

# A Polish Hamlet: Zbigniew Herbert's "Elegy of Fortinbras"

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## Introduction

*Hamlet's* universality and immense capacity for endless appropriations, adaptations and transformations, as pointed out by Jan Kott in his seminal work *Szekspir współczesny* [*Shakespeare our Contemporary*] in 1964, seems to be a well established fact nowadays. Hamlet the character as well as *Hamlet* the play are seen as international commodities which grow into independent myths, borrowed, exploited and reshaped by numerous artists all over the world. They also appear to be notions taken for granted by Shakespearean scholars around the world. The phenomenon of *Hamlet's* dispersion has resulted in Hamlet taking on a life of his own, whether as a full-fledged character or a symbolic intellectual short-cut. The wide interpretative potential of the play has led to the creation of national Hamlets, who in the process of adaptation and appropriation become national literary heroes, carriers of patriotic values, who are often either supposed to ignite political action or expose national flaws. This article will analyse one face of the Polish Hamlet by looking closely at Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Tren Fortynbrasa" ["Elegy of Fortinbras"], which was written around 1957 during the so-called Polish Thaw.

Herbert's "Tren Fortynbrasa" enters into a dialogue with Shakespeare's tragedy and stands in front of Hamlet's mirror, as Kott might put it, in order to become a symbol of defiance against oppression and totalitarianism. "Tren Fortynbrasa" as a rewriting of Shakespeare's tragedy has inspired numerous critical responses. However, existing interpretations, written both before and after the fall of communism circa 1989, have mostly focused on the general message of the poem as a call against enslavement, while dismissing, for various reasons, the complicated political and historical context of the poem and its publication history. It seems obvious that critics writing in Poland before 1989 could not freely exploit the political load implicit in Herbert's poem. Nevertheless, critics writing outside Poland, beyond the reach of censorship, as well as those analysing the poem after the systemic transformation of the country around 1989, have at least partly dismissed this interpretative path, possibly seeing it as too crude for Herbert's multidimensional poetry or as too obvious even to be acknowledged. Emigré critics often highlighted the importance of political context for Herbert's poetry, for instance, while at the

same time failing to take advantage of it in their analyses. Moreover, the body of thought on the poem has never been sympathetically organised, leaving a whole plethora of multiple, often unconnected reflections. Thus the aim of this article is twofold: first of all, I would like to organise and at the same time reconcile interpretations coming from various sources and periods; secondly, my goal is to turn the reader's attention to the specific political and historical context of the poem, which in turn leads to the idea of a Polish Hamlet heavily burdened by a politically oriented yearning for freedom and liberty.

The point of departure for me is a "new historical" assumption that the poem by Herbert must be the product of an intricate network of personal, political and historical interdependencies. Bearing in mind the much cited universality of Herbert's poetry, this article suggests that ignoring the very Polish context of "Tren Fortynbrasa" does violence to the poem and the vision of Hamlet encapsulated in it. Apart from seeing it as a metaphorical story of oppression, I want therefore to look at it as a direct poetic portrayal of communist tyranny in Poland, in particular of the superficiality of changes brought about by the events of October 1956, as well as Herbert's private expression of doubt that the so-called Polish October had any lasting value. Inscribing the poem within the specific context of the events surrounding the Polish October will not, in my opinion, diminish its significance but, on the contrary, adds another layer of meaning to its intricate poetic fabric. To fully appreciate the erudition of Herbert's vision and illuminate some of the distinctly Polish interpretative trails in his poem, it is important to see how *Hamlet* has functioned in Polish culture since Romanticism and how strongly the influence of Polish Romantics resonated right up until the Second World War.

### The Polish Hamlet

The construct of a Polish Hamlet relies heavily on the heritage of Polish Romanticism, which was created by such poets as Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki or Cyprian Kamil Norwid.<sup>1</sup> It is crucial to note that during Polish Romanticism, dating roughly from 1822 to 1864, the Republic of Poland did not exist as an independent state. The year 1822 marks the publication of Mickiewicz's *Ballady i Romanse* [*Ballads and Romances*], most often seen as a manifesto of Polish Romanticism, while 1864 is the year of the collapse of the January Uprising, the last of three military attempts to regain Poland's independence, which had been lost in 1795 (Straszewska 331, 534). From 1795 onwards, literature began to play a crucial role in the preservation of Polish language and culture. This trend culminated in the period of Romanticism when "the literature of Poland developed into that marvellous haunting song of a nation in bondage which stands forth not only as a noble artistic creation, but as the sublime expression of a nation's faith" (Gardner 324). Polish Romantic literature shared many features with Western Romanticism;

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<sup>1</sup>For a more detailed analysis of rewritings of Shakespeare in Polish literature, see Gibińska (1999, 9–23).

however, its nature was strongly politicised as a consequence of Poland's disappearance from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maps of Europe.

