The Liturgy of the Final Hours Zbigniew Herbert’s Breviaries in English translation

Abstract
The Liturgy of the Final Hours Zbigniew Herbert’s Breviaries in English translation

When Wydawnictwo Literackie published Zbigniew Herbert’s Poezje wybrane/Selected poems (Cracow 2000), among the poems under the title of Breviary three were translated into English, while the shortest one was omitted. What is more, John and Bogdana Carpenter, the authors of the translation, entitled each of the three pieces Prayer. However their translations capture the essence of the poems with the highest precision, there are questions to be raised in reference to the poems’ English titles and Breviary [III] exclusion. All of Herbert’s four Breviaries belong to his latest poetry volume entitled Epilogue of the Storm and were written during the course of his severe illness, but it places them not only in the context of the imminent death, but also in religious culture and tradition of reading breviary.

Keywords: Zbigniew Herbert, Epilogue of the Storm poetry volume, breviary in poetry, the art of translating poems, metaphysicality in poetry

1. The breviary cycle of lyric poems as part of the Epilogue of the Storm poetry collection

Four lyric poems written by Zbigniew Herbert are entitled Breviary. They are a part of Epilogue of the Storm – his poetry volume, published in May 1998, three months prior to his death; the poems collected in this volume are his final ones. These verses are considered difficult – they were written when the poet was bedridden, when “he could neither breathe normally nor even walk”¹, and knew that death was nigh.

Wydawnictwo Literackie (in 2000) published English translations of Zbigniew Herbert’s lyrics selected from various poetry collections². Among the poems under the title of Breviary (I give them the following working titles: Breviary [I], Breviary [II], Breviary [III] and Breviary [IV]), three were translated into English, while the shortest one

¹ Katarzyna Herbert’s words from the interview: “Pani Herbert. Katarzyna Herbert w rozmowie z Jackiem Żakowskim”, Gazeta Wyborcza 30 (December 2000 – 1 January 2001), 15.
(Breviary [III]) was omitted. The authors of the translation, John and Bogdana Carpenter, entitled each of the three pieces Prayer. There are questions to be raised in reference to these very accurate translations capturing the essence of the poems with the highest precision.

The first question is about the English title chosen by the translators – not Breviary but Prayer. This can be considered a kind of modification to the meaning given by Herbert to his lyrics. The second question concerns the reasons for leaving Breviary [III] out. In Epilogue of the Storm, four poems create a kind of small cycle of lyrics composed in a specific way and complementing one another. It can be presumed that the poems were a fragment (the beginning) of the idea of creating the poet’s own personal breviary, especially considering that – according to Andrzej Franaszek – some of the lyrics of this nature remained in the manuscripts³. The breviary form was the essence of his poetic conception. These lyrics (Breviary [I], Breviary [II], Breviary [III] and Breviary [IV]) should not be separated. The author perceived them as a whole, the implementation of a coherent idea.

At this point it should be emphasized that the English translations of the poems are accurate and refined, reflecting the spirit of Zbigniew Herbert’s poetry. Nevertheless, questions about specific translational decisions are well grounded, since they refer to the meaning of the specific lyrics under discussion.

The third question on the art of translation pertains to the structure and the conception of the poetry collection. Breviaries perfectly blend with the whole Epilogue of the Storm, forming an integral entity with the remaining poems, which deal with the past. Translating only selected lyric poems from various volumes (probably out of necessity and due to the rules governing publications of this kind) deprives them of a meaningful context. The poems are elements of a whole – a volume of poetry, and at the same time a coherent artistic concept, yet the choice is governed by its own laws.

