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The Classicist, the Romantic and an Uncertain Eternity

Abstract

In the second half of the 20th century, the Young Wave of Polish poets (the avant-garde poets born in the mid-1940s) clashed with Zbigniew Herbert (a member of the wartime generation, born around 1920) over generational differences. This dispute revolved around poetics (“plain speech” versus “classicism”) and subject matter: whether poets should deal with “contemporary times” meaning current events, especially focusing on politics, or whether they should rather invoke topoi of Mediterranean culture in order to view current events in the context of the permanent values of European culture. For Herbert, this was also a question of the writing strategy, as he felt that topicality should not dominate the interpretation of the poem and that poetry should survive past communism. Adam Zagajewski was chosen as a representative of the New Wave because his early clash with Herbert propelled him to the position of an adversary. Sadly, both Herbert and Zagajewski failed in their attempt at an *exegi monumentum*, as the education system of today has abandoned the classical tradition and many allusions to it are simply incomprehensible to today’s high school or even college graduates. Knowledge of recent history is

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not in demand either. Both poetics are unintelligible to a wider audience and in this sense they have failed.

Keywords

Zbigniew Herbert, Adam Zagajewski, New Wave, 20th century
Polish poetics, 20th century classicism

There are different poetic strategies: to follow the *Exegi monumentum aere perennius dictum* and become a beacon in national, and perhaps even world literature. Let us follow two of them that clashed in the late 1960s. Which one won? That is for history to judge.

On the one hand, there was some “imaginary version of classicism,” as Herbert describes his program. On the other – the manifestos and the “plain-speech” practice of the New Wave. Since the latter is a poetic group, we will focus on its prominent representative, Adam Zagajewski, whose evolution is thought-provoking. In order to understand the history of the dispute, let us also take into account the background, and at least vaguely outline its main elements.

A defined epoch

The two adversaries have different dates of birth and, consequently, different generational experience, as well as different ideas of poetics. They share a “defined epoch,” that is, the communist era, more precisely, three different decades: Władysław Gomułka’s “little stability” (1956–1970), Edward Gierek’s period when “Poland grew in strength and people lived more prosperously” (1971–1980), and the Solidarity movement along with General Wojciech Jaruzelski’s attempts to destroy it by martial law (1980–1989). With that said, Zbigniew Herbert (1924–1998) lived through not only the Second World War as an adult, but also, most importantly, through Stalinism and the so-called “Polish October,” otherwise known as the “thaw,” which ended shortly thereafter with Gomułka’s tightening of control. He also remembered from his high school days the Soviet occupation of Lviv, which fell to Stalin under the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact and

subsequent German–Soviet agreements, as well as the Allies’ acquiescence in the USSR’s post-war acquisitions. This experience is very important, because it forever stripped the poet of any illusions about the nature of communism and immunized him against the leftist draw to “red fascism”¹.

New Wave poets, on the other hand, entered literary life only in the second half of the 1960s. They could not remember the war (they were generally born in the mid-1940s), they lived through Stalinism and the “thaw” as children, and their attitudes were largely influenced by the student March of 1968 and December 1970 (with the interlude of the entry of Warsaw Pact troops into Czechoslovakia due to the “Prague Spring”). In the first case, there was a student-intelligentsia revolt with an admixture of the party playing the anti-Semitism card on the occasion of Israel’s Six-Day War (1967)². In the second case, there was another workers’ revolt over food price hikes, which was brutally suppressed in the port cities of Poland (Gdynia, Gdańsk, Elbląg, and Szczecin)³. So, in general, the difference was generational and conditioned politically and economically (the latter element is generally overlooked by literary scholars), while the atmosphere of the worldwide countercultural revolt of the 1960s constituted its broader historical background.

Another factor is the question of aesthetics, which is also governed by the laws of history, although on slightly different terms, since it

1 “Those who survived the Soviet occupation from 1939 to 1941 in Lviv or Vilnius simply had an idea of the Soviet system, its functioning in a nutshell. People like me felt that 1945 was no liberation whatsoever, but simply an invasion, a further, longer occupation, one that would be much more difficult to survive morally. I had the Lviv experience. It was an insightful lesson, after which virtually no doubts remained about the intentions, the color and the goals of the power. For me, it was simply a variation of fascism. A terrible word, but I can document it. True, fascism in the sense of methods”; Herbert qtd. in Citko, 2008, p. 119.

2 In Poland, Israel’s victory over the Arab states supported by the USSR was greeted with enthusiasm by the public and produced countless jokes. In a society deprived of opportunities for public expression, “political jokes” were a form of manifestation of public sentiment. Another element was pride in Israel’s military and political leaders of Polish descent (especially popular was Menachem Begin, an Anders Army officer who, with the acquiescence of the Polish exile authorities, remained in Palestine and headed the Irgun, an underground armed organization operating in the British Mandate of Palestine).

3 Nalepa, 1990; Nalepa 2011.

depends on the changing sensibilities and fashions. Herbert's debut as a poet falls on the "thaw" of 1955–1957 and involves a generational misunderstanding, since it concerns a man who is already a well-formed adult, with earlier very tentative attempts at poetry since the late 1940s. In terms of age, the poet belongs to the war generation that was born around 1920. For military, social, and political reasons, this generation debuted in three groups. The poets of the cultural center, the so-called "Warsaw poets," were students and soldiers of the Home Army who participated in the underground cultural life of the German-occupied capital (Tadeusz Gajcy, Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, and Andrzej Trzebiński). Basically all the 20-year-old talented boys died if not during the occupation, then in the Warsaw Uprising, with the exception of Tadeusz Borowski, who survived... in Auschwitz. As a prose writer, the author of *U nas w Auschwitzu* [Here in our Auschwitz] made his debut after the Red Army defeated the Germans, and he became involved in the cultural policy of the new government, but committed suicide several years later.

Poets from smaller towns and younger poets, such as Tadeusz Różewicz and Wisława Szymborska, debuted shortly after the war (three or four years' difference is quite a lot at that age). The second wave also had its exceptions, for example, Karol Wojtyła was a seminarian and then a priest and would hide his real name under the pseudonym Andrzej Jawień, and besides, did not participate in postwar literary life (he was active during the occupation as a student of illegal courses and theatre movement⁴ in the Polish Underground State⁵). Moreover, what was unique about this group of artists was the emergence of such prose talents as Stanisław

4 Komorowska, 2022; Kisiel, 2021.

5 Note that sometimes the incorrect name "resistance movement" is used, which is a misunderstanding. In several German-occupied countries, there were various underground organizations, including armed ones, but in occupied Poland, the Underground State was an extensive, complex, top-down system on an unprecedented scale, divided into the civilian part (with an underground parliament and national government and a government-in-exile) and the military (the Home Army as an underground organization in occupied Poland with about 390,000 soldiers under the command of 10,000 professional officers, and the Polish Armed Forces in the West with more than 200,000 soldiers and officers); see: Korboński, 2008.

