies i gwiazda* the prose poems formed a separate section; they were originally intended to be published as a separate volume, but this project was thwarted by an editor. In the subsequent volumes, the prose poems are interspersed among the other verse poems. In *Hermes, pies i gwiazda* the separation of prose poems from verse poems was partly an accident and reflects the poet's awareness that they were generically distinct; this is understandable, as they were a novelty in his writing at the time. Herbert's abandoning of these generic divisions in the following volumes reveals how the prose poems were progressively "naturalized," gaining rights of citizenship in his poetry.

The intriguing question naturally arises: why did a poet as accomplished as Herbert revert to prose? What prompted him to do so? When questioned about this[6] Herbert disarmingly replied that he didn't know, but he drew attention to the unique circumstance in which the first prose poems were written:

> It was when I didn't have an apartment of my own, a friend took me in under his roof. I went regularly to a library to read. I wrote the first fable in the library. I don't know what came over me. A *concetto.* A concept too short for a poem, and even more so too short to make a story from it.

Were they a form of playful relaxation? Possibly, because the poet has termed them "*bajeczki*" (little fables, or short fairy tales), thus denying them the status of a serious genre. Yet these fables express the same philosophical and ethical concerns found in the rest of his poetry, they are equally about what Czesław Miłosz has called "serious matters"—war and suffering, evil, death, and art. What is more, the prose poems often thematically parallel verse poems. Like the verse poem "Apollo i Marsjasz" ("Apollo and Marsyas"), the prose poems "Malarz" and "W drodze do Delf" ("Painter" and "On the Road to Delphi") probe the relationship between art and suffering. Like the verse poem "Uprawa filozofii" ("The Cultivation of Philosophy"), the prose poems "Klasyk" and "Raj teologów" ("Classic" and "The Paradise of the Theologians") contrast philosophical abstractions against life. The prose poems "Wojna" and "Żołnierz" ("War" and "Soldier") parallel numerous verse poems about war; and like the verse poem "Kamyk" ("Pebble"), the prose poems "Przedmioty," "Drewniana kostka," and "Muszla" ("Objects," "Wooden Die," and "Conch") contrast the instability of human nature to the stability of objects. The difference between prose poems and verse poems does not lie in the seriousness of their concerns, but rather in their tone; the more serious tone of the verse poems—they were always punctuationless—becomes playful, ironic, and frequently humorous in the poetic prose. There are exceptions on both sides: verse poems like "O tłumaczeniu wierszy" ("On Translating Poetry"),

"Jedwab duszy" ("Silk of a Soul"), and "Nic ładnego" ("Nothing Special") are ironic and humorous; less frequently prose poems such as "Świt" ("Dawn") and "Wąwóz Małachowskiego" ("Malachowski's Ravine") can be found which are serious. This difference in tone arises from the poet's different approach to his subject. Prose lacks the sympathetic involvement of the verse poems. Instead, the speaker creates a distance between himself and the experience he writes about. For Herbert, prose poetry is often a way of saying "no," a gesture of moral refusal. Irony and sometimes a marked harshness accompany the critical, polemical nature of the majority of prose poems.

The difference in tone and approach of the two genres is best illustrated by comparing two poems with a similar theme, one written in punctuationless verse and the other in prose. Both "Kamyk" ("Pebble") and "Drewniana kostka" ("Wooden Die") are about objects, and in each, objects are opposed to humans. In "Drewniana kostka" the difference is stated directly and simply, the poem appears to be limited to an objective acknowledgment of facts:

> Drewnianą kostkę można opisać tylko z zewnątrz. Jesteśmy zatem skazani na wieczną niewiedzę o jej istocie. Nawet jeśli ją szybko przepołowić, natychmiast jej wnętrze staje się ścianą i następuje błyskawiczna przemiana tajemnicy w skórę.
>
> Dlatego niepodobna stworzyć psychologii kamiennej kuli, sztaby żelaznej, drewnianego sześcianu.
>
> (*Wiersze zebrane,* 276)

> (A wooden die can be described only from without. We are therefore condemned to eternal ignorance of its essence. Even if it is quickly cut in two, immediately its inside becomes a wall and there occurs the lightning-swift transformation of a mystery into a skin.
>
> For this reason it is impossible to lay the foundation for the psychology of a stone ball, of an iron bar, or a wooden cube.)