Polish Romantic literature was characterised, similarly to English Romanticism, by the re-discovery of Shakespeare as the Bard. In Poland, Shakespeare attained the status of a cult figure, while *Hamlet* became one of the most popular vehicles communicating Poles' unfulfilled yearning for freedom and lost independence. It was common practice among poets to read the fatal destiny of the country through the tragedy of Hamlet; the story of Hamlet was intertwined, for instance, with the failure of the November Uprising of 1830 (Trznadel 1988, 17). In addition, Mickiewicz, influenced by Shakespeare's histories, was trying to create a new national historical drama that could console Poles or push them to action. And Słowacki was writing his politically infused drama *Kordian*, whose title figure, torn by raging passions and contradictory impulses, might be seen as the Polish Romantic realisation of Hamlet. Of course, poets of the following literary periods also utilised Shakespeare, but it is Romanticism that had the strongest influence on Polish visions of Hamlet. The main reason for the lasting influence of Polish Romanticism on the reading of *Hamlet* in later periods was the aforementioned politicised message brought to bear through Hamlet's mouth. The tragedy of Hamlet became associated with the tragic fate of the nation and, once this happened, the mental identification was imprinted as a kind of national archetype. This idea turned out to be particularly handy in post-war reality, especially as the creative circumstances of Romantic poets and post-war twentieth-century poets emerged as painfully similar. The Romantic poets created poetry to honour a politically non-existent nation, while post-war poets had to find a way to write poetry in a country whose sovereignty was yet again severely infringed and where values like democracy or freedom of speech were compromised. For these reasons, the archetypal Polish Hamlet seems to have met with a favourable response in the twentieth century and was widely taken up. Herbert's "Tren Fortynbrasa" continues and at the same time contests the tradition of the Polish Hamlet. However, before this idea can be carried any further, it seems reasonable to first analyse the text of the poem as well as its relation to Shakespeare's play in order to outline a more general background to Herbert's conceptualisation of the Polish Hamlet.

### The Genre of the Poem

Herbert's "Tren Fortynbrasa" was first published in a then fortnightly magazine called *Po Prostu* [*Simply*] in 1957. It was later republished in Herbert's third poetry collection entitled *Studium Przedmiotu* [*Study of the Object*] in 1961. The poem involves the type of appropriation which Julie Sanders in her book *Adaptation and Appropriation* termed "grafting", where a seemingly minor character from a source text occupies a central place in another work of art (Sanders 56–57). Central to the poem by Herbert is Fortinbras, the Norwegian prince, a minor character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Janusz Sławiński, the author of the first, very detailed and influential analysis of Herbert's elegy from 1967, focuses mostly on the contrasts

between the Shakespearean Hamlet, on the one hand, and on the other, Fortinbras as seen through the eyes of Herbert. Sławiński also devotes much time and space in his essay to generic disputes and structural intricacies. For example, he points to the ironic appropriation of the elegy genre. "Tren Fortynbrasa" reverses the constitutive elements of an elegy: instead of praising the late prince, the speaker intends to ridicule him. As Sławiński claims, this happens because the monologue is really an act of self-expression and a self-definition of Fortinbras, the new ruler (45). Marta Gibińska, on the other hand, suggests that Herbert's poetic vision is structurally reminiscent of a history play instead of a tragedy:

as in Shakespeare's histories—one ruler takes over after another, or, more precisely, after the helm of authority has been vacated by usurpation or assassination. And, as in any Shakespearean chronicle play, the new man in power, the ruler-to-be, takes delight in his position, announces his political dogma and starts acting accordingly. (Gibińska 1999, 57)

Sławiński's analysis was praised by Stanisław Barańczak in his influential study of Herbert's poetry *Uciekinier z Utopii* [*A Fugitive from Utopia*]. Barańczak, following Sławiński, claims that the proper understanding of this reworking of the elegy genre and the subtle irony of Herbert's dramatic monologue leads one to the conclusion that the poem primarily communicates the aforementioned clash of these totally opposite attitudes (Barańczak 98). Helpful and insightful as these observations may be, they seem incomplete as they give little clue as to the meaning of the contrasted attitudes. Thus, to uncover the intertextual and hypertextual meanderings created by Herbert, it seems necessary to move on to a more detailed reading of the two key figures of Hamlet and Fortinbras.

### **Hamlet versus Fortinbras**

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the character of Fortinbras takes up little space in the text and does not usually demand much attention from spectators of the play. Fortinbras is the son of the late Norwegian king who is at first planning to battle against the Poles but promises not to attack Denmark. One learns that his father had lost some lands in the battle against the late King Hamlet. What seems crucial is the fact that Fortinbras's situation parallels Hamlet's. Fortinbras, along with Hamlet and Laertes, is one of the three avenging sons in the play. As Harold Jenkins observes,

the important thing is that Fortinbras and Laertes here lead up to Hamlet because their situations are designed to reflect his. The first, as the son of a dead king and nephew of a reigning king, invites obvious comparisons, and is actively campaigning to right his father's wrongs. (133)

Fortinbras is mentioned in Act 1, Scenes 1 and 2; he appears once later in Act 4 and eventually in Act 5 he brings some hope for restoration after the chaos and the deaths of all the major characters. With the words "he has my dying voice", Hamlet on his deathbed gives Fortinbras the prerogative to act and restore law and

order (Shakespeare 459). He is supposed to play a crucial role in the restoration of order; however, subsequent events do not belong to the sphere of Shakespeare's tragedy any longer. As Hamlet puts it "the rest is silence" (Shakespeare 460). The final silence proposed by Shakespeare is broken by Herbert's Fortinbras who comes into focus with his new, alternative continuation of reality.