Lem and Jan Józef Szczepański. The latter debuted and fell silent due to Stalinism, having published in the marginalized periodicals of the Catholic ghetto anyway. Though they were older, Herbert, together with Miron Białoszewski, openly debuted only during the “thaw,” with new and very diverse members of the Generation ‘56⁶ (the most important being Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, Stanisław Grochowiak, Ernest Bryll, Andrzej Bursa, Tadeusz Nowak, Witold Woroszyński, and Witold Dąbrowski – artists born in the early 1930s⁷).

The New Wave were poets born in the mid-1940s, just before or just after the fall of Nazi Germany, and their debuts usually occurred in the second half of the 1960s. The main centers of this movement were Kraków (Julian Kornhauser, Adam Zagajewski, Jerzy Kronhold, and Stanisław Stabro) and Poznań (Stanisław Barańczak and Ryszard Krynicki), although poets from Warsaw (Krzysztof Karasek) and Wrocław (Marianna Bocian and Lothar Herbst) claimed to be part of Generation ‘68, while the Łódź milieu was represented by a somewhat separate group (Zdzisław Jaskuła and Jacek Bierezin⁸). It should also be noted that the scope of both names is disputed. The matter was summarized by Tadeusz Nyczek (1995, pp. 4–5), a literary critic and participant in the movement:

Some (e.g., Stanisław Barańczak) felt that the New Wave and Generation ‘68 were one and the same. And since they did not like the term New Wave, they preferred to use the other name, as they believed it to be more accurate and more informative. It should be stated that they meant “generation” in a narrower sense, as a group of writers clearly distinguished from the literary generation as a whole. Others (e.g., Julian Kornhauser) were also inclined to use the terms New Wave and

6 The names *Współczesność* (from the name of the *Współczesność* literary magazine as well as the *Współczesność* literary group gathered around it) generation or Generation ‘56 were used, but the distinguishing feature was a similar debut date rather than a crystallized group or poetics.

7 In some cases, it was a repeat debut, as the very young writers under the care of the communist state, known as “pryszczaci” (pimpled youths), had already managed not only to publish in Stalinist periodicals, but even to publish volumes of socialist realist poetry.

8 I mention only the most important writers, leaving out even then active and important, but now forgotten.

Generation '68 interchangeably, except that – this time, the reverse was true – they extended its meaning to the entire (or almost entire) generation beginning their literary careers at the time.... As they understood it, New Wave meant the activities of at least several creative groups and several dozen members of the generational group in total.

Nyczek considers the term Generation '68 to be more appropriate for the entire generation (in terms of the birth year), since it refers to a fundamental existential experience, while he uses the term New Wave to describe those poets who made up the social and ideological Krakow-Poznań circle that published mainly in the biweekly *Krakovian Student*.⁹ Thus, it would seem that he mainly has the literary group in mind, were it not for the considerable differences in their poetics, which were noticeable from the very beginning. The author of the anthology admits that what mattered more was the peer community and the social-political ties (metaphorically called the “mass mobilization movement”), rather than a coherent poetics, aesthetic views or literary or philosophical influences, although the subject matter was similar for all poets: the experience of a hypocritical existence in the People's Republic of Poland.

This problem reveals the methodological influence of the prominent Polish literary historian Kazimierz Wyka (1910–1975), for whom the most important determinant of a literary generation was a “generational experience,” i.e. a historical event (mainly political) that substantially affected the consciousness and sensitivity of writers who were entering adulthood at that moment (Wyka, 1977). It shaped the writers' world-feeling and worldview. In Polish literary studies of the second half of the 20th century, this category was a handy tool for describing successive generations of writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, from the first generation of Romantics to the New Wave. Nowadays, this terminology has fallen out of favor, being displaced by newer methodologies, especially when it comes to recent Polish literature that does not lend itself to such categorizations.

9 Writers not associated with the movement or generation also published in this magazine.

Poisoned humanities and self-education

However, let us remember that the dates of birth of New Wave adversaries and Herbert, decided both about the differences in their historical experience (political, military, and economic) and in their education. This is one of the key distinctions that is often forgotten. Herbert (like others of his generation, for example, Różewicz, Wojtyła, and Szczepański) received his education in a patriotic, modern school, which was of the highest standard of its time. And although he and Różewicz did not manage to graduate from the pre-war high school (the other two succeeded in starting college), the academic training they received (there was illegal underground schooling during the occupation, so Herbert, for example, managed to pass the underground high school diploma) gave them an intellectual advantage over those receiving the communist education of the People's Republic of Poland. As for Herbert, it should be added that shortly after the end of the hostilities, he began attending the Higher School of Commerce and Jagiellonian University in Krakow, and later studied at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. The dates are very important, because in the first post-war years universities still had a pre-war staff and young Herbert learned non-socialist economics (he remained a Keynesian until the end of his life¹⁰); in Krakow, he attended lectures on philosophy by Roman Ingarden (the most prominent Polish student of Edmund Husserl); in Toruń, he took a philosophy seminar by Henryk Elzenberg (an excellent scholar, who was very "independent," and did not belong to any school of philosophy), while other lecturers at this university were outstanding professors of philosophy and law, mainly from pre-war Vilnius and Lviv. After transferring to the University of Warsaw (by that time, scholars like Ingarden and Elzenberg had already been removed from the faculty), he was refused permission to submit his master's thesis by Adam Schaff, a member of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party and one of the important ideologists of Marxism-Leninism in Poland. We must add that Herbert, an erudite,

10 On the poet's economic education and the presence of economic doctrines, see: Ruszar, 2020; Ruszar, 2016.

who would have been the happiest to take “a position as a perpetual student” (Citko, 2008, p. 111),¹¹ gained a great deal of knowledge in art history through self-education.

The New Wave poets attended schools in the People’s Republic of Poland. The education of this generation is described in Bohdan Cywiński’s book *Zatruta humanistyka* [Poisoned Humanities]¹². Society was pacified by Stalinist terror, and consent to public hypocrisy was widespread. Barańczak and Krynicki both studied Polish literature in Poznań, while Kornhauser graduated from Slavonic studies (with a major in Serbo-Croatian) in Krakow, while Zagajewski studied psychology and philosophy. Barańczak’s academic career (of the main leaders of the New Wave, he – a former member of the Polish United Workers’ Party – became most involved in overt opposition activity) ended when he joined the Workers’ Defence Committee (Polish acronym: KOR) in 1976¹³. He was expelled from the Adam Mickiewicz University and moved to the United States in 1981, where he took the chair of Polish language and literature in the Slavic studies department at Harvard University. Zagajewski was an assistant lecturer of philosophy (officially: Marxist philosophy) at the AGH University of Science and Technology in Krakow until 1975, and, having lost his job, he emigrated to France for twenty years (1982–2002), while also teaching at American universities as a visiting professor (in Chicago and Houston). Only Julian Kornhauser kept his job at Jagiellonian University until the end of the Polish People’s Republic and retired as a professor in free Poland. The young writers and scholars had to make up for the gaps in their education on their own and, first of all, free themselves from the allure of Marxism, which in those days had the status not so much of an ideology as of the crowning achievement of philosophical thought in general, albeit less so after the collapse of Stalinism.

11 *Herbert nieznanym...* [Herbert Unknown], p. 111.