There is a sharp, clear-cut division between the speaker of the poem and the subject. The speaker limits his role to that of an observer who describes and avoids interpretation. His tone is detached and almost exaggeratedly impartial. He remains the outsider who wants to see the object only from without, motivating this stance convincingly by the very nature of objects—their impenetrability and resistance to interpretation. The rather flat, categorical tone is perfectly adapted to the content of the poem. In fact, however, it is a deliberate choice of attitude; and in the poem "Kamyk" Herbert does what he asserted in "Drewniana kostka" was impossible—he succeeds in penetrating the object's mystery and creates its "psychology":

> Kamyk jest stworzeniem
> doskonałym
>
> równy samemu sobie
> pilnujący swych granic

wypełniony dokładnie
kamiennym sensem

o zapachu który niczego nie przypomina
niczego nie płoszy nie budzi pożądania

jego zapał i chłód
są słuszne i pełne godności

czuję ciężki wyrzut
kiedy go trzymam w dłoni
i ciało jego szlachetne
przenika fałszywe ciepło

—Kamyki nie dają się oswoić
do końca będą na nas patrzeć
okiem spokojnym bardzo jasnym
(*Wiersze zebrane,* 265)

(The pebble / is a perfect creature // equal to itself / watchful over its limits // filled exactly / with a pebbly meaning // with a scent that does not remind you of anything / doesn't frighten anything away doesn't arouse desire // its ardor and coldness / are just and full of dignity // I feel a heavy remorse / when I hold it in my hand / and its noble body / is permeated by false warmth // —Pebbles cannot be tamed / to the end they will look at us / with a calm and very clear eye)

Unlike the wooden die the pebble has life, it is called a "creature" endowed with nobility, dignity, equanimity, and a clear conscience. While the tone of "Drewniana kostka" was detached and curt, "Kamyk" is intensely lyrical with a strong emotional element. The speaker is not a detached observer but one of the actors in the drama, an active participant in the human dialogue with objects. The opposition of the object to man is not a statement of fact but an evaluative judgment, to which the speaker subjects not only others but—above all—himself. The difference in tone in the two poems results from the different degree of emotional involvement. The same is true of the choice of form: punctuationless verse in "Kamyk," prose in "Drewniana kostka." In each poem the form reflects the act of consciousness itself—in the first, the crossing of the "limits" of psychology by means of compassion, but in the second poem, the cool acceptance of surfaces and the limits of consciousness.

The difference in Herbert's approach to his subjects can be seen in an even more drastic way in two poems from *Hermes, pies i gwiazda,* "Co robią nasi umarli" ("What Our Dead Do") and "Umarli" ("The Dead"). Both poems are about the relation between the dead and the living. "Co robią nasi umarli" is in verse, has a frame composition and two speakers who are friends. One of them narrates a dream in which he conversed with his dead father. The ties uniting father and son, their mutual concern and care, continue after death; these are reinforced by the tie between the two friends, creating an atmosphere of affection and tender irony. The poem ends:

tak to troszczą się o nas
nasi umarli
napominają przez sen
odnoszą zgubione pieniądze
starają się nam o posadę
szepczą numery losów
albo gdy tego nie mogą
stukają palcem w okno

a my im z wdzięczności wielkiej
wymyślamy nieśmiertelność
zaciszną jak norka myszy
(*Wiersze zebrane,* 91–92)

(This is how our dead / look after us / they warn us through dreams / bring back lost money / hunt for jobs for us / whisper the numbers of lottery tickets / or when they can't do this / knock with their fingers on the window // and out of great gratitude / we imagine for them immortality / cosy like the burrow of a mouse)

Although the experience is not the author's, the sense of involvement and participation is similar to that of the poem about the pebble. The use of the first person plural pronoun at the end of the poem permits generalization by including his friend's dream in his own experience. The possessive adjective "our" in the title emphasizes this—the relation with the dead is an experience common to us all.

