

Anna Stec-Jasik

Wydział Polonistyki UJ

“Fragile” and “Infinite”. Memory in the works of Zbigniew Herbert

(doctoral thesis – summary)

Memory in work of Zbigniew Herbert is an issue which I discuss in my doctoral thesis. One of Zbigniew Herbert’s poems inspired me to choose that theme. The last volume, which Herbert published, contained the poem which is called *Fabric*. This lyric closes not only the volume *Epilogue of a Storm*, but also – symbolically – the whole poetic work of Zbigniew Herbert. In this poem lyrical “I”, who expects a journey to the metaphorical “not-far coast”, said: *So stay with me fragile memory / Grant your infinity*. Herbert in his last poetic word shows memory as a patron and a companion of a life journey and literary work. Why did he choose to depict it by two extremely different words – ‘fragility’ and ‘infinity’? How is memory connected with literature and what can literature tell us about memory? I’ve tried to answer this question in my doctoral thesis. One part of its title derives from poem *Fabric* and it reads as follows: *“Fragile” and “Infinite”. Memory in the works of Zbigniew Herbert*.

Methodology, which I used in my work, is hermeneutic interpretation of a poetic text (which consists in decoding and showing various senses inscribed in lyrics, also by using varied contexts). I relied on the works of French philosopher and hermeneutist Paul Ricoeur. This philosopher is known as the author of an excessive dissertation called *Memory, History, Forgetting*. This book and the authors on which Ricoeur based, are also “memory literature” base for my analysis and interpretations (these authors are for example: ancient philosophers like Aristotle, Plato, Christian saint Augustine from Hippo or the twentieth-century authors like Maurice Halbwachs, Edward S. Casey).

I divided my work into two parts: *Memory in literature* and *Literature about memory*. In these two parts I show various forms of mnemonic issues in literary work. In the first part, *Memory in literature*, I gathered the interpretation in which I show how memory starts to be the main theme of the poem, how memories are represented in it, and what kind of memories they are. In the second part, *Literature about memory*, I am asking what literature tells us about how memory functions– about its action mechanism, its nature and a great role, which it plays in human life. In both parts I concentrated on individual memory in which collective memory could exist.

In the first part I focused on how memory and its contents can function as a literary theme.

First – how memory (individual and collective) starts becoming a “substance” of literature and if the literary language is expressible or inexpressible, if (and how) literary work could represent the past experience.

Second – autobiographical memory as a theme of literary works, in which poetic mnemonic representations build their own, individual history (these representations are for example family, a familiar city, school reality, and unusual events such as foreign travels described in Herbert’s essays). I have tried to show how mnemonic view of past has been painted in literature (for example by describing one memory “scene”).

Third – “somebody else’s” memory, which becomes “my” memory: memory as knowledge about the world and, on the other hand, various sides of collective memory “anchored” in individual experience (for example generational memory about Herbert’s and his generation’s contemporary events or about history which happened a long time ago and its forgotten heroes. Collective memory is also a part of literature by using intertextual contexts, references to other pieces of art or taking up, as Herbert said, “old themes of mankind”).

In the second part, which I called *Literature about memory*, I gathered poems which say something about memory’s nature and its functions. I focused on crucial concepts connected with a mnemonic subject.

First – memory as trace and, on the other hand, as representation. Especially “trace”, as one of the most important mnemonic metaphors, shows a lot of memory aspects: persistence and instability of mnemonic trace; intended searching for mnemonic trace and spontaneous evocation of memory; difficulty with reading trace and interpretation of it; trace deformations (for example when two mnemonic traces influence each other and “mix”); disappearing, destroying, missing trace (forgetting); relation between trace and its “finder”.

Second – memory and identity. The second theme connected with human memory is its identity-creating ability. I have tried to show, on the one hand, how memory about past makes it possible for a man to exist at present and how it shapes a man’s future. On the other hand, how memory starts to be a condition of feeling the sense of existence continuity and self-identity (when we know thanks to memory that when we did something in the past we were the same person), and kind of “proof of past”. Finally, how memory becomes a sign of one of the most important themes in the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert – fidelity (for example fidelity to a given word, to important values and to the people who passed away).

Third – memory and time. Another theme is the connection between memory and time. These connections are for example: influence whose time exerts memory and memory as proof of passing time; memory as something which provides access to the past, which makes it possible for the past to exist (a poetic example is one of the metaphors used by Herbert: an insect in amber); *anamnesis* and making memory present (context derived from the Jewish tradition, in which memory means real involvement in the mentioned events).

Fourth – memory, oldness, God and “not-far coast” known from poem *Fabric*. The last area of my research is a metaphysical aspect of memory and, on the other hand, its function at the end of human’s life. Memory as a permanent companion of loneliness and disease, something which makes it possible to sum up and understand own history. And finally, it is memory in context of belief in God – for example when forgiveness becomes possible through remembering, or when a man can see God’s face in experiences of their own life.

Interpretations, which I gathered in my doctoral thesis, show “fragile” and “infinite” memory as not only an important theme in poetry of one of the greatest Polish poets, Zbigniew Herbert, but also as a crucial facet of human life.