12 Cywiński, 1980 [illegal edition in the so-called “second circulation”].

13 KOR, Komitet Obrony Robotników – Committee for the Defense of Workers was an institution of intellectuals formed after the pacification of the Polish workers’ revolt in 1976. Initially this organization was set up to defend the imprisoned and help those who had been thrown out of work, then by 1980 it had grown into a serious opposition force: the Committee for Social Self-Defense. See: Lipski, 2006; Błażejewska, 2010.

To realize the importance of education for the indoctrinated minds of the New Wave (and for the entire generation, of course), let us consider the small booklet *W cudzym pięknie* (In The Beauty Created by Others) by Adam Zagajewski (2007, first published in 1998). The publication is a sort of confession with elements of memories from his youth, and – as is often true in such a case – is somewhat pretentious, and at times dull, not to mention very forgiving of the author. Nevertheless, it shows us the poetic path from the vantage point of old age, which is interesting to us. Zagajewski recalls old professors for whom he feels respect, but with whom he had no intellectual rapport (except perhaps for Danuta Gierulanka, a student of Roman Ingarden, and therefore a “granddaughter” of Husserl, with whom he wrote his master’s thesis). When he was a student, the intellectuals he met were generally already retired and did not teach (Ingarden would at most give lectures at the PAU¹⁴), or had already become autistic eccentrics completely crushed by the system (prof. Leszczyński who taught Descartes, Berkeley, Hume and Kant), or at worst senile retirees like the prominent pre-war psychologist Stefan Szuman, who was graciously allowed to live on the top floor of the Institute of Psychology, where he was once head of the department. The demeaning life of an eminent scholar did not invite intellectual interactions:

We were looking at a stodgy, rather poorly dressed old man, carrying up grocery bags to the third floor, slowly and with effort, with the occasional white bunch of onions or green, hard stalks of leeks sticking out of them. Sometimes he was accompanied by his wife, as old as he was [...]. There was an air of sadness, poverty, dotage about them [...]. For them, for Szuman and his wife, we were probably barbarians, formed by the post-war education system, by the new schools, the new newspapers, the new radio and television. They must have regarded us as fools trained by the new system [...]. We were so different! These two generations, so far apart in time, could be considered completely alien to each other [...]. One could also come to think that the system had won a victory by carefully separating the old from the young, cutting

14 Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Krakow.

off the young from any contact with the best representatives of the pre-war intelligentsia [...] (Zagajewski, 2007, pp. 48–49).

The twenty-year gap between Herbert and the New Wave meant a cultural and civilizational gulf. For Zagajewski, as he writes in his memoir, “the greatest attraction was that the prominent intellectual living in humiliation was a personal friend of Witkacy and Schulz,” and years later he regrets lacking the courage to talk to him. Gaps in education – or more precisely, indoctrinated studies – left the young susceptible to Marxist usurpations, although, as the author describes, “I came out of this tribulation [of communism] unscathed – or almost unscathed” (Zagajewski, 2007, p. 230):

I taught classes in the history of philosophy, but officially my subject was called “Fundamentals of Marxist Philosophy.” I read passages from Plato [...], Descartes [...], Kant, Hegel, existential philosophers with the students, and sometimes I did not even get to Marx at all, who – contrary to chronology! – was supposed to crown and conclude all the millennial efforts of European philosophy, but, nevertheless, I belonged, formally, to the army of mercenaries appointed to enslave the minds of students (Zagajewski, 2007, p. 29).

The enslavement was also carried out through ideological struggle against the Catholic Church. “I was twenty-three years old; someone advised me to apply to the Society of Atheists and Freethinkers and offer my services as a contractor. The lectures there were very well paid” (Zagajewski, 2007, p. 138). The experience was disconcerting for someone “who neither belonged nor intended to belong to the Communist Party, who was part of a tribe different from theirs, who was a young poet and just wanted to earn some money so that he could buy books and records” (Zagajewski, 2007, p. 139). Sensitivity to beauty (communism was unbelievably hideous and primitive) and widespread lies that blatantly defied reality must have pushed the sensitive poet (as well as his peers) into confrontation with the regime. The clashes of 1968 and 1970 came as a shock, as the restricted openness to European culture and the loosening of censorship under Edward Gierek failed to become an effective means of rallying young artists

and intellectuals. The 1970s was a decade of total ideological collapse of communism in Poland as a doctrine explaining the world, because – of course – communism as a concept and system of power was doing well, as it guaranteed people's careers (hence the affiliation of some members of the generation to the Polish United Workers' Party).

Additionally, there was a difference between the generation that remembered Stalinist terror (which was a cause for fear or at least restraint) and the generation born in the People's Republic of Poland, which did not experience the terror of life sentences, capital punishment and gulags (Kopka, 2019; Moczarski, 2009), so the young in the 1970s were braver as they did not know to be afraid. Murders were rare, sentences were generally of several years (with the hope of amnesties on communist national holidays), and the majority of oppositionists risked mere interrogation, detention for 48 hours, or expulsion from work or college¹⁵. The 1970s witnessed a multitude of overt political activities (before that, conspiracies which invariably ended in arrests, dominated¹⁶). The young intelligentsia, aware of the shortcomings and official lies of history, was swept up in a frenzy of self-study in illegal seminars and lectures, and the typical conflict of generations (let us remember that these were the times of the counterculture, the Paris May and similar phenomena) gave way to the expectation of intellectual support from older intellectuals. This is how the Flying University¹⁷ and the Society of Scientific Courses (Terlecki, 2000), which Zagajewski mentions, came into being:

15 "I experienced neither trial nor imprisonment, I was not persecuted by the secret police and, although I turned into an enthusiastic oppositionist, I spent only one hour at the police station" (Zagajewski, *W cudzym pięknie* [In the beauty created by others], p. 24).

16 In the early 1970s, "Ruch" activists were arrested. Sentences ranging from 4 to 7 years in prison were handed down; see Byszewski, 2008.

17 The tradition of illegal education and clandestine colleges is more than a century old in Poland. The name "Flying University" appeared in the Polish public discourse with a book by Bohdan Cywiński, who described the activities of illegal schooling under the Russian partition in Warsaw at the end of the 19th century, and the term used a century later also refers to it (Cywiński, 1971). Illegal education during the German occupation of the World War II years had slightly different characteristics, as it was organized by the Polish Underground State and was more codified, despite the fact that participation in underground education was punishable by death or deportation to a concentration camp (Korboński, 2008).

Seminars and lectures were proliferating, either in private homes or – sometimes – in churches or monasteries. For example, at the Norbertine Sisters in Salwator, on the banks of the Vistula, where crowds of listeners gathered. These classes, taught by prominent and independent intellectuals, and supported by the students who “self-educated,” were among the best that could be found: for they were unselfish, their fuel was curiosity, not a lust for a useful diploma (Zagajewski, 2007, p. 193).

In the second half of the 1970s, Herbert (and his generation) comes together with Generation ‘68 in joint political and cultural activities (of course, individuals get involved for a more or less political reasons). This is also when the dispute between the “classicist” and romantic “New Wave” writers ends, and when the older poet reconciles with and befriends Stanisław Barańczak, Ryszard Krynicki and Adam Zagajewski.