Sławiński, in his classic analysis of Herbert's elegy, points to the probable source of its inspiration. He claims that Herbert might have taken the idea of making Fortinbras the centre of his elegy from Stanisław Wyspiański's seminal study of *Hamlet* from 1907 (42). Wyspiański was the first Polish critic to recognise the crucial role of Fortinbras within the fabric of Shakespeare's tragedy and to point out essential parallels between the lives and aspirations of the two princes. In his study, originally written to provide actors and directors working on *Hamlet* performances with guidance and advice, Wyspiański created his own vision of Shakespeare's play by mixing Shakespeare's lines with his own reflections and interpretations of particular scenes. According to Wyspiański, Fortinbras is immensely important in the structure of the play as his threatening figure overshadows all the unfolding events and heralds destruction (83). Fortinbras, just like Hamlet, wants to avenge his father and has an uncle who is the king. Wyspiański, building upon the cursory appearance of Fortinbras in Act 4, Scene 3, and his near meeting with Hamlet (who appears on stage exactly as Fortinbras leaves), imagines a fantasy meeting between the two princes, in which they plot together against Claudius. As Wyspiański outlines, Hamlet sees the brave avenger Fortinbras as his "faithful reflection and an example" who ignites him to action (89). It might be this fantasy meeting that stirred Herbert's imagination and provided the necessary bridge between the text of the play and its poetic continuation, at least as Sławiński envisages it. After all, in the poem the two princes "can talk man to man" (Herbert 2007, 186).<sup>2</sup> However, what also seems to be important about Wyspiański's Fortinbras and what ultimately makes him an approximation of his poetic counterpart in Herbert's elegy, is the fact that in Wyspiański's fantasy Fortinbras conducts negotiations with Claudius under the guise of friendship and loyalty (Wyspiański 87). He seems to be a pragmatic politician strategically planning his moves and securing his position on all fronts. This pragmatism, bordering on cynical particularism, links him to Herbert's calculating Fortinbras "with a cold apple in [his] hand" (Herbert 2007, 186). Following Wyspiański, Kott in his essay on *Hamlet* in *Szekspir współczesny* also highlighted the importance of Fortinbras. However, Kott demonstrated striking personality contrasts between Prince Hamlet and Prince Fortinbras (84–85). It is these character antinomies that lie at the very heart of poetic tensions present in "Tren Fortynbrasa". Thus it comes as no surprise that Kott used a quotation from the poem as an opening for his essay.

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<sup>2</sup>Most of the poems in Herbert (2007) are translated by Alissa Valles, with some exceptions. These exceptions include "Tren Fortynbrasa", which is in the translation by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott.

In Herbert's poem it is Fortinbras who comes into focus and is given voice. The poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue in which Fortinbras presents his immediate actions following Hamlet's death, like "a soldier's funeral" which will "be [his] manoeuvres before [he] starts to rule" as well as more far-reaching tasks like "a sewer project and a decree on prostitutes and beggars" and "a better system of prisons" (Herbert 2007, 186). However, a closer look at the poem's structure and message shows that it is really a conversation (Gibińska 1998, 61). The opening line of the poem, in the English translation by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott, "Now that we are alone we can talk prince man to man", testifies to this notion (Herbert 2007, 186). Moreover, Fortinbras evidently enters into a dialogue if not with the dead prince, then definitely with ideas and attitudes verbalised by him in Shakespeare's play (Sławiński 43). He also addresses his comments to Hamlet. Sławiński diligently traces most of the source quotations which Fortinbras, the speaker, discusses. For example, when Fortinbras says "you crunched the air only to vomit" (Herbert 2007, 186) he reshapes Hamlet's line "I eat the air, promise-crammed" (Shakespeare 303). Then, when he says "you did not know even how to breathe", he appears to echo Gertrude's words from the scene of Hamlet and Horatio's fencing match, "He's fat and scant of breath" (Shakespeare 453). Fortinbras also negates Hamlet's last line, "The rest is silence" (Shakespeare 460) and rejects it by saying, "The rest is not silence but belongs to me" (Herbert 2007, 186). In this way, he finally breaks down Hamlet's "crystal notions" and "chimeras" and establishes himself as the master of puppets in the aftermath of Shakespeare's tragedy.

Alfred Alvarez highlights the fact that in Herbert's early poetry, before the birth of Mr Cogito, the moral judgement of poetic characters is never direct (1). In the midst of nuances and subtleties, readers seem to be left to make a decision as to who is right and who is wrong, or maybe rather whose side they want to take regardless of any rightness. Alvarez compares "Tren Fortynbrasa" to Andrew Marvell's "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland", where, in his opinion, carefully weighed *raison d'état* always wins over political idealism. In this sense, Alvarez praises Fortinbras for his political realism. At the same time he tries to justify Fortinbras's cold and patronising tone, even acknowledging some notes of sadness and regret in it (Alvarez 1). Although Alvarez seems to focus on the indirectness and ambiguity of Fortinbras's utterances, simultaneously underscoring the universality of the poem, he fails to support his argument with any textual examples. To my mind, though acknowledging Herbert's poetic subtlety, Alvarez's view of Fortinbras still seems far too generous. By saying "you lie on the stairs and see no more than a dead ant" (Herbert 2007, 186), Fortinbras brutally strips the dead prince of the nobility and honour which should belong inextricably to the tragic hero. He mechanically gets down to the business of tidying up the mess left by the idealistic prince, saying "I must also elaborate a better system of prisons / since you justly said Denmark is a prison" (ibid.). This statement is a twist on Hamlet's metaphorical comment "Denmark's a prison" (Shakespeare

