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**THE ARCHITECTONICS OF DRAMA:
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE READING
OF ZBIGNIEW HERBERT'S *JASKINIA FILOZOFÓW*
(*A CAVE OF PHILOSOPHERS*)**

Zbigniew Herbert's archive contains a commentary on the staging of his debut drama *A Cave of Philosophers*, addressed to directors *in spe* of this play. It runs like this:

The play is set on three plans, or on three layers. The first one, the most external, being set on the 'proscenium' is the Prologue and Choir's Intermedia. The second, the plot proper, is set inside the scene. Socrates's monologues form the bottom of the play, the last, the third, the deepest plane.

In the prologue choir members speak with oratorical excess, while in Intermedia they use common language and speak indifferently. The symmetric nature of the structure should be stressed, that is the return of the same scenes through the use of the same musical themes.

Anyway, I do not have any specific wishes and leave everything to the invention of the director. However, I would like to be firm about one thing: this play should be performed in a dry, scathing manner, without Romantic poses and lilt.

Addressing a future director of his play, Herbert saw his drama on stage, and more specifically, he showed where each part of the play is to be performed. While doing it, he betrayed not only the structure of the play, but also revealed the three semantic strata of it. Both the terms which he used to describe a potential performance and the drama itself ('plan', 'layer') have literary meanings; they point

to the place of performance and structure of the play. Moreover, metaphorically, they define the character and the deep sense of the plot. It is easy to notice that through ‘plan’ and ‘layer’ Herbert was referring to two different spatial images. The first one is based on the horizontal, while the second on the vertical treatment of reality. A poet looks at a stage as a painter (and as a film director), stressing its first plan, that is the ‘proscenium’ and the second one, the inside of a stage. There is also a third plan, but in order to define it he uses a term from a different spatial and semantic order. He says: “the deepest layer”. At this moment a painter’s gaze, preserved in the commentary, is transformed, in a way, into an archaeologist’s gaze. The word ‘layer’ used by him also brings engineering associations. It refers to the language of architecture and, obviously, to Wyspiański, who in “Studium o ‘Hamlecie’” (“A Study on *Hamlet*”—which Herbert knew very well—used the phrase “the architectonics of drama”. This phrase also appears in texts by Zawieyski.¹

The instantaneous change of orders in Herbert’s commentary is meaningful: for him ‘to go deep’ means also ‘to go down’, and these terms will have not only spatial, but also temporal connotations. It could be maintained that in Herbert’s drama deeper and lower mean earlier. Before, however, the sense of architectonic structure is revealed in front of our eyes, our attention is drawn by the symmetrical structure of parts of the drama and of the whole.

The poetics of *A Cave of Philosophers* refers to classical models: both ancient and mediaeval. Herbert introduced a choir onto the stage, which performs the Prologue and the Epilogue of the play, and also two Intermedia, which separate the three acts. Each act of *A Cave of Philosophers* consists of five scenes, and each last scene is, in its entirety or in part (act three), filled with the monologue of the main protagonist—Socrates. Therefore, the Choir appears four times on

¹ “This act and act IV are the result of Plato’s *Dialogues* transformed according to the requirements of the architectonics of this drama”—wrote Zawieyski in the commentary to *Socrates*. . Zawieyski, *Nota edytorska*, in *Dramaty*, vol.3, ed. by B. Wit, Warszawa 1986, 76.

the proscenium, to introduce the play from this spot (the competencies of the Choir will turn out to be strongly debatable), which means that the parts of the Choir may be compared to the 'surface' of Herbert's drama. 'Inside' is built out of twelve dialogue scenes, which are performed in the central area of the stage. Finally, Socrates gives three of his dramatic and lyric monologues, and it is there that is the metaphysical 'bottom' of Herbert's drama; these parts can be heard from the literal 'bottom', that is from a prison's basement, from the dimly lit bunk of a lonely prisoner.

The three dramatic and scenic plans of the drama reflect the three spatial plans of the world presented there. The street is the surface, where the Choir debates in the role of Athenian people, the inside is the prison where people visiting Socrates have dialogues with him, and the bottom is the corner of the prison cell, where the completely lonely prisoner speaks with gods. The varied utterances of protagonists are related to their various locations in the scenic plan of the play and the changing space of the world represented there. So, the architectonics of *A Cave of Philosophers* looks like this: the first plan—the Choir, a street in Athens; the second plan—dialogue scenes, the inside of the stage, Socrates's cell, the third plan—monologues, back of the stage, the dark corner of Socrates's cell.