The prose poem "Umarli" sharply differs from this in tone:

Wskutek zamknięcia w ciemnych i nie przewietrzanych pomieszczeniach twarze ich zostały dokładnie przenicowane. Bardzo chcieliby mówić, ale wargi zjadł piasek. Czasem tylko zaciskają w pięści powietrze i próbują podnieść głowę niezdarnie, jak niemowlęta. Nic ich nie cieszą ani chryzantemy, ani świece. Nie mogą pogodzić się z tym stanem, stanem rzeczy.
(*Wiersze zebrane,* 162)

(Because they have been enclosed in dark, airless chambers their faces became completely recast. They would very much like to speak, but sand has eaten away their lips. Only from time to time do they clench the air in their fist and try clumsily to raise the head, like an infant. Neither chrysanthemums nor candles make them happy. They can't reconcile themselves to this state, the state of affairs.)

The amusing but macabre details of the poem result in black humor. The image of the dead is repulsive, their rebellion both futile and ridiculous. There is neither understanding nor sympathy between the dead and the living. The final statement is bitingly ironical, underlined by the verbal pun; "*stan rzeczy*," literally "state of things," has the colloquial meaning of "state of affairs." The narrator of this prose poem is detached, the dead are not "his" dead and he feels no solidarity with them. As in the poems quoted earlier, the attitude of the poet toward his subject influences not only the tone but also the form as well, and the over-all meaning. While in

"Co robią nasi umarli" death is overcome by love that outlives death, death is irrevocable in "Umarli" and shown in its unattenuated ugliness.

One of the most striking differences between Herbert's prose poems and verse poems is the use of punctuation. Its presence in prose adds both authority and finality to statements. Punctuation sharpens the edge of the irony—without it the irony would be more blunt, less mordant. In one of his poems Herbert called the period "a sign of catastrophe," warning that "people should employ it modestly and with proper consideration, as is customary when one replaces fate" ("Kropka" in *Wiersze zebrane,* 329). It might be pointed out here that the period is similar to the walls in the poem "Drewniana kostka"—both are forms of punctuation, or places where attention stops. Herbert rejected punctuation in his verse poems, considering it a hindrance.[7] On the other hand he has conceded that when writing prose poems, punctuation does not hamper him. "I even draw satisfaction from a longer or a shorter paragraph. From a sentence, a period, the next paragraph."[8] The use of punctuation creates another clear division between his prose and poetry, confirming that his approach to the two genres is different. It is connected to the initial creative impulse and the clear-cut choice he must make in advance whether to use verse or prose. If the impulse comes from immediate experience or is of an emotional nature, Herbert's preference is for verse, but if the impulse is intellectual or reflective, he will most likely choose prose. The lyrical speaker strongly felt in the punctuationless verse poems almost disappears in the prose poems. It gives way to an observer, a commentator, a polemicist. The word "*concetto*" used by Herbert to describe his prose poems suggests that they originated in an idea or concept rather than an emotion.

The absence of prose poems in Herbert's first volume *Struna światła* is probably due to the immediacy of the experience about which he writes: his early poems are dominated by the experience of the Second World War. They are tragic, the tone often elegiac, and the words used to describe his poetry in this volume indicate deep emotional involvement—a cry (the "cry of fear" in "Do Marka Aurelego"), a shout ("like a bird the poet shouts in the void" in "O Troi"), a song ("I raise up my song" in "Kapłan"), or a lament ("my defenseless tears" in "Do Marka Aurelego"). Some of the poems are autobiographical, such as "Mój ojciec" and "Matka" ("My Father" and "Mother"), many are personal. An important group is composed of poems mourning the loss of youthful faith in beauty, art, and harmony, and about the difficulty of writing after the experience of the war. Many poems in this volume use the form of second person address ("Do Marka Aurelego," "Do Apollina," "Do Ateny"), and in them both the poet's own voice is clearly heard and the person whom he addresses is clearly designated.

Although the experience of war does not disappear from Herbert's poetry

after *Struna światła,* and remains an important, intensely emotional subject in *Hermes, pies i gwiazda,* it is no longer central and does not determine the general overriding tone in the subsequent volumes. Other experiences and concerns, political, artistic, and philosophical, coexist with it and come to the fore in *Studium przedmiotu, Napis,* and *Pan Cogito.* Although these also command intense emotional involvement he can write about them from a greater distance, either in a more critical, detached manner, or—and this is a step away from involvement—with irony. Irony, which is a manner of distancing, becomes a salient feature of Herbert's mature poetry. The prose poems appear simultaneously with this shift of subject matter and tone, in fact they are the outcome of this change.

