

LITERATUROZNAWSTWO I KULTUROZNAWSTWO

Anna Budziak
Instytut Filologii Angielskiej
Uniwersytet Wrocławski

ELIOT'S DREAMER AND HERBERT'S SKEPTIC. THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE MODERNIST PERSONAE

I have always found that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves
as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from
systematic reasoning

(William Blake: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plates 21–22)

"Poetry and History: according to many recent Anglo-American critics, the two are virtual antonyms", Clare Cavanagh states provocatively in her article concerning the relation of literature to *Lebenswelt* (lived reality) (80) and argues that in Eastern and Central Europe the opposite was the case. Polish and Russian modernists – the author calls on Aleksander Watt, Adam Michnik, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Evgeniia Ginzburg, Nadezhda Mandelstam (82) – not only linked literature to history, but responded with their writings to a specific political situation. Cavanagh exemplifies this point with the impact of a psalm translated by Czesław Miłosz, which acquired political significance by simple re-contextualization. When it was placed on the monument commemorating people killed in the workers' protest in Gdansk, it lost its aesthetic autonomy and became a political act in itself (82). So if Miłosz states that "the true home of the Polish poet is history" (Walder 260) his statement, in the above context, has at least a double meaning (not necessarily intended by the author): it may be read not only as an exile's confessing his allegiance to history, but also as history's claiming the poet. In Eastern and Central European modernism, the political involvement stood in opposition to the high modernism's avowed political disengagement in England.

My focus in this essay will be the interplay of the poetic *personae* as fashioned by Zbigniew Herbert and early T. S. Eliot, which I see as representative of the English /Polish modernist antipodes: the aesthetic isolationism and the ethical involvement, which resulted from specific conditions under

which classical modernist aesthetics¹ was shaped: in England in expectation, and in Poland, in recognition of totalitarian utopia understood as a weird political artifact in itself².

Herbert openly voiced his dislike for utopia: "I don't like utopias, because they start with someone inventing an island and a marvelous social system, but they end with concentration camps" (Barańczak, *A Fugitive* 154). A poet with such an awareness, as Plato already recognized, becomes a threat to the ideal state, because his illocutionary act poses a challenge to the insanely rational system³. To Herbert, the function of poetry, is to demystify utopia, to shift from fantasy to sobriety, or from myth to reality, with poems that challenge the modernist mythological method. Though Herbert followed Eliot's classicist bias, his attitude was the reverse of Eliot's approach to mythology: in Herbert's verse myth is questioned by the real and not vice versa. Modernist employment of myth actually varied from the neutral to judgmental. While for James Joyce, for instance, myth is a purely technical

¹ As in western divisions, Polish modernism is discussed as falling under two categories: the classicist (fostering belief in the artificiality of language, promoting depersonalization, and awaiting epiphany – the tendency which obviously corresponds to T.S. Eliot and T. E. Hulme's theoretical bias) and the avant-garde (denying the dichotomy of art and life and demanding that art be politically formative).

² Significantly, Adolf Hitler conceived of himself as an artist (though a failed one), an unsuccessful painter, who subsequently turned to architecture and ended up as a social engineer. As put by Kenneth Burke, as an "architect" he attempted to design a state, whose magnitude would match the magnificence of "the people's architecture of Munich" (371). A skilled orator, he knew how to increase his impact through the use of the radio. However, the führer relied not only on the novel technical devices but also on ancient rituals, the mystery of dark interiors, incense and burning torches, to, as he admits in *Mein Kampf*, weaken and break the listener's will and to darken their ratio. The end towards which this artistry was directed was the creation of earthly paradise – totalitarian utopia, or as noted in Frank Kermode, a modern adaptation of the 12th c. Joachite apocalyptic heresy of the Third Reich (13).