What is the symbolic sense of Herbert's architecture? The answer could be found in an "Among the Dorians" from the volume *Barbarian in the Garden* in which we come across similar ideas. While describing the first of the three Dorian temples in Paestum, Herbert wrote: "The temple's interior lay-out is simple. The central area is an enclosed, rectangular chamber—called *naos*—dark as a ship's hold. Once it accommodated a statue of the god with his thunderbolt at rest. It is a place for priests rather than worshippers, the distant echo of a subterranean cave".² This is a characteristic simile, the large room called *naos* "is dark as the inside of a ship", that

² Zbigniew Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, transl. by Michael March and Jarosław Anders, in *The Collected Prose 1948-1998*, ed. by Alissa Valles, Harper Collins, New York, 2010, 19.

is the part of the ship that is located at the bottom, under the deck. It is a “remote echo of a subterranean cave”, which will be soon seen by Herbert from the perspective of a quarry, from which the material for the construction of the temple had been extracted. It is the harsh reality of slave labour in a quarry, Herbert explains, which gave to the ancients “the two worlds of Plato’s caves, and Tartarus and the sphere of the clear heavens, where souls rid of their bodies reach a state of blessed peace”.³ The dark, stone room of a Doric temple from the 6th century B.C. is, in Herbert’s vision, a replica of a subterranean cave lit by a flame, the same one which allowed Plato in the 5th century B.C. in Book VII of *The State* to construct an allegory of human cognition. In Herbert’s drama this symbolic constellation will be evoked by the subterranean cell of Socrates, made of stones.

If—structurally and symbolically—Socrates’s cell is the *naos* of the drama, then the whole classicist art of Herbert might be treated as a temple. Its architectonics makes it clear that it was designed according to Dorian principles. “Hera of Argos has the ponderous and austere necessity of the old Doric buildings though it belongs to the classical era. The ratio of the columns’ diameter to their height is 1:5”.⁴ The ratio of acts to scenes in *A Cave of Philosophers* is identical (let us remember that in later Greek buildings this ratio was different, it was 1:6). However, if we only count the acts and scenes in Herbert’s drama, we would be behaving like a guide in Paestum, whose “passionless voice gives the temple’s dimensions with an accountant’s accuracy, providing the number of missing columns as if to apologize for the ruin. He points towards the altar but this forsaken stone stirs no emotions, If the tourists has any imagination, instead of clicking their Kodaks, they would bring an ox and slaughter it in front of the altar.”⁵ Because a temple without a sacrifice remains dead. The precise structure of the drama would be equally dead, if at

³ Ibid., 22.

⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁵ Ibid., 25.

the 'bottom' of it, a man was not dying, who, a second before he dies utters the word "sacrifice" twice.

However, what is the meaning of the Doric architectonics of Herbert's play, enlivened by the death of Socrates? Why was Herbert so precise with the structure of his début drama? Do the figures which govern it decide about its beauty, or do they merely reveal some inhuman set of rules, turned against mortals? On the one hand, the harmonious structure of Herbert's play seems to be an ironic answer to the claims of human reason: "Those who have read Plato's *Republic* will not be surprised by the popular rebellion of circa 450 B.C. against the philosophers who used the worship of numbers as a pretext for ordering a compulsory registration of men, and use the occasion to imprison all those suspected of anti-Pythagorean sentiments" wrote Herbert in the essay "Among the Dorians".⁶ At the same time, however, he reconstructs Pythagoras' triangle, a figure, which apart from its geometrical valour, also had a 'cosmic valour': "[t]he architects of the Doric temples were less concerned with beauty than with chiselling the world's order in stone",⁷ noted Herbert and moving on to the classical architecture he added: "Symmetry understood as both an aesthetic rule and as an expression of the order of the universe (and may we not say the same of the symmetrical fates in ancient tragedy) is based on a module reproduced in all units of the construction".⁸ While explaining what a module is, he quoted *Ten Books of Architecture* by Vitruvius, a Roman theoretician of architecture, thanks to whom Greek and Roman theatres in their Renaissance reconstructions, were built in Italy. Herbert, while travelling in Italy, however, was more interested in the original Greek temples, which he analysed as treatises made of stone. Was not the architectonics based on the Dorian module he constructed in *A Cave of Philosopher*, serving a similar purpose:

⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ Ibid., 23

that is of presenting in the play a tragic order of the world in its two dimensions: existential and historical-philosophical?

But, of course, Herbert's play was not made of stone, but of language. On the surface of the drama this language takes the shape of everyday trivial talk strengthened with elements of primitive ideological discourse. Inside it becomes an intellectual debate, and at the bottom a lyrical monologue. While constructing these three linguistic layers of the play, Herbert builds three types of verbal expression, which refer to three linguistic visions/pictures of the world.⁹ And it is in this way that Herbert's language became a cognitive tool.