In Herbert's prose poems, irony has a special prominence and performs several functions—it increases the distance between the speaker and his subject as in "Umarli," but it also allows the poet to express his judgment indirectly. In the poem "Wojna" ("War"), for example, there is no straightforward condemnation of war:

> Pochód stalowych kogutów. Chłopcy malowani wapnem. Aluminiowe opiłki burzą domy. Wyrzucają ogłuszające kule w powietrze całkiem czerwone. Nikt nie uleci w niebo. Ziemia przyciąga ciało i ołów.
>
> (*Wiersze zebrane,* 169)

> (A procession of steel roosters. Boys painted with whitewash. Filings of aluminum destroy houses. They throw deafening balls into the air, completely red. No one will fly away into the sky. The earth attracts bodies and lead.)

Reminiscent of a fairy tale, the opening description of war contrasts with the realistic conclusion; the illusionistic fanfare of war is undermined by the scientific law of gravity. The irony of the last two sentences provides an indirect moral, leaving the final judgment whether war is good or bad to the reader. This kind of moral *à rebours* is a frequent procedure in the prose poems. Another anti-war poem, "Żołnierz" ("Soldier"), contains the words: "This exactly was war. About the most important cause. Whether the banners should be sewn with crimson or with blue silk" (*Wiersze zebrane,* 191). The disparity between the enormity of war and the pettiness of its cause results in a similar irony, and the phrase "the most important cause" means exactly its opposite. These prose poems about war differ from punctuationless verse poems like "Dwie krople" ("Two Drops") and "Deszcz" ("The Rain")—extremely moving poems that have no distance whatsoever from the war they describe—by achieving a greater degree of generality and critical distance reinforced by irony.

The substitution of irony for a straightforward moral reflects a fundamental trait of Herbert's writing, what might be called his unmoralizing moralism. In his famous poem "Kołatka" ("The Knocker"), Herbert speaks of himself as a moralist, comparing his imagination to a wooden board:

uderzam w deskę
a ona podpowiada
suchy poemat moralisty
tak—tak
nie—nie
(*Wiersze zebrane,* 95)

(I knock on the wood / and it answers / with the moralist's dry poem / yes—yes / no—no)

Without quite being "dry" Herbert's poetry is permeated by an ethical consciousness, and his attitude toward the world comprises a clearly defined moral stand.[9] But although he evaluates the world from an ethical point of view, he never preaches. His ethical judgments originate in his own conscience and do not come from external authority; not deriving from a command, they do not become commands to others. A critic has referred to this as the "spritual honesty of Herbert," who does not put his ideals "on a pedestal of unshakable faith" or impose them dogmatically.[10] It is irony that enables the moralist to fulfill his task without becoming a preacher, to express his moral stand without becoming either didactic or sententious. The "moral" of a traditional fable is by its very nature authoritative, unambiguous, didactic—in Herbert's "fables" it is replaced by irreverent, ambiguous, and sceptical irony.

Using the fable as a model, Herbert at the same time stands it on its head to the point of negating its generic premises. By calling his prose poems fables, Herbert wishes to situate them in a specific literary tradition. But, as so often with this poet misleadingly called a "classicist,"[11] the tradition serves as a point of reference to express more forcefully his rebellion and opposition, rather than a ready-made mould that he tries to fit. The main characteristic of the traditional fable is the presentation of a generally known and accepted truth as a moral; Herbert's fables do just the opposite, they question accepted truths and put them on trial in the light of contemporary experience. The poet's contestation of received attitudes and fables is carried out, paradoxically, from a moral standpoint. In the prose poem "The Wolf and the Sheep," an adaptation of the well-known fable, the wolf eats the sheep and justifies his act by necessity because he is acting according to the generally accepted concept of "wolf." "Were it not for Aesop, we would sit down on our hind legs and look at the sunset" (*Wiersze zebrane,* 170). The poem ends with the ironic moral, "Don't imitate the wolf, dear children. Don't sacrifice yourselves for the moral." Although Herbert's poem confirms the common knowledge that wolves eat sheep, it also re-examines the value of such knowledge from the moral point of view. If it doesn't prevent crime but, on the contrary, serves as a flimsy excuse, its value is doubtful.