Close bonding of the aesthetics of totalitarianism and utopia can also be exemplified by the Soviet postwar theory of the 1960's as propounded by Leonid Stolovich. The very first sentence introducing his aesthetics is an allusion to Wilde's jest (here taken seriously) that the map of the world devoid of Utopia would not even be worth looking at (5). Stolovich is highly appreciative of Campanella and Thomas More, but bitterly critical of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and Yevgienii Zamyatin, who, as the author of the novel *Us (My)* published in England in 1924, is accused by Stolovich of spurring anti-utopian writings and thus slandering the communist ideal (334-336). After having charged the Russian English emigrant with slander, Stolovich adroitly switches the tables on capitalism and argues that anti-utopia is not anti-Stalinist but first and foremost anti-Fascist (Fascism, whether German, Italian or French Maurrasian, makes a very convenient postwar scapegoat) and, secondly, anti-capitalist. To Stolovich anti-utopia presents reality as twisted by the successful implementation of monopolistic practices and bureaucratic tendencies. Characteristically, Stolovich's outrage at anti-utopia is only the flip side to his sincere appreciation of the communist utopia, the apocalyptic dream come true, both Communism and The Third Reich being envisaged as the conclusive stages of history.

³ Cf. for instance M. Zalewski, who discusses the implications of Alfred Gawroński's essay *Why Did Plato Exclude Poets From the State?* in: *Literatura i władza*, p. 251–252.

device and imparts aesthetic coherence to the narrative⁴, for Eliot and Herbert, respectively, myth is a springboard from which to denigrate or elevate the contemporary experience. While in Eliot's poetry the implicit presence of myth mocks reality (for instance, with the valiant Parcival replaced by the vulgar "Mrs. Porter" and "her Daughter" in *The Waste Land* iii), in Herbert reality unmasks myth with the implacable Apollo, inflicting punishment for insolence on the less perfect Marsyas. Apollo's relentless perfection and justice he exacts verge on utopian systematic inflexibility, neglectful of human liability to err, which makes the reader shift sympathy to Marsyas rather than support Apollo's right. In the poem *Apollo and Marsyas*, the god is the winner of the music contest which was held to humiliate the overconfident silenus Marsyas. The punishment he inflicts – stripping the silenus of his skin – makes the "nightingale fall petrified" and "the hair of the tree to which Marsyas was fastened go white". Thus Apollo's aesthetic triumph is his ethical collapse.

The de-mystifying nature of Herbert's poems is central to Stanisław Barańczak's discussion of the poet's ethical and aesthetic stance. Barańczak in his book on Herbert – characteristically entitled *A Fugitive from Utopia* – presents the poet as he metaphorically moves between the extremes: between the earthly paradise and earthly experience, "the mythical" and "the empirical", "the abstract" and "the tangible", "the perfect" and "the erroneous", "the ornamental" and "the true" (63), the second option in each case being the ethical one. Speaking of juxtaposition of myth, the aestheticized "ever", with reality, the experiential "now", Barańczak compares it to the antinomy between Archetype and Signature (*A Fugitive* 25). This analogy can be further extended to the field of ethics by proposing a parallel antinomy of the collective and the individual. By deciding on the individual sensibility as the source of a literary pronouncement we restore the moral dimension to the domain of artistic experience, with a move that stays very much in vein with the contemporary ethical focus on "authoredness"⁵. This way the author cannot be abstracted from history and exempted from moral responsibility. The concept of "authoredness" serves as a reversal of Eliot's impersonality concept.

⁴ David Daiches terms *Ulysses* a comedy of equation. In contrast to the bathetic employment of myth in Eliot's work, in Joyce myth merely provides a framework with which to encompass the multifarious aspects of existence – the ancient past and the modernist experience – within one narrative (113–137). Such use of myth draws on the essentialist assumption that irrespective of the historical costume man wears the human does not change, which makes the founding premise of both Eliot's recourse to myth and Ezra Pound's employment of the Confucian historical model in *Cantos* and stands in contrast to the anti-essentialist position of a contemporary Foucauldian historicist. The conjunction of the idea of historical equation (proper to the essentialist approach) and the comic aspect, which Daiches attributes to *Ulysses*, is succinctly captured by Richard Ellmann's noting that: "Through humor we tumble to our likeness with others" (15).