Herbert the “classicist” and the poetics of “plain speech”

In the 1960s, Herbert was regarded as a “classicist,” a “stoic” and an “aesthete”: a poet who drew on ancient tradition and Mediterranean myths to counter the intellectual, aesthetic and moral misery of communism (Ruszar, 2020b). It was this image that became the reason for New Wave’s attack. It seems that at the deepest, unspoken level, the dispute was over the attitude to language and tradition. The New Wave grew out of the avant-garde and distrust of hypocritical public speech. Herbert had no misgivings on this issue either, but believed that it was possible to oppose communist newspeak both through language and tradition. His correspondence with Jerzy Zawieyski, an older colleague and, in a sense, confidant, is symptomatic. In a letter that comes from before his book debut and documents his personal search in the field of poetics, Herbert writes:

I am now looking for some imaginary formula for classism of my own, for poetry that would have some chance of survival. There is a reference to this in the attached poem about time (title undetermined). I would like to find powerful vocabulary with which to rebuild sincere pathos. We have a petulant fear of pathos and of some supreme prophetic creation of poetry. I would like words to be stateful, equivalent elements (not

ornaments, not sounds, not references, not punchlines). I would like to reach a conceptual purity of poetry, new conceits, instead of sprawling metaphors, a culture of phrases and poetic syntax, parallelism, poetic definition, antinomy, paradox, dialogue, repetition, simplicity, and an expansion of the culture of concepts [Z. Herbert to J. Zawieyski, October 4, 1950] (Kądziela, 2002, p. 41).

This was the task that the poet, who had only published several poems so far and was consciously looking for his own voice, set himself. More than that – it was a philosophical and personal attitude of a conscious reference to tradition, with the premise that one must examine what remained alive in it and what had died. After all, the disaster of World War II also meant an axiological disaster, not just a military one:

Teachers in middle school hammered into our heads that “historia magistra vitae.” But when it descended upon us in all its barbaric splendor – as a real glow over my city – I realized that it was a peculiar teacher. Those who experienced it and all that followed have more material to ponder than readers of ancient chronicles. It is a muddled and dark study material. It takes the work of many consciences to illuminate it [...]. Humanity does not give up the dream of a sign, a spell, a formula that will explain the meaning of life. The need for canons, criteria to separate the evil from the good, a clear set of values is as strong now as it was in the past. When our fathers and grandfathers were asked about eternal values, their thoughts would invariably gravitate toward antiquity. Human dignity, seriousness, and objectivity radiated from the writings of the classics (Herbert, 2017).

Generation ‘68 was marked by aesthetic incoherence, while Tadeusz Nyczek (1995, pp. 5–6) describes it as a loose “mass mobilization movement.” “It is a blend of the most diverse aesthetic criteria, with literary and philosophical influences coming from extraordinarily distant traditions.” When we narrow our analysis of the New Wave generation to Adam Zagajewski and the Krakow “Teraz” group, the first thing we notice is the role of the biweekly *Student* in crystallizing important friendships in Krakow, which were not limited to a single city or literature, since theater artists, filmmakers, painters,

musicians, and cultural publicists also took part in the countercultural movement. More broadly, the generation grew up influenced by worldwide trends of cultural and moral revolt, especially from the US and France (May '68). As Nyczek (1995, p. 8) writes, "everything old was to be negated. Customs, culture, art, even language." With that said, the issue of language occupied a key position in the Soviet system, and its abuse had a different character. The new, "non-naive realism" clashed with the hypocrisy of public speech. The upshot was that the new movement failed to develop a new convention: "The truth is that the New Wave really did not create a new language, or a new style. Just as the painters of the Wprost group or the filmmakers of the cinema of moral unrest failed to create one" (Nyczek, 1995, p. 12). "Realism" (New Wave writers were maliciously accused of sharing similarities with the artists of socialist realism) actually meant being communicative, focusing on the gray and oppressive everyday life, and exposing the struggle against persuasive-propagandistic newspeak (Głowiński, 2009) that falsified the communist reality. However, this practice was not the exclusive property of the New Wave movement, but a common system of means of expression of the time (used by various artistic groups), and besides, it did not apply exclusively to art or literature. On the contrary, from the 1970s onward, it was the norm in everyday life as well, as a reaction to the dissociation of the official language from everyday private speech.

Adam Zagajewski's attitude to language was even more complicated, as his output of that time indicates. His testimony survives not only in the poems, but also in his commentary, or rather, a self-critical confession from years later: "I was convinced that language lies; at that time I was not yet thinking of the 'language of newspapers,' this *bête noire* of the New Wave, but of language in general" (Zagajewski, 2007, p. 161). The statement distinguishes the poet not only from Herbert, whose ambition was to discover a language of truth, a language tied to the thing, a language that is "transparent" (i.e., does not obscure Reality¹⁸), but also from his peers, focused on

18 When I use the word spelled with a capital letter, I am referring to the notion of Zbigniew Herbert, who understood it as the fullness of physical, cultural and transcendent reality.

deconstructing the language of communist propaganda and using various forms, from irony, to unmasking, to unabashed mockery to achieve this goal. This is probably why Zagajewski was never an advocate of “linguistic poetry,” like his Poznań colleagues Stanisław Barańczak and Ryszard Krynicki, for whom (at least in the first period of their career) sophisticated language games were part of poetic philosophy.

What Herbert and the young poets had in common was a sense of incapacitation (under communism, a person was not a citizen, but a subject) and a psychological self-defense against police-political power through irony or even mockery. The similarity between Herbert’s and New Wave’s diction is most obvious in the frequent use of reported speech and pseudo-reported speech, with Herbert preferring the poetics of roles and masks (hence Mr. Cogito, who slowly displaces other characters, who are generally borrowed from history, mythology or literature), while New Wave more often uses a style of appeal, especially to the “ordinary man of the street.” New Wave poets also liked to identify with their protagonist, the “simple man,” and use this convention to speak on his behalf, which led to some surprising situations, like when Zagajewski, in his poem “Philosophers,” demands that philosophers “stop fooling us.” As stated above, the author was a (hardly diligent) lecturer of Marxist philosophy¹⁹.

Zagajewski was the first in his circle to abandon this poetic device. He also sharply disputed his reserve against the poetry of living alongside others, of understanding and empathizing with others, as will be discussed later. Herbert, on the contrary, wrote the poetry of roles or masks in order to distance himself, to avoid subjectivism, confusing the speaking subject with the author. Thus, it can be deceptive to identify the views of the characters of the poems with their author and vice versa: many readers honestly believed that Mr. Cogito was the poet himself, and Mr. Cogito stuck to Herbert as a pseudonym standing for the author. Only professionals insisted that the degree of identity (or rather, similarity of views) should be

19 “We [young poets] were ourselves infected with some of the venoms of the system” (Zagajewski, *W cudzym pięknie* [*In the beauty...*],..., p. 64).

discovered in each poem separately. As for his strong connection to the nation, this trait brought the poet into fierce conflict with the former oppositionists, who after the victory of 1989 formed an alliance with the former apparatchiks from the Polish United Workers' Party, as well as with Czesław Miłosz²⁰.