255).<sup>3</sup> It is not merely that Herbert's Fortinbras refers to Hamlet's words; rather, Herbert refashions their meaning through bitter irony in order to paint a picture of the Danish prince as frail and excluded from human life. Even the description of Hamlet's appearance proves his total unsuitability for real life and especially his weakness. The look of Hamlet's hands makes Fortinbras laugh, while his feet are clad in "soft slippers" (Herbert 2007, 186). By contrast, Fortinbras seems to emerge as an epitome of the ideal ruler's pragmatism and strength of character. He wants to "take the city by the neck and shake it a bit" (ibid.). If there are really tones of grief or regret in the voice of Fortinbras, as Alvarez maintains, they are cancelled out by his detached "Adieu prince [ . . . ] I go to my affairs" (ibid.). As Sławiński underscores, the poem juxtaposes two opposite attitudes to life and power. Hamlet is a "defenceless" moralist who knows nothing about "human clay", while Fortinbras is a practical and shrewd ruler who knows only too well how to knead this clay (Sławiński 46). After all, he sees his rule as "the eternal watching / with a cold apple in one's hand on a narrow chair / with a view of the ant-hill and the clock's dial" (Herbert 2007, 186).

A close reading of the poem confirms Sławiński's claim that the poem revolves around the presentation of two opposite political stances: Fortinbras's pragmatism and Hamlet's idealism. Herbert's lyrical indirectness creates a relatively open framework for the interpretation of these attitudes and the figures who represent them. Alvarez suggests that Fortinbras says farewell to Prince Hamlet with understated sorrow and takes over his role with a qualified sense of duty. On the other hand, Fortinbras's irony seems all too evident and we cannot escape feeling that we have access to the workings of a very calculating, if not two-faced person's mind. Though this might be a partially limiting reading of Fortinbras, he emerges as a Machiavellian prince who acts according to the principle that the ends justify the means. However, Fortinbras's biting irony bordering on cynicism becomes only clearly visible when we embrace a strongly political reading of the poem, taking into consideration the context of the original publication and historical circumstances surrounding its creation. Barańczak does not provide a fully-fledged analysis of "Tren Fortynbrasa" in his study on Herbert, but he mentions this particular poem when reminding the reader that the aforementioned political, historical and even autobiographical contexts should always be considered when speaking about Herbert's poetry (Barańczak 28). Although he does not see them as absolutely decisive and definitive clues to unveiling the mystery of Herbert, he sees them as crucial to avoid misunderstandings and "primitivism of interpretations", to use his own words (ibid.).

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<sup>3</sup>These lines appear only in the Folio version but are present in Polish translations of *Hamlet*. The line "Denmark's a prison" was also used as one of the opening lines in the famous staging of *Hamlet* in the Stary Theatre in Krakow in 1956, which was interpreted by Jan Kott in *Szekspir współczesny* as a political statement and a commentary on the situation in Poland.

### The Literary and Historical Context of the Poem

At this stage, it seems crucial to look at the circumstances of the poem's publication and at the same time to shed some more light on the functioning of the institution of censorship in the People's Republic of Poland. Jacek Trznadel, author of the essay collection *Polski Hamlet* [*Polish Hamlet*], claims that "Sławiński said everything that could have been said about the poem".<sup>4</sup> He also highlights the fact that for many years Herbert's poem officially "existed only with half of its meaning, which is demonstrated by analyses taking into account only internal and literary symbolism" (Trznadel 1988, 249). Obviously the reason for such a situation was the existence of censorship in communist Poland. As mentioned at the beginning, the poem was originally published in 1957 in *Po Prostu* along with another text entitled "Ze szczytu schodów" ["From the top of the stairs"]. Almost simultaneously another poem "Co widziałem" ["What I saw"] appeared in another weekly, *Ziemia i Morze* [*Earth and Sea*], in the same year. According to Janusz Detka, these three poems form a triptych that was written in the same period and whose parts complement one another (Detka 27). The division of the poetic triptych and its publication in two separate magazines was a result of a compromise with censorship officials. As Detka suggests, at the time Herbert was negotiating the publication of his second poetry volume *Hermes, pies i gwiazda* [*Hermes, Dog and Star*] and possibly had to make concessions to officials (Detka 27).<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the triptych once divided into a diptych and one separate poem could not be republished in the volume together and thus "Tren Fortynbrasa" found its way into *Studium Przedmiotu* from 1961, while "Ze szczytu schodów" and "Co widziałem" had to wait until 1983 to be republished in *Raport z Oblężonego Miasta* [*Report from the Besieged City*] in Paris (Detka 27). The case of Herbert's triptych illustrates the practices of censorship in communist Poland, as censors avoided any radical falsification of reality and instead proceeded cautiously, while nonetheless distorting authors' original intentions. So they interfered with the arrangement of poems, their layout or dates, occasionally blocking single poems in a given volume (Budrowska 29).