⁵ Cf. L. Buell: *In Pursuit of Ethics*, p. 12–13.

The process of demystification is visible in Herbert's treatment of his poetic *personae*, if they are seen as contrasted with Eliotic eponymous characters. Eliot's early poetic protagonists verge on the allegorical, as embodiments of ideas rather than humanly dramatic complexities. Prufrock, Gerontion, or Sweeney are concepts rather than personalities: Prufrock as the pure potential, Gerontion pretentiously stoical, and Sweeney the sensual, do not make dramatic complexities. They are the incarnation of the extreme. By contrast, Herbert's *persona*, Mr. Cogito, is both active and reflective: he reflects on the moral implications of the potential, the stoical and the sensual. Mr. Cogito inhabits the realm of the real, in the sense of the historical, while Prufrock shies away from history and fantasizes about living in the historically reversible (that is a-historical) universe. Prufrock denies identification with those who act: he is neither Lazarus "come from the dead" nor "prophet" (John the Baptist); Mr. Cogito desires to be St. George although the dragon (the evil) he chooses to confront is beyond human contrivance:

it cannot be pierced with a pen
 one would think
 it is a hallucination of a sick imagination
 but it exists
 for certain it exists (...)

(Z. Herbert: *The Monster of Mr. Cogito*, Trans. S. Barańczak)

This certainty of existence is taken away from Prufrock and Gerontion likewise. They live in the theatre of words, not of moral choices. The theatricalization of the universe is particularly striking in Gerontion's case: pompous, and at the same time pathetic, bent on preserving a pseudo-stoical posture of balance and harmony in the face of adversity, he actually sports the attitude of bitterness and revels in apocalyptic imaginings. The element of consciously stoical stylization does not allow us to classify his posture as ethical. As noted by Calvin O. Schrag in *The Self after Postmodernity*, establishing the stoical ethos, though the very project of character formation was originally ethical, in practice turned out to be tantamount to the theatricalization of life.

The tendency to blur "the distinction between ethics and aesthetics"⁶ is conspicuous in Prufrock's case likewise. While Herbert's Mr. Cogito chooses between the moral and the immoral, Prufrock's choice is between the less and more aesthetically pleasing options cast in the form of the dandy behaviour. The decadent features, which underscore Prufrock's aestheticism, as well as Gerontion's pseudo-stoicism, are these of "refinement of appetites, sensations, taste, luxury, pleasure, neurosis, hysteria, hypnotism [...] scientific quackery" – and both Eliotic personages are appropriately "blasé" about

⁶ I use here C. O. Schrag's formulation. Schrag spots the tendency to "blur the distinction between ethics and aesthetics" in M. Foucault's reading of Stoicism in *L'écriture de soi (Scripting the Self 1983)*. In his words, Foucault is "courting a Nietzschean-like aestheticism in which moral values are aesthetically transvalued" (38).

such approaches⁷. To those, one can add an inward turn and cruelty that recoils on the self as, for example, Prufrock pictures himself "sprawling on a pin", "wriggling on the wall", pinned by an insistent gaze that comes from the outside.

In a diffusive monologue, Prufrock scripts⁸ his self with citations and overlays his personal history with what he imagines to be literary parallels, so that, in a sense, the theatrical aspect outweighs the moral, or, in other words, the ethical self is immobilized and sinks under the weight of a peculiar carapace of the textual allusions. The presentation of an enervated Prufrockian self finds its metaphorical equivalent in Huysman's *A Rebours* (called a Bible or a "breviary" of decadence), in the image of a jewel-encrusted tortoise which, as phrased by Nicholls, "dies beneath the weight of its artificial carapace"⁹. Prufrock's sinking and descending movements (the fantasy of going down the stairs or the wish to be a crab "scuttling across the floors of silent seas") symbolically points to the self-immersion of an "I", sequestered from society and disengaged from the choices that might be charged with moral weight¹⁰. Prufrock is neither responsive nor responsible; he replaces what may be called the "ethic of care" with the "aesthetic of self-formation"¹¹.