Distrust of deceitful language – a feature of both this movement and of Herbert – coincided with a desire to restore the link between words and reality, to debunk lies. The dispute was over methods, as will be discussed later. Often it was a matter of drawing attention to some of the more subtle operations on language, such as the blurring of concepts and the annihilation of the concrete, not to mention the substitution of designators. This is the subject of Zagajewski's poem, involving a battle against newspeak based on the substitution of words:

No one talks about butchers today
 those old knights of blood
 butcher shops have become museums of new sensitivity
 he's an official no hangman (...)
 In the twentieth century under the new government of reason
 certain things no longer happen²¹
 (translated by Charles Kraszewsky)

Another aching obvious enemy is the ubiquitous censorship, which Julian Kornhauser writes about, while making an allusion to the colloquial term "deleted by the censors," meaning eliminated from print:

20 Namely, Adam Michnik and the circles of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The conflict between Miłosz and Herbert (despite their mutual admiration for each other's poetry) was political. Miłosz hated the Second Polish Republic and the insurrectionary spirit of the Poles and right after the war, he became a Stalinist diplomat, fighting the pro-independence emigration in America (Mokrzycka-Markowska, 2013). He referred to Herbert as an alleged nationalist: "It was I who made a name for Herbert in America, and for what? So that he would capitalize on the momentum all his life and cruise through his poetry like this, another child prodigy 'riding on the wave of events,' but without that wave, a sullen, old, National Socialist fart?" (Giedroyc, 2011, p. 379). Herbert was proud of the achievements of pre-war Poland and felt a strong moral connection to the generation of "Warsaw poets" who perished during the German occupation. He also wrote a spiteful pamphlet dedicated to Miłosz (Herbert, "Chodasiewicz" from *Rovigo*, 2008, pp. 617–618).

21 Zagajewski, *Sklepy mięsne* [Meat Shops], 1975, p. 25.

The state deletes the nation
The state deletes the fatherland
The state deletes the barricade
The state deletes the December events
The state deletes certain names
The state deletes the banners
The state deletes the Jews
The state deletes Radio Free Europe
The state deletes March
The state deletes titles ranks and degrees
The state deletes the imperative mood
The state transforms the nation into socialist camp
Fatherland into industrialized cities
Barricades into paper for recycling
The December events into Bratny's novel
Some names into initials
Banners into Mayday parades
Jews into professors
RFE into CIA
March into spring
Titles ranks and degrees into empty spaces
The imperative mood into the conditional
The state is the most renowned Polish poet of all²²
(translated by Charles Kraszewsky)

Let us note that the poem talks not only about complete or partial removal of the text, but also about a mandate to change words, phrases, names and other actions through which the censor becomes a co-author of the work. Zagajewski shows the bureaucratic banality of the censor's office, which cannot be compared with the physical suffering of the persecuted heroes:

Thou art, oh Censorship, art not so horrible after all
Neither dungeon nor drops of salty water
Dripping down dark stony walls,

22 Kornhauser, 2016, p. 129.

Neither the whistle of knout and bloody curses
But sunlight in the curtains, a desk of ash
The gay whistle of the teakettle, the homy aroma of coffee
Fills every corner and you can hear the high
Pearly laughter of the full-bodied official
Who holds in her hand quite ordinary scissors.²³
(translated by Charles Kraszewsky)

The tension between the personal experience of the world and the duties to the community was perhaps most noticeable in the poetry of Zagajewski, who – in this regard – never came to terms with the claim of the collective. He himself, years later, described the issue this way:

Great and unforgettable emotions – but not quite mine [the election of Karol Wojtyła as pope, the great strike at the Gdansk shipyard, the rise of Solidarity, martial law – my addition]. As they subsided, they faded, I felt a little ashamed. I was returning to my inner homestead, which for a moment, sometimes quite a long one, seemed poor and modest. [...] I have nothing against these kinds of experiences. They certainly enriched my life and not only mine. I was only embarrassed that they came from outside, that I didn't earn them. I was a spectator of a gigantic spectacle. Can poetry, art be made from such emotions? [...] But due to this hint of shame... when the immense emotions were leaving me, I did not stop wondering about the genesis of artistic emotion, and I was more and more inclined to believe that a poem or an essay or a story should originate from emotion or observation, from ecstasy or melancholy – my own, not national ones. They should be born within me, not in the crowd, even if I loved the crowd (loved the crowd – my God!) and passionately identified with it. The New Wave – this is where its strength and its weakness come from – tapped into collective emotions, sometimes only intuited and hypothetical (it's not every day that society deigns to turn up in a church or a shipyard!) (Zagajewski, 2007, pp. 207–208).

The breakthrough came in the mid-1980s, during his exile in Paris, and was most visible in the collection of essays *Solidarność i samotność*

23 Zagajewski, 2010, p. 49.

[Solidarity, Solitude] (Zagajewski, 1986). Not surprisingly, the poet forgoes New Wave political themes as too current, temporary and essentially unimportant, in favor of personal experience. He is also critical of his debut and early poetry:

The New Wave was a hybrid formation, a historical-artistic alloy, a metal in which collective emotions and individual dreams, fantasies, and skills were mixed. I have the most deeply ambivalent feelings towards this phenomenon, this metal. [I am] not saying this angrily, I am not motivated by either regret or resentment, and neither bitterness nor despair, envy nor pettiness (at least I don't think so) is speaking through me. Rather, it is indifference to a form that has already burned out, to a shape that was established so long ago; indifference and boredom (Zagajewski, 2007, p. 206).

We knew the poetry of our predecessors, we read the great European poets. But we were not educated enough [...]. A handful of 20-year-olds, who knew nothing yet, founded the TERAZ poetry group. The name was supposed to be a manifesto [...]. The name TERAZ suggested something radically present, that this group of young poets in black sweaters had found direct access to current affairs.... Soon I turned into a propagandist and ideologue of this unattractive "now"; I, exiled from the paradise of imagination, where music used to mix with poetry and painting, began to proclaim the supremacy of "duty" over pleasure, sobriety over daydreaming, society over the solitary reader and poet, history over the timelessness of artistic contemplation, the concrete over the symbolic (Zagajewski, 2007, pp. 174–176).

The fact that I made my debut with angry political poetry protesting against the system, irritates me at times; I have long stopped attaching importance to this type of poetry. I have come to understand that poetry is elsewhere, outside of current partisan battles, and even outside of rebellion against tyranny, preferably even justified (Zagajewski, 2007, p. 63).