As a result of censorship interventions, "Tren Fortynbrasa" was intentionally taken out of its original context and deprived of the interpretative background originally provided by its sister poems. The practices of communist officials signal the implicit political message of the poem and they also explain the incompleteness of Sławiński's analysis from 1967. According to Barańczak, in the course

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<sup>4</sup>The translation of the quotation is mine. The same applies to all the other critical works published in Polish. It is worth mentioning that Trznadel's critical work was originally published in 1988 in Paris and thus is an example of emigré writing. In Poland during the communist era, literature could be divided into three spheres: the official literature in accordance with the communist politics and ideology, clandestinely circulated literature which escaped the constraints of censorship, and emigré literature created by Poles who emigrated for political or economic reasons. In order to find out more about the circulation of literature and literary criticism in communist Poland, consult Detka or Budrowska.

<sup>5</sup>Herbert's clashes with censorship surrounding the publication of his second poetry collection are documented in his letters to Halina Misiólek (Herbert 2000, 161).



of Herbert's career, the paranoid tightening of censorship coincided with a smear campaign against his person and his poetry.<sup>6</sup> This also resulted in a distorted vision of Herbert's poetry in Polish post-war poetry criticism (25–27). Just a glance at Herbert's biography makes this even clearer. Herbert had his late or rather second debut around the year 1954, two years after the death of Stalin, when the first signs of the Thaw were beginning to settle in (Barańczak 21). He had consciously refused to publish any works in the period of raging socialist realism in Poland between the years 1949 and 1956. In 1954 he even left Związek Literatów Polskich [The Polish Writers' Society]. In 1985, in an interview with Trznadel, Herbert reminisced about the times of socialist realism and explained his stance by saying:

So I chose, you know, I simply had no other choice. A situation of a sailor, who goes out to sea, a climber who climbs a mountain or a choice of a profession or a woman, with whom I am for better or worse. Natural risk of every life. So it is like this: I was not interesting, I did not expose what I thought and wrote. When I was still a member of the writers' society and the time for verification came, I told myself: I will not write a single text 'in accordance with the trend', simple as that, I will not write it. (Trznadel 1986, 256)

Herbert spent many years of his life abroad in western countries where he received many prestigious awards. In the meantime in Poland, the cultural unit of the governing communist party, the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), responsible for the official cultural policy of the country, manifested growing hostility towards Herbert (Barańczak 21). When he came back to Poland in 1980, the authorities refused to publish any of his works. Herbert emerged as a poet whose poetry existed in translation but was barely known in his homeland (Alvarez 1).<sup>7</sup> Alvarez recalls that when one of the underground publishing houses decided to publish eighteen poems from Herbert's *Raport z Oblężonego Miasta*, his popularity grew,

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<sup>6</sup>Barańczak's study *Uciekinier z Utopii* also belongs to the critical literature of emigration. It was published in 1984 in the UK.

<sup>7</sup>Herbert as a poet existing in translation leads us to reflect on the translated text of "Tren Fortynbrasa". As happens with poets whose mother tongue is not widely spoken around the world, translated text gives a reader only mediated access to the original. Fortunately, one can speak of incredible luck with the choice of translators who were able to keep Herbert's power of expression even in translation (Alvarez 1). However, as Alvarez underscores, it is the clarity of expression, internal balance and purity of the moral message that makes Herbert's poems so powerful even in translation (1). "Tren Fortynbrasa", along with a couple of other poems, was translated by the two very gifted translators Peter Dale Scott, a poet and a former professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, and Czesław Miłosz, Herbert's compatriot, also an acclaimed poet and a Nobel Prize Laureate. Thanks to their efforts, the quality of translation is exquisite and enables the English-speaking reader to enjoy Herbert's poem with all its subtleties and intricacies. Not only Scott and Miłosz's acute poetic instincts were responsible for the high quality of the translation. I would argue that equally important were Miłosz's experiences and background, which to an extent were similar to Herbert's. It seems crucial that Miłosz was a Polish emigré poet of Lithuanian roots, whose poetry was banned by censorship in Poland until 1980 because of its strongly anti-communist message. To my mind, these experiences shaped a similar kind of sensitivity to Herbert's and helped Miłosz successfully render not only the message but also the form.

but this in turn brought the Citizens' Militia, the police in communist Poland, to his door. The authorities would keep Herbert under constant observation and harass him with summons or anonymous calls (Alvarez 1). Obviously these practices were not carried out without reason and references to them lead us to the realisation that apart from the universal message of Herbert's poetry, it must also have communicated a strongly political statement.

### **Political Overtones in the Poem and the Poem's Relationship to the Triptych**

Now that the relation of "Tren Fortynbrasa" to Shakespeare's tragedy, as well as the general context of both Herbert's biography and criticism of his poetry, has been outlined, it seems reasonable to move on to the political statement signalled in the poem. As mentioned before, the emigré critics Trznadel and Barańczak point to the importance of inscribing the elegy within the fabric of the Polish political atmosphere of the late 1950s and signal the Polish October or the fate of the Home Army, the resistance movement under occupation, as interpretative keys. One can only speculate on the reason why they do not go beyond merely acknowledging these keys and abstain from a more detailed analysis of the poem in this light. It is possible that they both assumed that the events of the 1950s were still fresh in the collective memories of Poles and there was thus no need to refresh them. Alternatively, although these emigré critics were under no compulsion to use self-censoring mechanisms, they might have been indirectly infected by various techniques used by critics and writers to evade censorship in the country.<sup>8</sup> The truth, in my opinion, lies somewhere in between, as Barańczak and Trznadel appeal to a period memorable and widely recognisable in the collective memory of the nation, taking for granted the comprehensibility of their understatement.