***Ricorso* or Return of the Metaphor: Vico**

In *A Cave of Philosophers* we come across a clear trace of the linguistic theories of Giambattista Vico. Northrop Frye commented on it in this way in his book *The Great Code*:

According to Vico, there are three ages in a cycle of history: a mythical age, or age of gods; a heroic age, or age of an aristocracy; and an age of the people, after which there comes a *ricorso* or return that starts the whole process over again. Each age produces its own kind of *language*, giving us three types of verbal expression that Vico calls, respectively, the poetic, the heroic or noble, and the vulgar, and which I shall call hieroglyphic, the hieratic, and the demotic. These terms refer primarily to three modes of writing, because Vico believed that men communicated by signs before they could talk. The hieroglyphic phase, for Vico, is a "poetic" use of language; the hieratic phase is mainly allegorical; and the demotic phase is descriptive.¹⁰

The basic stylistic figure of this age of language is metaphor. "[...] The emphasis falls rather on the feeling that subject and object are linked by a common power or energy."¹¹ It gives a man who uses

⁹ See *Językowy obraz świata*, ed. by Bartmiński, Lublin 1999.

¹⁰ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2006, 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

words the power of a shaman, a magician, a priest—someone who can have direct contact with the godhead, use its power and wisdom, and transmit it to others as oral teachers and gurus. According to Frye, “presocratic philosophers such as Heraclitus or Pythagoras seem to have been essentially oral teachers or gurus; and what has survived from them consists mostly of discontinuous aphorisms with a cosmological reference.”¹² The first phase of language is “inherently poetic; it is contemporary with a stage of society in which the main source of culturally inherited knowledge is the poet, as Homer was for Greek culture.”¹³

The basis of expression here is moving from metaphorical, with its sense of identity of life or power or energy between man and nature (‘this is that’), to a relationship this is rather metonymic (‘this is put for that’). Specifically, words are ‘put for’ thoughts, and are the outward expressions of an inner reality. But this reality is not merely ‘inside’. Thoughts indicate the existence of a transcendent order ‘above’, which only thinking can communicate with and which only words can express.”¹⁴

According to Frye, we entered into this phase of language “together with Plato, [...] the basis of Plato’s use of language is the teaching method of Socrates”, whose irony “implied the renouncing of the personal possession of a wisdom in favour of an ability to observe it”.¹⁵ In the speech of the historical Socrates metaphors were replaced by allegories, which are “a particular form of analogy” allowing the construction of abstract ideas and the use of them in the process of arguing. According to Frye, Socrates’s concept of the transcendental “anchored in the seabed of human problems” replaces the reality which is available to experiences. That is why the “liminal category of martyrdom”, in which Plato put Socrates,

¹² Ibid., 25.

¹³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25-26.

¹⁵ Ibid., 26.

was so crucial. The confrontation of “thinking about death” with the experience of death will become fundamental in Herbert’s drama.

The expression in the demotic phase is the result of the critique based on analogy.

Syllogistic reasoning, it was felt, led to nothing genuinely new, because its conclusions were already contained in its premises, and so its march across reality seemed increasingly to be a verbal illusion. Then again, an analogical approach to language appeared to have criteria for distinguishing existents from non-existents [...]. The difference can be established only by criteria external to words, and the first of these criteria has to be that of “things” or objects in nature.¹⁶

Thus, this is language which is concrete, focused on descriptions of ordinary things and the practical activities of the majority of people. “A Sumerian or Egyptian of 3000 B.C.E., if he were ordering stone for a building, or bickering with his in-laws about the finance of his marriage, or assessing the amount of tax owed by a farmer, could doubtless use much the same demotic categories of true and false, reasonable and fanciful, that we should use now,” wrote Frye,¹⁷ and Herbert would have probably agreed with him. Although Herbert was not against the concretes of life, he knew that in demotic language metaphysical, moral or religious notions simply cannot be expressed.

Thus, on the way to subsequent levels in *A Cave of Philosophers*, we move back in time, in the direction of sources of expression and cognition. At each stage we experience the world differently, people, gods and Socrates himself. During the first stage—demotic—there is no philosophy at all. During the second—hieratic—stage Socrates is present, but he almost does not participate in dialogue. It is during the third—hieroglyphic—stage that a silent philosopher is transformed into a poet who “thinks with all his life and all his person”, as Herbert wrote in his essay about Hamlet. “The obsessive, dense form of thinking” at the “bottom” of the drama takes the shape

¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹⁷ Ibid., 31-32.

of monologues full of metaphors, which give way to an “explosive dialogue”, a dialogue with gods.¹⁸ All this happens a moment before the death of the lonely, accused and suffering protagonist. The death which puts all this philological, historical and philosophical construction of the play into one knot and allows us to experience on the existential plane as a ‘liminal experience’ in the sense given to this expression by Karl Jaspers. The heart of the matter in this play is an attempt to transcend borders of cognition and express the mystery of being in the face of the limited condition of a lonely, accused man experiencing fear.

¹⁸ Z. Herbert, *Hamlet na granicy milczenia*, in Z. Herbert, H. Elzenberg, *Korespondencja*. Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich, 132.