Many fables adopt the naïve conventions of children's literature in order to question the notion of innocence on which it is based. The prose poem "Niedźwiedzie" ("Bears") seems to be entirely benign:

> Niedźwiedzie dzielą się na brunatne i białe oraz łapy, głowę i tułów. Mordy mają dobre, a oczka małe. One lubią bardzo łakomstwo. Do szkoły nie chcą chodzić, ale spać w lesie— to proszę bardzo. Jak mają mało miodu, to łapią się rękami za głowy i są takie smutne, takie smutne, że nie wiem. Dzieci, które kochają Kubusia Puchatka, dałyby im wszystko, ale po lesie chodzi myśliwy i celuje z fuzji między tych dwoje małych oczu.
>
> (*Wiersze zebrane*, 174)

> (Bears are divided into brown and white as well as paws, head and trunk. They have nice snouts, and small eyes. They like greediness very much. They don't want to go to school, but to sleep in the forest, that, yes, very much. When they don't have some honey they clutch their heads in their hands and are so sad, so sad, that I don't know. Children who love Winnie-the-Pooh would give them anything, but a hunter walks in the forest and is aiming with a rifle between that pair of small eyes.)

The amusing, joking description of the bears and their childlike behavior, the allusion to Winnie-the-Pooh and the mimicked language of children's stories—diminutives, repetitions, naïve colloquial expressions, and syntax—all these contrast with the concluding image of the aimed rifle. Irony results from the confrontation of two different worlds, conventional children's literature and harsh reality, the existence of the latter putting the viability of the former in doubt. The poem does not explicitly state a "moral" and the conclusion is left to the reader; the poem is limited to showing that the world usually left out of fairy tales exists, and prevails. To ignore it is equivalent to closing your eyes to the truth.[12]

Some of Herbert's fables are outright parodies of the genre. " Od końca" ("From the End") opens where most conventional fairy tales end: with a wedding feast and a beautiful princess. "Well, good, but what was before?" asks the poet (*Wiersze zebrane*, 179), for the truth lies precisely in this "before"—a black witch, a dragon, and robbers. The happy ending has entirely dissolved this truth into a mirage of order, happiness, and innocence; the dragon has been transformed into a beetle, the witch into a moth, and the robbers lose their knives as they escape. When the order of the fairy tale is turned around, the falseness of the convention is revealed, the verisimilitude of happy endings completely undermined. The question, "What was before?" and the ironic answer, "Oh, let's not think about it" express distrust of all easy solutions, the moral is replaced by scepticism. Herbert has created a new kind of fable the aim of which is not to appease, to teach, or to restate common knowledge, but instead to strip off appearances and go beyond all generally accepted points of view. A truth repeated without questioning and testing easily becomes dead, turning into a meaningless and even dangerous cliché.

The biting Herbertian irony is not only directed at the genre of fables but

has a more contemporary reference. It is important to remember that these "fables" were written during the Stalinist years, at a time of all-pervasive official propaganda and the dogma of Socialist Realism in literature. It was a time of government-enforced optimism, of "wedding feasts and beautiful princesses." Herbert's fables are a reaction against these, and his tone captures the flavor of the period. The atmosphere of a poem like "Wojna" with its "parade of steel roosters" evokes for those who lived during this time the fanfare of the omnipresent military parades. And the reasons behind the wolf's arguments in the poem "Wilk i owieczka" recall the frequent insistence on historical necessity as the justification for many kinds of crime. Herbert's choice of the fable as a weapon is particularly apt because it captures the infantile tone of the official literature; he confronts the gilded optimism of official propaganda with a much less rosy picture of reality. The poet living in a totalitarian country, where agreement with ideology is more important than agreement with truth, becomes particularly sensitive to lies and falsity. Herbert's reaction precedes by about ten years the similar reaction of the next generation of Polish poets. At the center of the poetry of Andrzej Bursa and Stanisław Grochowiak is the problem of reality and the desire to show its true, ugly face; the reaction even gained the name of "Turpism." And here Herbert also precedes the youngest generation of Polish poets who wrote in the 1970's, the Rebels or Contestors ("Kontestatorzy"): poets such as Stanisław Barańczak, Adam Zagajewski, and Ryszard Krynicki. Rather than attack reality, these poets attacked the lie of official language.