2. Breviaries – Prayers

The lyric poems under the Polish title Brewiarze refer to particular meanings, as well as a specific tradition and religious culture. The translators chose the title Prayers, thus modifying author’s original title. Prayers seems quite unambiguous when directing the act of reading towards religious poetry in its general sense. This title guides the reader to the literary genre which can be considered “a prayer-poem” and to a very broadly understood religious culture. It refers to prayer-poems that deal with the topic of man’s relationship with God in a whole range and richness of meanings. Brewiarze,

³ Andrzej Franaszek wrote: “Towards the end of his life, Zbigniew Herbert will sketch several poems under the title Breviary, he will manage to publish some of them in Epilogue of the Storm, but will leave some in the manuscript. Among the unfinished works, there is also one dated Christmas Eve 1995, in which we can read a request to God: remember a boy who asked you fervently / not for happiness, girls’ smooth bellies, the ability / to arrange words, wealth and health / but he asked you fervently on his knees and with tears in his eyes, to put in his hands the cold virtue of fortitude”. Andrzej Franaszek, Herbert. Biografia (Kraków: Znak, 2018), vol. 1, 212; vol. 2, 794–795.
on the other hand, points to the book of *Breviarium Romanum* which has existed since early Christianity (3rd century AD) and has been used for prayer by clergymen and religious people, as well as – in an abbreviated version – by lay people. The two titles – *Brewiarze* (*Breviaries*) and *Prayers* are not identical in meaning. The word ‘prayer’ does not contain and does not activate the direct contexts of meaning included in the word ‘brewiarz,’ which is important, especially in all attempts to define the specificity of Herbert’s poetic prayer, its tone and its religious and transcendent dimension – since it relates directly to the depth of the poet’s relationship with God. These poems are so personal that the use of the word ‘poet’ instead of ‘lyric subject’ when trying to give a description seems appropriate. When John and Bogdana Carpenter decided on the title *Prayers*, they introduced Herbert’s poems into the mainstream of religious poetry, and into broad cultural contexts, bestowing on them a certain universality of meanings and references.

*Breviarium Romanum* is the Latin title of *The Liturgy of the Hours*®. *Breviarium* stands for ‘abbreviation’ and refers to the structure of a book based on fragments of various text sources: “According to the ancient Christian tradition, *The Liturgy of the Hours* is arranged in such a way, so that all times of the day and the night could be sanctified through worshipping God”®. A breviary contains fragments from the Holy Scripture, texts written by the Fathers of the Church, psalms, and hymns, subordinated to the circadian and calendar rhythm. It is a book of prayers and religious writings, canonically arranged and organized in accordance with the church calendar, directly related to the Catholic tradition®. A breviary puts a praying person in sacral time, when all designated hours are to be filled with prayer. Zbigniew Herbert’s act of including his poems in the area of the liturgy of the hours gives them a strictly defined character and forms connections with a rich tradition of prayer based on reading and – most importantly – on contemplation. Translating the title *Brewiarze* as *Prayers* moves these poems away from direct, native connections with *The Liturgy of the Hours*, and also from the deep meaning opened up by such a connection. Herbert was a man of reading, of utmost respect for tradition and sources. In *Breviaries* this respect is clearly noticeable. The term adopted by the poet opens up a correspondence of significations, the source of meaning. It seems that the translation of the title of the poems as *Prayer* is a reference to the tradition of religious literature, comprehensible to the readers, but it does not reveal the immediate connection between the lyrics and the liturgy of the hours, or the peculiar character of the breviary prayer. *Prayer* is a broad and general title. In *Breviary* a man is immersed in sacred time – it is the liturgy of the hours. Books of this kind are also present – although

---

® Breviary: “The book containing the psalms, hymns, lections, prayers, etc. of the Divine Office according to the Roman rite. Usually printed in four volumes for the four seasons of the year. Prior to the 12th and 13th centuries the material now included in the Breviary was contained in several books arranged for the various persons in the Choir Office”. *An Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. Vergilius Ferm, (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1945), 88.


in a different form – in the tradition of the Evangelical and Anglican Church (Book of Common Prayer⁷). It is probably here where we can find the roots of the decisions made by the translators of Brewiarze to use Prayer (they did not choose the form: Book of Common Prayer, which might have partly reflected the poet’s intention). Breviary is a direct reference to the Roman Catholic tradition, which in Herbert’s case should be considered important for various reasons. What is the reason for choosing the title Brewiarze (in English or – possibly – in Latin)? As a young man, Herbert applied for a trial period at the Order of Saint Benedict in Tyniec. It is an enclosed, contemplative order. In an interview, Katarzyna Herbert recollects this fact and a situation during an evening of poetry reading at church (the volume of interest was Report from the Besieged City, published in the occupation underground by “Kultura”):

“It was odd for us that a poet or a writer reads his own works or speaks to people from the altar. Yet for Zbyszek it was a tremendous experience. All at once he was supposed to stand there, in a place where a holy mass is usually said, as if on the other side. I remember how he surprised me when he asked to take the Blessed Sacrament out of the tabernacle. (...) He did not want to stand with his back to it. (...). Maybe it was just a matter of form, but I saw it as an expression of his sensitivity. He could clearly distinguish the sacred from the profane… As a twenty-something-year-old lad he applied for a trial period in a monastery in Tyniec”⁸.