In his late comments, Zagajewski seems to acknowledge that the poetics of the New Wave did not suit him at all, mainly because of his personality and philosophical interests, and that social involvement

was a need of the hour, a matter of atmosphere and friendships. Paradoxically, in his late career Zagajewski not only befriended Herbert, but also came very close to his poetry, in the sense of the subject matter, especially in terms of philosophical inquiry, and in particular in the understanding of what is, or what should be, the focus of poetry: “contemporaneity” or “Reality”? This question will be discussed separately, as it was the cause of a major dispute, but first let us turn our attention to Zagajewski’s evolution. What is worth writing about? What should be the subject of poetry? It seems that the turning point is seen in the poem “Co godzinę wiadomości” [Hour by hour news] (*Letter, Ode to Plurality*), whose conclusion reads:

Hour on the hour news on the radio
The talking heads know everything: impossible
You’d think that every hour
Should kill, steal, deceive. And yet
It does, the hours like lions devour
The stores of life. Reality reminds one of
A sweater worn at the elbows. Whoever
Listens to the news, knows not, that
Just around the corner, in the rain-soaked garden
A little grey cat is wandering, playing,
Struggling with the stiff stalks of the grass.
(*Letter, Ode to Plurality*, 36)
(translated by Charles Kraszewsky)

The former New Wave poet focused his attention on political news and was passionate about History, spelled with a capital letter, at least in the Communist era. This epoch was fascinated by history, while claiming to be its culmination, the happy and perfect end of social development. Now the poet suggests that one must not miss other facets of life, because the sphere of political interest that is imposed by the media is not necessarily worth it at all, not to say that it is not likely to be more valuable²⁴. Politics becomes degraded,

²⁴ In his prose comment, the assertion reads as follows: “There is a war going on in art, a fierce dispute, concerning reality. And yet we experience the totality

virtually irrelevant: this even applies to such a dramatic event as martial law:

All of these great events,
the unexpected blows,
the victorious battles that
you wage against your own brothers
– now you’ve conquered factories and mines
smashed in the doors of
our flats, keep going, now
arrest our thoughts – they’ll
shrink until they arrive at the dimensions
of the tiny fonts used
for the notes to Norwid’s poetry.²⁵

This is the new version of *ars poetica* in poetry, tantamount to a retreat from the ideals of the debutant. Zagajewski (2007, p. 128) puts it this way: “The defense of poetry is the defense of something which abides in the human being, the fundamental ability to experience the wonder of the world, to discover the divine in the universe and in other people, in a lizard and chestnut leaves, to marvel and freeze in this wonder for a long moment.” This is almost a quote from Herbert! although the view was expressed in a poem to another representative of the New Wave. At the same time, this opinion can serve as an interpretation of the poem “To Ryszard Krynicki – A letter” (from the collection *Report from the Besieged City*), which extols the salvific value of beauty. Despite the friendship and affinity between the two poets, Herbert, in gentle words, but nevertheless scathingly judges

of the world, given to us at every moment; on the beach, in the late afternoon, when seagulls gather on the sand; on the train, at dawn, when the sun rises over the rooftops of a foreign city, and even in a moment of great fatigue, when we are able to forget about ourselves for a moment. As soon as we have enough patience, when we are attentive, reality opens trustingly before us; we feel then that it is before us, whole” (Zagajewski, *Solidarność i samotność...* [Solidarity, Solitude], p. 60).

²⁵ *Kultura* 7/418–8/419, 1982, p. 59. The poem was later published in the second-circulation volume: A. Zagajewski, *Petit*, Wydawnictwo Słowo, 1983.

the poetics of the New Wave, which is overly focused on the description of the miserable contemporaneity:

Not much will remain Ryszard in truth not much
of the poetry of our mad century Rilke Eliot sure
a few other worthy shamans who knew the secret
of word spells time-resistant forms without which
no phrase deserves memory and speech is like sand

our school notebooks subjected to earnest torture
with their traces of sweat tears and blood will be
to the eternal proofreader a song without a score
nobly righteous and all too self-evident

we came too easily to believe beauty does not save
that it leads wantons from dream to dream to death
none of us was able to wake the dryad of a poplar
or to decipher the handwriting of the clouds
that is why no unicorn will stray across our tracks
we'll raise up no ship in the bay no peacock no rose
nakedness was left to us and we stand here naked
on the right the better side of the tryptych
The Last Judgment

we took public affairs onto our lanky shoulders
the battle with tyranny lies the recording of pain
but our foes—you admit—were despicably small
and so was it worth it to bring down holy speech
to rostrum gibberish to a newspaper's black foam

so little joy—sister of the gods—in our poems Ryszard
too few glimmering twilights mirrors wreaths ecstasies
nothing just obscure psalmodes the whine of animulae
urns of ash in a burned-out garden²⁶
(translated by Alissa Valles)

26 Z. Herbert, *To Ryszard Krynicki – A Letter* [in:] Herbert, Z. *The Collected Poems 1956–1998*. Translated and edited by Alissa Valles. HarperCollins, 2007.

Herbert's poetics remained consistent. He believed in the liberating power of truth, as well as in the salvific power of beauty.²⁷ In this poem, he calls to witness the highest poetic authority in Poland, that is, Adam Mickiewicz. The line "to whisper in the garden of betrayal a silent night" is an allusion to the scene from Konrad's cell (*Forefathers' Eve* Part 3), a romantic masterpiece in which the waking prisoner ponders over questions beyond his miserable plight:

Still moon, when you arise, who asks of you
Whence you come; when you toss before you stars,
Which of them might your future ways construe!
(translated by Charles Kraszewsky)

In his youth, he developed a style with beauty and truth as its two pillars. Beauty saves humanity in a situation of debasement, the banality of evil and widespread ugliness and wickedness. The problem is that when one is forced to resist, one must stoop down to the level of the despicable enemy. Tadeusz Nyczek (1995, p. 117), in recalling the poetics of the New Wave, says something almost identical as Herbert: "The catalog of ways of exercising power that this poem records may not be very fanciful: searches, trials, interrogations, courts, censorship... But this is how, through repression, the political side of life appeared in this best, in its own opinion, of all systems." Both of the poets – Zagajewski and Krynicki – underwent a far-reaching evolution towards philosophical poetry, concerned with the beauty of the world, and not only with the monstrosity of History,

27 What is poetry which does not save? – this question, which Czesław Miłosz asked just after the war in his volume *Ocalenie*, was one of the most momentous during the existence of the People's Republic of Poland, with many poets, including Herbert and the New Wave writers, trying to offer their answers. The relevant passage reads:

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or people?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment,
Readings for sophomore girls.

(translated by Miłosz)

("Dedication" from *The Collected Poems 1931–1987* by Czesław Miłosz. HarperCollins Publishers, 1988).

represented by “everyday press gibberish” and “the black foam of newspapers.” Incidentally, Zagajewski also received the royal gift of a poem called “Widokówka od Adama Zagajewskiego” [A postcard from Adam Zagajewski] (from the *Rovigo* collection), where a close reading reveals the prominence of truth, though without overlooking beauty. This time the focus is not on truth as a description of banal evil, but on anthropological and metaphysical truths that are difficult to recognize, but also hard to accept, such as the question of existential loneliness (this is a topic discussed by Zagajewski):

Thank you Adam for your card from Fryburg
on which an Angel with a cap of snow
with his great trumpet heralds a charge
of hideous apartment blocks

They’ve come up over the horizon they come inexorably closer
to reach your and my lecture podium
Hideous apartment blocks of Chernobyl Nowa Huta Düsseldorf

I can imagine just what you’re doing at this moment—
reading to a handful of the faithful for there are still some left
“*Das was sehr schön, Herr Zagajewski.*” “*Wirklich sehr schön.*”
“*Danke.*” “*Nichts zu danken.*” “*Das war wirklich sehr schön.*”
So there you are in spite of tragic Adorno’s fancy theories