Herbert's poetic prose had an impact, in turn, on the style of his own verse poems. A change in prosody is already discernible in the volume *Napis* (1969)—in such poems as "Curatia Dionisia" and "Sprawozdanie z raju"—but it becomes most striking in the volume *Pan Cogito* (1974). It is a change from a lyrical toward a more narrative mode. The lyrical quality of Herbert's poetry was above all a function of the rhythm. In the earlier poems this was based on what might be called the short breath—a series of statements uttered in rapid succession, seemingly loose and disconnected but held together by the cohesiveness of the argument and the internal logic of the poem. The outward, graphic signs of this rhythm were the short lines and lack of punctuation; the rhythm gave Herbert's poems their lightness, agility, rapid tempo, and compactness. However, the rhythm changes in *Pan Cogito.* The lines become longer and to read them aloud requires a deeper, longer breath.[13] Even though punctuation continues to be absent (with the surprising exception of "Matka"), it is easier for the reader to restore it if he wishes. The long lines are sometimes difficult to distinguish from one another and a few of these poems are close to prose. An interesting poem entitled "Pan Cogito rozważa różnicę między głosem ludzkim a głosem przyrody" ("Mr. Cogito Considers the Difference between the

Human Voice and the Voice of Nature") combines both verse and prose within the confines of a single poem:

Niezmordowana jest oracja światów

mogę to wszystko powtórzyć od nowa
z piórem odziedziczonym po gęsi i Homerze
z pomniejszoną włócznią
stanąć wobec żywiołów

mogę to wszystko powtórzyć od nowa
przegra ręka do góry
gardło słabsze od źródła
nie przekrzyczę piasku
nie związę śliną metafory
oka z gwiazdą
i z uchem przy kamieniu
z ziarnistego milczenia
nie wyprowadzę ciszy

a przecież zebrałem tyle słów w jednej linii—dłuższej od wszystkich linii mojej dłoni a zatem dłuższej od losu w linii wymierzonej poza w linii rozkwitającej w linii świetlistej w linii która na mnie uratować w kolumnie mego życia—prostej jak odwaga linii mocnej jak miłość—lecz była to zaledwie miniatura horyzontu

i dalej toczą się pioruny kwiatów oratio traw oratio
chmur
mamroczą chóry drzew spokojnie płonie skała
ocean gasi zachód dzień połyka noc i na przełęczy
wiatrów
nowe wstaje światło

a ranna mgła podnosi tarczę wysp

(*Pan Cogito*, 36–37)

(The oration of the worlds is untiring // I can repeat all of it from the beginning / with a pen inherited from a goose and Homer / with a diminished spear / stand in front of the elements // I can repeat all of it from the beginning / the hand will lose to the mountain / the throat is weaker than a spring / I will not outshout the sand / nor with saliva tie a metaphor / the eye with a star / and with the ear next to a stone / I won't bring out stillness / from the grainy silence //

and yet I gathered so many words in one line—longer than all the lines of my palm and therefore longer than fate in a line aiming beyond in a line blossoming in a luminous line in a line which is to save me in the column of my life—straight as courage a line strong as love—but it was hardly a miniature of the horizon //

and the thunderbolts of flowers continue to roll on the oration of grass the oration / of clouds / choruses of trees mutter rock blazes quietly / the ocean extinguishes the sunset the day swallows the night and on the pass / of the winds / new light rises / and morning mist lifts the shield of islands)

The poem is composed of three parts formally and rhythmically distinct: the first and third parts are punctuationless verse, the middle section is prose. In the opening section Herbert speaks of the inadequacy of the poet's tools, the hand, the eye, ear, pen, and metaphor. They cannot express the elements or "write" the world. The prose section that follows is a single, long developed sentence with no beginning or end and only one punctuation mark, the long dash. The sentence is a graphic metaphor for his own poetry, "so many words in one line." The third part is again in verse but this time the lines are longer; they express what he said poetry was unable to express in the first section, the untiring "oration of the worlds." The poem is to be read as a single uninterrupted flow of words; the conjunction "and yet" between the first and second parts, and the conjunction "and" opening the third part suggest continuity, allowing only minimal breaks just long enough for a rapid intake of breath. The lack of punctuation in the verse sections, as well as the minimal punctuation of the prose, intensifies the impression of fluidity, and also illustrates the content of the poem, the attempt to match words to the world.