Interestingly enough, Gibińska, who wrote her interpretation of the poem after 1989, in free Poland, claims that it is possible to read the poem through the lens of Polish history, but at the same time says "Herbert's Hamlet does not read any current text of Polish politics" (1998, 164). Though she does not completely reject a political reading of the poem, she seems to dismiss it as either too crude or too obvious. I would like both to contest and complement her view of the elegy. The original publication date of the poem is 1957, which quite directly points to the period of changes in Poland brought about by the Polish Thaw known also as October 1956 or Gomułka's Thaw. Gomułka's Thaw was naturally a result of Krushchev's Thaw in the Soviet Union, where after the death of Stalin in 1953, Nikita Krushchev denounced his predecessor in a famous speech "On the Person-

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<sup>8</sup>Kamila Budrowska analyses the plethora of techniques used by authors to avoid clashes with censorship. Among one of the most popular strategies was the so called "mowa ezopowa" [Aesop's speech] that was characterised by a widespread use of metaphor and synecdoche. The idea was to write a text with double (that is, explicit and implicit) meaning. Obviously the implicit meaning was only subtly suggested and it was up to the reader to unfold it. For more details and other examples see Budrowska (229–57).

ality Cult and Its Consequences". Although the content of the speech was secret, it was quickly leaked to the satellite countries of the Soviet Union. The process of de-Stalinisation, in the form of the release and rehabilitation of political prisoners, and the softening of repression and censorship, started in the Soviet Union and spread to Poland (Detka 146). The Polish October was supposed to bring about a lasting softening of communist policy and greater freedom for Polish citizens. Indeed, Gomułka's new policy raised great hopes and earned him relative support across the nation as he succeeded substantially in various areas; for example he introduced economic recovery plans, negotiated the departure of some important Soviet Army officials, led the abandonment of collectivisation and liberalised policy towards the Catholic Church (Bubczyk 106–10).<sup>9</sup> However, the liberalisation of life turned out to be illusory and temporary, as Gomułka's regime quickly grew more and more oppressive.<sup>10</sup> The superficiality of the Thaw was finally exposed during the bloody pacification of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 by the Soviet Army. The Hungarian revolt was modelled on the events of the Polish October, but unlike in Poland it evolved into a regular military uprising with thousands of casualties (Detka 183). The management of the governing party, the PZPR, with Gomułka at its head, despite initial support, officially condemned Hungarian aspirations, ultimately shattering Polish hopes for a permanent change of course in Polish-Soviet relations. The events of the Polish October and its aftermath, as well as the dashed hopes of Hungarians, had a symbolic dimension as they ultimately marked the disillusionment of the nation and exposed the cynical workings of the totalitarian state that only put on a mask of liberalism to achieve temporary aims.

Having outlined the background of the Polish October, it seems more plausible now to draw a comparison between the space of the poem and the real historical plane. As mentioned above, both in Shakespeare's play and in Herbert's poem the arrival of Fortinbras heralds a new beginning as well as restoration of order. So promising, too, was the beginning of the Thaw in Poland. However, Fortinbras's cold sneer directed at Hamlet is symptomatic of the unveiled superficiality of the new order. The atmosphere of regret, mentioned before by Alvarez, seems to be parallel to the painful atmosphere of lost hopes that might have been felt in Poland in 1956, when the Polish October euphoria died out. After all, Hamlet sees "nothing but black sun with broken rays" (Herbert 2007, 186). Fortinbras's saying "there will be no singing only cannon-fuses and bursts" (ibid.) might stand for the mad workings of the totalitarian machine, which eventually turned its way back to repression and offered only fear clad in the disguise of normality. These "cannon-fuses and bursts" could very well be linked with the ostentatious demonstration of Soviet power that was played out in Hungary, though Fortinbras's political manifestation of power also reminds one of the communist parades in any totalitarian system: "helmets boots artillery horses drums / drums" (ibid.). One should bear in

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<sup>9</sup>For more information on Gomułka's regime, the so-called "little stabilisation", see Leslie (367–82).

<sup>10</sup>For more information on the aftermath of the Polish October, see Kemp-Welch.

mind the fact that although the Polish October was a relatively peaceful chain of events, at various stages of reforms, the threat of Soviet invasion in Poland was real and the suppression of the Hungarian revolt definitely testified to this (Persak 106–08). In my opinion, the strong focus on the military aspects of Fortinbras's rule portrayed in the poem perfectly illustrates this atmosphere of pending danger. In the poem one learns that Hamlet's funeral will be a military event. This might also stand for the enforced secularisation of life under the communists. Fortinbras says, "there will be no candles no singing" (Herbert 2007, 186). His plan "to develop a better system of prisons" (ibid.) also indicates his plans to enslave his kingdom, as does his intent to take it by the neck and shake it.