The poet would repeatedly return to the monastery in Tyniec throughout his life for spiritual retreats, thus he must have come across a conventional celebration of The Liturgy of the Hours⁹. Therefore, making an immediate reference between the poet and the breviary is of multiple significance: it activates the deep, ancient Christian tradition with its abundance of meanings, while the author includes himself in this particular tradition and the community of the faithful. In all of his literary output, this is probably the only creed which is so direct and personal. The poet made the act of prayer – very intimate, internal – a part of not only religious, but also literary tradition, indicating the sources of culture which he had always highly valued. In Breviaries, the final days and hours have their liturgical dimension, their sacred order. The tendency to organize works according to certain external rules can even be found in the layout of the volume Epilogue of the Storm: the lyrics are arranged in alphabetical order (applied twice). What should also be emphasized is the connection between Herbert’s Breviaries and Rainer Maria Rilke’s The Book of Hours (original title: Stundenbuch)¹⁰. For this reason, the title Breviaries is of key importance for grasping the full meaning of Herbert’s lyric poems.

⁷ Book of Common Prayer: “The Anglican book of public worship and administration of the sacraments and other rites. Its primary sources were the medieval Latin service books used in England prior to the Reformation—Missal, Breviary, Manual, Pontifical. The skill with which these were simplified, combined, reformed, and rendered into the language of the people, reveals the genius of Archb’p Cranmer. (…)”. An Encyclopaedia of Religion, 88.
⁸ Pani Herbert. Katarzyna Herbert w rozmowie z Jackiem Żakowskim, 14.
As far as the poems from earlier volumes are concerned, certain questions were raised: how does Herbert comprehend God? What is Herbert’s God like? The complexity of this issue has been highlighted. Breviaries cast light on this problem, so challenging for solving with academic precision. Not only are the lyrics from Epilogue of the Storm religious poems, but also a record of a deep experience of contemplating God. It would be difficult to find pieces analogous in their significance among the poet’s earlier works. The depth of meaning is revealed in Breviary – so strongly emphasized by the poet.

3. The Liturgy of the Hours

Liturgia horarum sprang from the psalter tradition. Herbert’s Breviaries refer to the form and poetics of psalms. They are defined by extensive phrasing, melodiousness, and a thankful, pleading and penitential character. They are the prayers of a man at the end of his days, but also of a poet who does not cease to ask for inspiration. The word ‘liturgy’ pertains to ‘public service to God’, thus what is important here is the universal aspect which binds an individual to a community, and also (or maybe above all) the aspect of service – submission to God, assuming in prayer a deeply thankful attitude, full of devotion and trust, with the state of contemplation expressed in a lyrical way.

Herbert devoted his last hours to the breviary liturgy, he conferred on them a sacred dimension. In poems, as in the “church” breviary, two times – human and sacred – and two dimensions – communal and individual – coexist. At this point, it is worth recalling words undoubtedly known to Herbert and quoted by Czesław Miłosz in The Land of Ulro, words which Adam Mickiewicz allegedly said to Seweryn Goszczyński in 1849: “A calendar and a breviary are the most important books for a man.” This statement captures the specificity of understanding the essence of time dimensions, close to Herbert’s final poems. Time is organized in two parallel orders: calendar (human) and sacred (relating both to life and eternity). The premonition of death and the state of serious illness make both of these dimensions merge. Epilogue of the Storm is the poet’s last report from the period of time he experienced in such a way. The title Breviary reveals this significance.