The voice of nature warrants verse, while the human voice expresses itself in prose: this is borne out by looking at the verse and prose poems in Herbert's earlier work. As we have seen, when he refers to literature (here it is his own poetry) he tends to use prose and punctuation. In this instance, however, he is inserting his own writing into the world of nature, and above all his attempt to rival nature, to speak with its voice. And whether from willful effort, from momentary failure, or from a willingness to admit defeat, the rivalry ends in a form of success in the final section.

To a greater degree than his verse poetry, Herbert's prose poems bring out his critical dialogue with tradition and permit him to use new voices and personae, new forms, and a new, sharper tone on an increasingly broad scale. The prose poetry is not opposed to his verse poetry, but constantly enriches it and complements it. Few modern poets have extended their range so far, and used both prose and verse genres in such a variety of applications, in such subtly modulated combinations of the two. In literary history the extension of form, of expressive range, can have different causes; it might be the result of historical change and the infusion of new content, or in less dramatic situations, it can be caused by the gradual wearing away of old forms due to habit and numbness. Generational change may contribute to the need for new forms, as well as the innovations on the part of an artist or group—the artist, the audience, and their common experience all have changing relationships, and as they alter, old forms are cast off in favor of new ones.[14] What is the most striking and, probably in the long run, most innovative feature of Herbert's use of prose and verse forms is that he does not simply exchange one set of forms for another; he combines them in relations that are constantly new, extending

the range of poetry cumulatively in multiple directions. He incorporates the old with the new, prose with poetry, into a polyphony of forms that are at the service of the exploration of the world.

NOTES

1 In his discussion of Białoszewski's poetic prose, S. Barańczak speaks of the blending of "epic" and lyrical elements: "In short one could say that Białoszewski takes his fabulation from the epic, and a particular organization of language from the lyric. And thanks to precisely this he can achieve the blending (*zespolenie*) of the two literary genres . . ." *Ironia i harmonia* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1973), 173.
2 S. Barańczak, 171.
3 Madeline G. Levine, *Contemporary Polish Poetry, 1925–1975* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 83–85. See also the introduction to Tadeusz Różewicz, *The Survivor and Other Poems* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), trans. by Magnus Kryński and Robert Maguire, xvii. Also Tadeusz Różewicz, *Conversations with the Prince and Other Poems* (London: Anvil, 1982), trans. by Adam Czerniawski, 15.
4 S. Barańczak, 173.
5 Michał Głowiński, "Małe narracje Mirona Białoszewskiego" in *Teksty* (Warszawa), no. 6, 1972.
6 During an interview with the author of this article in Warsaw, August, 1982.
7 For a more detailed discussion of punctuation in Herbert's poetry, see the article by John and Bogdana Carpenter, "Zbigniew Herbert and the Imperfect Poem" in *The Malahat Review* (Victoria, B.C.: Univ. of Victoria), no. 54, 1981, 111–18.
8 Interview with the author of this article.
9 See the article by Bogdana and John Carpenter, "Zbignew Herbert: The Poet as Conscience" in the *Slavic and East European Journal* 24, no. 1, 45–48.
10 Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Felieton poetycki" in *Twórczość* (Warszawa), no. 3, 1980, 135.
11 Artur Sandauer, *Poeci czterech pokoleń* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977), 323.
12 I disagree with Jan Błoński's interpretation of the ending of this poem as expressing malice and disappointment, "as if—writing the poem—the narrator suddenly became wiser or grew up." Nor do I agree with Błoński's suggestion that Herbert's poetic prose shows a "desire to return to naïveté, even escape from maturity." See his article "Tradycja, ironia i głębsze znaczenie" in *Poezja* (Warszawa), no. 3, 1970, 35.
13 Bogdana Carpenter and John Carpenter, "The Recent Poetry of Zbigniew Herbert" in *World Literature Today,* Spring, 1977, 211–13.
14 C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 11–16; also Arthur Koestler, "Literature and the Law of Diminishing Returns" in *Encounter,* May, 1970, 39–45.