A comical situation because instead of *drzewo* you say *der Baum*
instead of *obłoki*—*die Wolken* and *die Sonne* instead of *słońce*
and it has to be so if the uncertain covenant is to last
breakneck metamorphoses of sound to save an image

So you’re in Fryburg I was there once too
to make an easy buck for paper and bread
Under a cynical heart I hid a naïve illusion
that I was an apostle on a business trip

The handful listening to us deserves beauty
but also truth
that is—danger

so that they will be brave
when the moment arrives

The Angel in a cap of early snow is truly a Destroying Angel
he raises his trumpet to his lips summons the fire
vain our incantations prayers talismans rosaries

The final moment is at hand
elevation
sacrifice
the moment which sunders
and we step separately into the melting sky²⁸
(transl. by Alissa Valles)

Such is the poets' philosophical discussion of posthumous life. Herbert's melancholy has less to do with the transience of a short life and more with the essential loneliness of man, especially in the face of death, like in the poem "Threnody" (from the volume *Report from a Besieged City*) dedicated to the memory of the poet's mother, which speaks of utter loneliness "abandoned like everyone else." Because death is a moment of absolute and insurmountable separation, parting with loved ones and objects closest to one's heart, as mentioned in the poems "At the Gate of the Valley" (from the volume *Hermes, Dog and Star*) and "Mr. Cogito's Eschatological Premonitions" (from the volume *Report from a Besieged City*). The boundary between the world and the hereafter is the annihilation of even the strongest ties, and the last line of the quoted poem is one of the most poignant visions of the Last Judgment, as it does not depict the final reconciliation and the community of the saved, but shows the terrible *principium individuationis*. Death obliterates solidarity and condemns us to eternal loneliness.

Herbert wrote his poems-gifts, poems-elegies and farewells to his friends at the end of his life, and the dedications were written

28 Herbert, Z. (2007). "A Postcard From Adam Zagajewski" [in:] Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems 1956-1998*. Translated and edited by Alissa Valles. HarperCollins.

many years after the first meeting, or rather, the clash that we must talk about.

The Kłodzko Poetic Spring and the dispute over principles

Herbert's dispute with the New Wave came in two major episodes: the argument during the 9th Kłodzko Poetic Spring (1972) and the publication of Zagajewski and Kornhauser's collaborative book *The World Unrepresented*.²⁹ The accusation was that Herbert is a "poet of culture," who writes about Greek gods and deals with ancient history, while the present day of communist Poland remains untold. Herbert, who was also an economist by training and understood the phantom nature of the communist economy better than any other Polish writer, comprehended Poland's financial destitution acutely, and was therefore predisposed to a keen criticism of the system. So why did he not write "in plain speech"? This was a matter of his poetics and writing strategy³⁰. "Writing about the first secretary" not only bored Herbert, but he also believed it was a wrong literary strategy that would efface the tragic dimension of human existence and would not touch the axiological depths of the human essence. His response, published in the literary monthly *Odra*, was calm but firm:

29 I am referring to two texts: J. Kornhauser, "Herbert z odległej prowincji" [Herbert from a distant province], and A. Zagajewski, "Jak zmierzyć własny świat" [How to measure one's own world], [in:] J. Kornhauser, A. Zagajewski, 1974. The dispute had already heated up earlier, during the 1972 Kłodzko Poetic Spring. The monthly magazine *Odra* (issue 11 of 1972) published three texts: by Edward Balcerzan, Zbigniew Herbert, and Jacek Łukasiewicz under the common title *Poeta wobec współczesności* [The Poet in the face of modernity]. Herbert's statement (under this title) was later reprinted (Z. Herbert, *Węzeł gordyjski oraz inne pisma rozproszone 1948–1998*, ed. P. Kądziała, Warsaw 2001, pp. 44–46). An account of the discussion was published in *Nowy Wyraz* (1973, 1–2) under the title: "Spór o nową sztukę. Dyskusja na 9th Kłodzkiej Wiosnie Poetyckiej 1972" [Dispute over new art: The discussion at the 19th Kłodzko Poetic Spring 1972].

30 I write more extensively on this subject in: J.M. Ruszar, *Zapasy ze światem Zbigniewa Herberta* [Wrestling with Zbigniew Herbert's world]...

I must confess that the subject of our meeting: the poet in the face of modernity, provoked my negative reaction due to a rather obtrusive association with sterile pseudo-discussions from the period of socialist realism, and all the normative poetics alien to me [...]. History does not know a single example where art or an artist anywhere or at any time succeeded in making a direct impact on the fate of the world – and this sad truth leads to the conclusion that we should be modest, aware of our limited role and power [...]. The realm of the poet's activity, if s/he is serious about his/her work, is not contemporaneity, by which I mean current socio-political and scientific knowledge, but reality, a person's stubborn dialogue with the concrete reality around him/her, with this chair, with this neighbor, with this time of day, the cultivation of the fading skill of contemplation and, most of all, the building of values, the building of sets of values, the establishment of their hierarchy, that is, their conscious, moral choice with all the real-life and artistic consequences that are associated with it – this seems to me to be the basic and most important function of culture (Citko, 2008, pp. 241–243).

Years later, Adam Zagajewski, too, was critical of his youthful views:

Two young poets publish a book in which they argue that the country they live in is indescribable (while hinting that other countries or continents are better off in this regard). However, the world is never and nowhere described!... Reality mocks description (Zagajewski, 2007, p. 95).

[...]. some furious speeches during the Kłodzko Poetic Spring, attacks, emotions, taunts and the belief that one day we will reach maturity (Zagajewski, 2007, p. 209).

In hindsight – perhaps influenced by Herbert – Zagajewski places his accents differently. First, he changes his view (“contemporaneity”) of his adversary's notion, that is, he uses the word “reality.” And secondly, the point of the discussion was not that the world was not “represented” well enough, but that this sort of duty was being abandoned. This was the accusation made at the time, and it is

confirmed by researchers of the era³¹. “The poet’s words, therefore, have to fit reality as closely as possible if they are to be credible,” writes critic and participant in the movement, Tadeusz Nyczek (1995, p. 224). The dispute was over the understanding of reality and its representation. Herbert’s poems addressing public affairs sought to distill the essence of the political dispute and transfer it to the eternal-historical-mythical world, to generalize a tangible manifestation in order to portray it as a certain mechanism governing history (to some extent, we are talking about circular time³²). Meanwhile, Zagajewski’s method (and that of the New Wave) was associated with the communist literalism, and current historicity, which was synonymous with contemporaneity, the present day, and the topicality of political commentary in poetic form³³.

Yet – as it turned out a little later – both poets had a penchant for contemplating the beauty of the world and marveling at individual existence, especially that existence which is independent of humankind. Zagajewski’s lyric poems (which were rather scarce in his debut period, and predominant since the mid-1980s) have a similar atmosphere to Herbert’s lyric poetry written around the same time. Malgorzata Mikołajczak (2013) and Grażyna Halkiewicz-Sojak have pointed out these poets, affinities with late Polish Romanticism, particularly the poetry of Norwid. The patronage of Rilke (Kuczyńska-Koschany, 2017) is also at play, and it is not without

31 “If the hallmark of the system is lying, then much of literature was accused by New Wave writers of the grave sin of abandoning the truth. Let us recall Kornhauser’s and Zagajewski’s *The Unrepresented world* with their thesis on writers’ escape from responsibility for the reality they were dealing with. Form rather than content, aesthetics rather than ethics, beauty rather than reliable testimony to facts were to be the main sins of the ‘old’ literature” (*Określona epoka...* [A Defined Era], p. 223).