---


12 Aleksander Fiut wrote: “The poet [Herbert] remains extremely discreet as far as his faith or lack thereof is concerned (...) If he prays in the poems, he does it with the lips of the characters – Mr. Cogito, the traveller, and the old men, whose sameness with the author is not so much suggested, as it is denied” ; “The existential and metaphysical drama of Herbert’s protagonist is played out in the shadow of the silent God the Father and the lonely death of the Son of God”. Aleksander Fiut, 154; 153. In Breviaries the situation changes.


Herbert treats the essence of the breviary prayer literally; he is aware that he is one of many people facing serious illness and death and, so he speaks in the tone of easily recognizable psalm poetry, referring to thankful, pleading and penitential psalms. In their translations, John and Bogdana Carpenter capture this tone well, phrases such as “Lord…” reveal the connection with The Book of Psalms. The translators read Herbert’s works with great understanding and their own words indicate this:

“At first glance, Herbert’s poems appear easy to translate – they employ clear intellectual structures, and rhyme occurs rarely. On the other hand, Herbert’s rhythms, tone, and word choice are often exceptionally difficult to translate, and his texture is complex. He uses a combination of high literary decorum – or formality – with more intimate, conversational, and everyday speech to express his sense of truth, to conform to the contours of the world. The tension between these two styles or tones is always present, and this is always simultaneous. Often he follows the movement of thought in his style. In the poem an internal dialogue can occur between the poet and his conscience, or between the present and the past, which draws together associations from disparate sources into a tightly strung balance.”

In a whisper, in irregular verses and long, elaborate phrases, the poet utters a psalmic call beginning with the word: “Lord…” He dresses his last hours in prayer, does not search for original compositional or verbal solutions, nor for narrative lyricism, and drops the mask of Mr. Cogito, forcing the reader to read him (i.e. Herbert) anew, as completely different than before. This is the epilogue of his work. He chooses the most transparent form, in this case the structure of a psalm, which does not absorb attention, directing it to something else, much more important, which on the one hand opens up the biblical tradition, and on the other a contemplative prayer.

In Breviaries, the situation seems to be clear: the poet is talking with God in a very natural way, in inspiration and spiritual rapture, he does not have any doubts about his existence. The author’s attitude is full of trust. Prayer is made of simple words, speaking on the edge of whisper and silence. This act of speech addressed in such a direct way to God protects him from despair, fear, and negation of the sense of existence. John and Bogdana Carpenter were perfectly aware of this:

“Herbert is easier to translate than those poets who experiment more with syntax and with meter, though we are aware of how much is lost from his careful handling of Polish idioms. Our main concern was to remain as casual and whispering as he is in the original, never to raise the intentionally subdued tone. We also had to think of the wit of Herbert’s word order, whenever a surprise or epiphany was held back for the end of a passage. And we tried to preserve a no less intentional clumsiness and coarseness of some lines, in which he attempts to revivify common language and clichés.”

These sentences capture the essence of Herbert’s poetic writings, especially the final lyric poems: the combination of colloquial language and a metaphor, speaking and

---

silence, simplicity and poetic artistry – such unexpected juxtapositions allow the poet to express the core of epiphany, exactly as in *Breviaries / Prayers*. The natural character of his speech reveals the dimension of persisting in God, everyday objects acquire a meaning as deep as poetic inspiration, the source of which is still God. Biblical David – the creator of the psalms – was a poet, and Herbert feels an unusually close relationship/affinity with him, as evidenced by *Breviary [III]*. When death is nigh and one can sense it, inspiration remains something absolute, important both in the world of the living and in eternity. *Breviaries* are an example of the lyric poetry of personal confession, which is at the same time the lyric poetry of the experience of transcendence initiated by illness and impending death. Herbert’s bitter phrase expresses this premonition:

“(…) I no longer have time to compensate the injured nor apologize to all those whom I have wronged this is why my heart is sad (…)”

(*Prayer [IV]*)

The poems are sketched in a contemplative silence, in a delicate and gentle way of looking at oneself and reality. Transcendence emerges from an attitude of complete acceptance of the essence of life and death, transience and eternity, and the experience of the presence and closeness of God.