Gibińska acknowledges 1956 as a possible interpretative path for the poem but she seems to dismiss it as unimportant. For her, Fortinbras "expresses the non-achievement of tyranny", while the poem constitutes a moral condemnation of tyranny and oppression in general (1998, 164). I strongly believe that it is possible to read the poem in a more specific way, in the sense that it visualises the sinister spread of totalitarianism in Poland. Fortinbras's plans illustrate the reversed course of Polish politics after the Hungarian revolution. After all, one only has to see how bleak Herbert's vision really is as the whole future is foreshadowed by Fortinbras's "eternal watching" (Herbert 2007, 186). It is worth referring to one of Herbert's comments from an interview with Trznadel from 1980, in which he openly, though reluctantly, admits that he had been convinced the system created under Stalin was going to last the rest of his life (Trznadel 1986, 255). No wonder then that in the wake of the Thaw he was very sceptical about it. I strongly believe that the whole "Tren Fortynbrasa" documents his scepticism towards the real intentions behind the reforms introduced by Gomułka. In the same interview Herbert says,

In 1956 they [the intellectual elite] thought the Thaw was their creation. We agreed that it was not true. What happened later was a tremendous blow for the intellectual elite. Gomułka was not only primitive, he knew that the authorities already sat firmly in the saddle, they had their repression apparatus, hell of a lot of prisons [. . .] the justice system corrupt enough, so [. . .] what was literature for? [. . .] The year 1956 ultimately shattered the myth of soul engineers, shattered the myth of the political utility of those who, with their poems, paintings, symphonies, had supported the system. (Trznadel 1986, 266)<sup>11</sup>

Fortinbras's comment "what I shall leave will not be worth a tragedy" only strengthens the sinister grimness of this newfound knowledge and the cynicism of the new ruler's message. The potential created by the dramatic monologue and the use of irony creates a divide between the voice of the speaker—the evil Fortinbras—and

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<sup>11</sup>Here Herbert also offers his criticism of artists and poets who supported the Stalinist system in its early stages in Poland. On the whole, Trznadel's book *Hańba Domowa* [Civil Disgrace] is a collection of interviews with writers who gave in to the lure of communism in Poland. One of few exceptions is Herbert, who never yielded to the communist propaganda and maintained an indifferent or at times even hostile attitude to the authorities.

the intended message. However, this perspective becomes clear enough only when one is aware of the historical circumstances surrounding the poem. Thus, the poem can be read as a strong voice speaking universally against any kind of oppression but, to my mind, is it also an elaborate metaphor responding to the returning totalitarian moods in Poland.

As indicated later, "Tren Fortynbrasa", as one part of a poetic triptych, apart from constituting an individual poetic image based on Shakespeare's original imagery, also communicates an implicit second message, only visible in the context of its sister poems. Trznadel is one of the first Polish critics who alludes to yet another layer to the political reading of the elegy, which comes to light when one confronts the poem with "Ze szczytu schodów" published together with the elegy in 1957. In his *Polski Hamlet*, Trznadel sees this poem's Hamlet as the symbolic embodiment of the ill-treated generation of the *Armia Krajowa* (AK) soldiers. This Home Army was the main Polish resistance organisation during the Second World War; loyal to the Polish government in exile, it formed an armed unit of the Polish underground state under Nazi occupation. The organisation was disbanded when the Red Army gained control over the territory of Poland (Leslie 234–38) and after the war, the former AK soldiers, seen as hostile and reactionary elements, became the key targets of NKVD terror and persecution by the newly-formed communist government (Trznadel 1986, 34). Communist propaganda attempted to portray national heroes as subversive criminals and quickly labelled them as "wretched reactionary midgets".<sup>12</sup> Trznadel, comparing the two poems, points to a very accurate parallel between those "who stand at the top of the stairs" and Fortinbras, who also triumphantly looks down on the dead body of Hamlet lying on the stairs (Trznadel 1988, 250).<sup>13</sup> The perfidious authorities' actions towards AK soldiers seem to reflect the same relation as "obviously / they who stand at the top of the stairs / they know / they know everything" (Herbert 2007, 338). In 1956, as a result of the Thaw, an amnesty released thousands of former AK soldiers from prisons. However, this apparently generous act on the part of the government also turned out to be fraudulent as most former AK activists were under state surveillance until 1989. As Barańczak observes, the poem is a portrayal of a suppressed and disappointed society, "the hostages of a better future" who "will go on cultivating [their] square of earth / [their] square of stone" (Herbert 2007, 338–39). These "hostages of a better future" do not like the sight of "rolling heads" as they "know how quickly the heads grow back" (ibid.). These words not only indirectly point the reader to Hamlet's head, that "lies apart", and Fortinbras's "eternal watching" (Herbert 2007, 186), but also yet again underscore the ultimate hypocrisy of the Polish Thaw. The appeal "let's talk / man to man" (339), already uttered in "Tren Fortynbrasa" as "we can talk prince man to man" (186), is repeated by those in power, but this time the conversation stays in the sphere of the speakers' imagination, as they say "at

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<sup>12</sup>These words—"zapłuty karzeł reakcji"—are a caption from a very well-known propaganda poster portraying a Red Army soldier crushing a Home Army soldier with his huge boot.

<sup>13</sup>Gibińska (1999), following Trznadel, also points to the same parallel, as does Barańczak.

times we dream / those at the top of the stairs / come down / down to us" (339). However, the speakers in the poem confirm the illusory nature of these imaginings by saying "sure they're dreams [. . .] not a drop of hope in our hearts" (339–40). Both poems, to an extent, deal with the derision of tyrannical rulers, who coldly look down on ordinary people, but the poems also document the fate of the Home Army.