32 “One should not recount much, but crystallize experience: extract the essence from it. There is a beautiful word in German, *Dichtung*, which means to condense something, to compress it. So if one condenses, one cannot allow oneself to ridicule some party secretary, who will have to be footnoted two years later: who he was, what happened to him” (*Stalin i my. Rozmawia Helga Hirsch* [Stalin and us: Herbert interviewed by Helga Hirsch], [in:] *Herbert nieznany...* [Herbert Unknown], p. 182).

33 Herbert’s relations with his younger colleagues were described by, e.g. J. Samojew, 2004; T. Cieślak-Sokołowski, 2006; and D. Zawistowska-Toczek, 2008.

reason that the author of the *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus* appears in the poem “To Ryszard Krynicki – A Letter.”

The two poets met at the same point of mimesis, as they came to an agreement on the understanding of reality as Reality. Zagajewski’s former handling of detail and love of the concrete also drove him to glorify ordinary and everyday things, as has always been the case with Herbert (Stec-Jasik, 2014). The shift was that when he dropped the subject of politics, Zagajewski emerged as a pure lyricist, full of admiration for the here and now, not just the “political now.” He switched to the side of description of “Reality,” which also includes its unseen part – something that has always been a feature of Herbert’s poetry. The poets met on the plane of making the inexpressible present, rendering a mood in which the moment merges with eternity and the concrete with transcendence, so that poetry opens up to the mystery of existence. “Fighting against some president or first secretary reduces literature to the hell of journalism” (Toruńczyk, 2008, p. 127), claimed Herbert, while Zagajewski followed suit from the mid-1980s, and accepted this claim as his own, as evidenced by the poem “Petit,” which dates back to the period of martial law, but already heralded a change in the author’s attitude.

Non omnis moriar?

This discussion began with the presumption that every poet creates within the horizon of eternity. Thus, one should be tempted to make a prophecy about how long the works of these poets will last and how effective their strategies were. What is the fate of Herbert’s and Zagajewski’s poems?

After writing *Mr. Cogito* (1974), Herbert became a patron of the anti-communist resistance, and under martial law even became a “national banner” as poems from *Report from a Besieged City* (published in Paris and in underground publications) were recited at illegal literary meetings in private homes and churches. Although the New Wave poems were political, it was Herbert who, for the Solidarity generation, was a teacher of valor and courageous defense of the dignity of the individual and the rights of the community. The paradox is that at the end of the sixties Herbert was accused of breaking

away from the present day in favor of mythology and ancient history (he was a “poet of culture,” as Kornhauser wrote), and years later his political involvement caused a revolt of the younger generation (the *bruLion* poets) and even the “necessity” of founding the League for the Defense of Polish Poetry against Herbert³⁴. Generally, the point was a retreat from commitment to national issues and the manifestos of the poetry of “new privacy” of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Also, the “classical” idiom, references to Mediterranean tradition, is no longer comprehensible, having been largely eroded and forgotten. The real “period of purgatory” is yet to come, in the strongest version to boot, due to civilizational, cultural and educational changes. The standard and orientation of education has resulted in a decline in the cultural competence of successive generations of Poles, and the younger part of Herbert’s potential readers do not understand his texts: more specifically, they are unable to correctly decipher the tropes of classical humanism based on the Greco-Roman-Hebrew tradition (this remark, by the way, also applies to the works of Czesław Miłosz, as well as many other poets raised on the Mediterranean heritage). The centenary of the Poet’s birth in 2024 may spark momentary – actually occasional – interest. In all likelihood, it can be assumed that poems lauding responsibility (also for others), valor construed as “wrestling with the world” and the ethos of sacrifice cannot serve as a benchmark in an individualistic, and hedonistic culture.

Adam Zagajewski’s situation is equally unenviable. His period of political involvement, as we know it, ended in the mid-1980s, during the struggle of Solidarity against General Jaruzelski’s martial law. His essays from the *Solidarity*, *Solitude* series and later poems caused considerable dismay in the circles of admirers and provoked unsavory comments in underground literary criticism³⁵. The shift

34 Tadeusz Komendant – the author of the slogan – was speaking “not so much against Herbert himself, but against Herbert being appointed as the national bard number one”; *Kamienny posąg Komandora* [Stone statue of the Commander], *bruLion* 1989, 10, p. 121. For an extensive discussion of the *bruLion* poets’ attack on Herbert and a review of the historical and literary context, see. D. Zawistowska-Toczek, *Stary poeta...* [The old poet].

35 J. Malewski (pseudonym of W. Bolecki), *Stracone szanse* [Lost Opportunities], [in:] Malewski, *Jedynie prawda jest ciekawa* [Only the truth is interesting], Warsaw 1987 [underground publication outside censorship].

away from the current affairs to private admiration for the beauty of the world and personal experiences did fit into the new trend of “privacy poetry,” but the association of the poet with his debut poetics stood in the way of younger audiences recognizing him as their representative: after all, they already had their poets, who rebelled against their obligations to the community (Marcin Świetlicki and Jacek Podsiadło) and also against the elegance of language. It is likely for this reason that Zagajewski became a more prominent poet abroad than at home (by the way, he stayed in France until 2002) and won more awards in Western Europe than in Poland³⁶. Moreover, the youngest generation of poets in Poland over the past ten years grew up in an atmosphere of a return to newer versions of Marxism,³⁷ and their anti-capitalist and cultural left-wing views prevented them from appreciating the lyricism of the author of *A Defense of Ardor*. On the contrary, his poetry became an object of mockery and derision, especially in the autumn, when before each announcement of the Nobel Prize winner, there were spiteful comments about the “constant anticipation of the prize” for Adam Zagajewski. The paradox is that contemporary leftist “engaged poetry” employs the brutalized poetics of the New Wave, with the use of vulgarisms and simplifications that poets debuting half a century ago would never have allowed themselves³⁸.

36 The most important awards include: the 1987 Prix de la Liberté, Paris; the 2004 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, USA; the 2010 European Poetry Prize; the 2013 Chinese Zhongkun Literary Prize; the 2017 Duchess of Asturias Prize.

37 This phenomenon comes as a real shock to generations who remember real communism.

38 At the end of his life, after the victory of the Law and Justice party, Adam Zagajewski departed from the principle of apoliticism and published a political poem in *Gazeta Wyborcza* entitled *Kilka rad dla nowego rządu* [Some advice for the new government]. The piece, written according to New Wave poetics, was so inept that even his admirers were embarrassed. On the pages of the newspaper (*Gazeta Wyborcza* 16 January 2016), the poem is not available (free) in its entirety, but it was published in *Akant* 2016, 3 (March 25, 2016). Zbigniew Herbert also made extremely strident statements towards the end of his life, but in his journalistic texts (see Z. Herbert, *Węzeł Gordyjski* [The Gordian Knot]..., pp. 690–720).

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