4. Contemplation and transcendence

The contemplative tone differentiates *Breviaries* from Herbert’s earlier poems. The state of illness and the experience of God make this tone personal. The poet is accompanied by the shadow of death, but also the sense of eternity. This is where the interpretation of transcendence originates, since the encounter and the fusion of two spheres – *vanitas* and *aeternitas* – expressed in poetic language, are both conspicuous. This tone is also illuminated by the English translations of these lyrics. The awareness of serious illness and imminent death, the inevitability of leaving people, unfinished matters, objects demonstrating the specificity of everyday life, all important and necessary, foreshadow the arrival of “the epilogue of the storm”. The “storm” found in the title of the volume is a metaphor for life, which seems violent, expressive and impetuous, while the epilogue carries some kind of calmness and exposes the meaning of the directly inexpressible mystery of life and death, danger and tranquillity, fear and relief, transience and eternity – as in Giorgione’s mysterious painting “The Tempest”\(^\text{18}\) – perhaps Herbert himself chose it for the cover of his poetry volume: the dark clouds in the distance

(reflecting the essence of the changes taking place in the world), the ruins of columns and buildings (expressing passing and inevitable death) are nothing in comparison to the power of motherhood which is the very essence of life because it gives a deep dimension and meaning to existence.

Transcendence reveals its sense in subjective and personal experience. The paths to it lead through threshold situations, such as illness, death, or, more broadly, the experience of losing life; they can plunge a man into darkness, but they can also elevate him, enable the spiritual experience of God and the mystery of existence. Zbigniew Herbert’s psalmic Breviaries reveal the experience of epiphany, the experience rooted – on the one hand in what is fragile, defenceless, personal and close, since they concern the very essence of a man and his existence, and on the other in the infinite sources of The Liturgy of the Hours.

Annex

“Prayer [I]

Lord,

I give thanks to You for all of this jumble of life, in which
I am drowning since time immemorial helplessly in dead earnest
concentrated on an endless search for trifles.

May You be praised for giving me lowly buttons
pins, suspenders, eyeglasses, rivers of ink, always
hospitable blank sheets of paper, transparent covers, folders that are patient,
waiting.

Lord, I give thanks to You for syringes with needles thick and thin as
a hair, bandages, all sorts of bandaids, the humble compress, thanks
for intravenous drips, saline solutions, cannulas, and above all
for sleeping pills names like Roman nymphs,

which are good because they beg, they recall, they take the place of
death”.

Trans. John and Bogdana Carperten

“Prayer [II]

Lord,

bestow on me the gift to compose long sentences, whose
line usually from breath to breath seems
to be a line stretched like suspended bridges like a rainbow the alpha and omega
of the ocean
Lord,

bestow on me the strength and agility of those who
build long sentences spread out like on oak, capacious
as a great valley, so they can contain worlds, shadows
of worlds made of dreams

and so that the main clause firmly governs the subordinate clauses
controls their tangled but clear course like a *basso continuo*
endures inexorably over the movement of the elements, so it attracts them as
a nucleus attracts electrons with the force of invisible laws of gravitation
thus I pray for a long sentence, a sentence put together in immense
labor so each for them can contain a mirror-like
reflection of a cathedra, a huge oratorium, a triptych
and also animals,
powerful and small, railway stations, a heart overflowing with sorrow
rocky abysses and the furrow of fate in the palm of the hand”.

Trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter

“Prayer [IV]

Lord

I know that my days are numbered
only a few are left
enough so I have time to gather sand
with which they will cover my face

I no longer have time
to compensate the injured
nor apologize to all those
whom I have wronged
this is why my heart is sad

my life
should have made a circle
concluded like a well made sonata
and now a moment before the coda
I see exactly
the broken chords
poorly matched colours words
clutter dissonance
the tongues of chaos
why
was my life
not like circles on water
awakened in the infinite depths
a beginning that grows
forms rings steps pleats
in order to die calmly
at your inscrutable knees”.

Trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter\(^\text{19}\).

Bibliography


Franaszek Andrzej, Ciemne źródło (o twórczości Zbigniewa Herberta), (Londyn: Wydawnictwo Puls, 1998).

Franaszek Andrzej, Herbert. Biografia (Kraków: Znak, 2018), vol. 1; vol. 2.


\(^{19}\) Herbert, Poezje wybrane. Selected Poems, 198–202.
Miłosz Czesław, Ziemia Ulro, (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1982).