The interpretative path suggested by Trznadel turns out to be even more well-founded when one casts a glance at the third part of Herbert's triptych, namely, "Co widziałem". The poem was dedicated to Kazimierz Moczarski, a writer and an AK officer, arrested in 1945, subjected to torture and sentenced to death, but pardoned in 1956 at the time of the Polish October. The poem illustrates "the whole humiliation" by recollecting the experiences of AK soldiers "subjected to torture" by "executioners in sheep's clothing" (Herbert 2007, 337). These events are contrasted with the image of official state celebrations, during which "a man went on about distortions" (ibid.). Obviously this vision can be linked with the aforementioned amnesty of 1956, after which the official stance of the leading party on the status of the Home Army gradually softened, promising compensation and rehabilitation. Herbert's tone is nevertheless full of reproach and irony, expressing doubt about the earnestness of the changes. However, the irony and the tone of scepticism are not the only elements reflected in "Tren Fortynbrasa". What seems to complement the vision signalled in the elegy is the *theatrum mundi* metaphor used in "Co widziałem". Herbert asks "is this the final act / of a play by Anonymous [. . .] filled with [. . .] the giggles of those / who heaving a sigh of relief / that they pulled it off again / after dead props are cleared / slowly / lift / the bloody curtain" (Herbert 2007, 337). The closing of the poem "Co widziałem" marks the ending of a theatrical performance, the ending of a bloody tragedy which leaves a trail of dead bodies, just as in *Hamlet*. In this sense, "Tren Fortynbrasa" is an ironic continuation of the play by Shakespeare as well as a painful portrayal of the "cursed" AK soldiers and a terrorised society trapped in the brutal wheel of history.

### **"Elegy of Fortinbras" and the Polish Hamlet**

Since the possible meanings of Herbert's metaphors in "Tren Fortynbrasa" and its sister poems have been signalled, it now seems necessary to ask in what way Herbert's rewriting of Shakespeare's tragedy shapes or reshapes the Polish Hamlet. As explained earlier, the Shakespearean Hamlet used in Polish literature usually becomes an exponent of a powerful political statement, expressing current political concerns. Herbert's poem has a twofold relation with this trend. On the one hand, when one takes into account political overtones in the elegy, underscored by the analysis of the other two poems, Herbert continues the tradition of reading the fate of Poland through Hamlet. On the other hand, Hamlet in his poem is dead and his place is taken by the ruthless Fortinbras. Herbert's Hamlet seems powerless and overtly too idealistic to bring any change. However, as Gibińska notes,

Fortinbras's point of view is invalid. So is Hamlet's. Herbert's eye sees the tragic failure of Hamlet's heritage, its inevitable end. But ineffectual as it is, it still has a value because it is beyond the reach of the imported barbarian.<sup>14</sup> The uncertain balance, the shaky resolution of such a reading of Shakespeare refutes the Romantic tradition of qualified idealism, as it refutes the acceptance of the ruthlessness pragmatics of power. (Gibińska 1999, 62).

It seems that Herbert de-constructs the myth of the Polish Romantic Hamlet especially in the context of the events of the Second World War and subsequent communist experiences.<sup>15</sup> The crucial question about the identity of the new Polish Hamlet remains open. However, Trznadel finds a promising alternative in Herbert's later poetry. He proposes Mr Cogito, sometimes seen as Herbert's poetic alter-ego, as the new realisation of Hamlet in Polish literature, "Hamlet incognito". He announces the death of "historic Hamlets" and the coming of the new "everyday Hamlets" for whom, as for Shakespeare's Hamlet, the most essential value is truth (Trznadel 1988, 297). Trznadel's proposal seems to be a very potent idea, but in the meantime, it remains to be seen in which direction the Polish incarnation of Hamlet will develop.

## Conclusion

"Tren Fortynbrasa" is undoubtedly a multi-dimensional poem in which numerous interpretative paths cross. The aim of this article was not to offer one definitive interpretation of the poem, but rather to analyse and order the existing body of thought on the elegy, as well as to extend the trails so far only hinted at by Herbert's critics. My presentation of the poem's publication circumstances, its numerous references to Poland's complex history and the analysis of the other two poems of Herbert's triptych shows that "Tren Fortynbrasa" is more than a rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or a universal condemnation of tyranny. It is, along with "Co widziałem" and "Ze szczytu schodów", a powerful poetic document of the Polish October of 1956, and the sad fate of the Home Army and a Polish society manipulated by communist propaganda. Of course, grounding Herbert's elegy in Polish history does not exclude its universal message. On the contrary, the power of Herbert's lines lies in the combination of these elements, because "Tren Fortynbrasa" might be read as an interesting continuation and discussion of Shakespeare's tragedy, a moral condemnation of tyrannical power, a discussion of Polish history and finally even of Polish literature. The political message of the poem might be read both within the historical context of Poland and within the intricate web of European, or even global, cultural heritage. It appears that the magic of this poem is about it being inherently Polish and inherently universal at the same time. However, one may suggest that as an inherently Polish poem, the universal and thus

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<sup>14</sup>This is most probably Gibińska's reference to Herbert's *Barbarian in the Garden*.

<sup>15</sup>Tadeusz Różewicz's poetry also seems preoccupied with a similar deconstruction. Różewicz is the author of "Rozmowa z księciem" ["The Conversation with the Prince"], a poem which also rewrites the story of Hamlet.

moral message of "Tren Fortynbrasa" becomes clear enough and powerful enough only when filtered through its inextricable context.

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