The literary canvass onto which Prufrock projects his self is marked both with the figures of those who can act and those who can wait for the right moment to perform an action, as *Prince Hamlet*. Yet, the reference to Hamlet, serves as a negative to Prufrock's posture (he openly admits "I am not prince Hamlet"), as Eliot's persona is neither directly involved in action, nor ready and expecting, and fantasizes about living in an imaginary non-consequential (but merely sequential) time – in the sphere where things done can be undone. A fitter comparison to the Prufrockian response to time patterns would be supplied by Macbeth's stance, as it is interpreted by Frank Kermode. Similarly to Prufrock, Macbeth considers the prospect of

⁷ Cf. the features that pertain to the decadent profile as outlined by Nicholls on the basis of the dandy characteristic launched by April 1886 by Anatol Baju in the magazine *Le Décadent* (Nicholls 47).

⁸ The term borrowed from Foucault's nomenclature as used in *Scripting the Self*. Cf. note 6.

⁹ Nicholls construes the motif of a dying tortoise as a metaphor for the decadent self's disintegration: „This is the real theme of Huysman's novel, that the model of the symbolist self will ultimately collapse under the pressure of the very devices in which it originated" (55).

¹⁰ Judge William in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* states that "The act of choosing is essentially a proper and stringent expression of the ethical" (qtd. in Schrag 66-67).

¹¹ See, e. g. Richard Ellmann, *Along the Riverrun*: With reference to Wilde, Yeats and Joyce, Ellmann states that they "went through decadence to come out on the other side" (17) – which was aestheticism. Interestingly, an overt aestheticism may be seen as a reverse of decadence, which, in turn makes an inalienable constituent of an apocalyptic pattern and a reliant authoritarian political vision. On the relation between apocalypse and decadence see F. Kermode: *The Sense of an Ending*, chapter "The Modern Apocalypse", p. 93–124.

precipitating things and shrinks from the envisaged consequences, change or success, which, as put by Kermode, is wishing to have "hurly without burly" (86). Prufrock's deliberations have a distinctly Macbethian ring. Prufrock's insistent questioning – Do I dare? Shall I? – places him in the realm of the pure potential, where acts are reversible and their effects subject to an imaginary command. This yearning for a delusive control over future prospects is relinquished by Lady Macbeth urging her husband to act: "Was the hope drunk ...? Art thou afeard/ To be the same in ...act ...as ...in desire? Will you let »I dare not« Wait upon ... »I would«...?" (qtd. in Kermode 86). In an analogous way, by taking no risk of action for fear of uncontrollable results, Prufrock behaves as those who, in the words of Clement, "arrogate to (themselves) a sort of eternity to »Take the long view« and »make sure of things«" (qtd. in Kermode 87). Merely fantasizing lets him control the flow of imagined events, yet it sequesters him from social relations and consigns to the sphere of imagination preoccupied with never realized long perspectives, which are humanly unacceptable for "only the angels make their choices in non-successive time and »be« and »end« are one only in God"¹².

In this sense Prufrock is angelical, but his seraphic abstract existence is very different from the down-to-earth life lived by Herbert's angel. Shemkel, is specific and humanly imperfect, "black nervous in his old threadbare nimbus". He both acts and bears the consequences of his deeds as "he's been fined many times/ for illegal import of sinners". Since Shemkel's life, in contrast to the elevated life of Prufrock, is quotidian, which means making choices and taking responsibility, in effect he undergoes torture, much like the humans do. His mortality, as observed by Barańczak, is metaphorically rendered by comparing Shemkel to a candle whose light is put out by turning the candle upside down: the interrogators "hang him head downwards", so that "from the hair of the angel drops of wax run down". So, unlike the mentally, or "spiritually" anguished Prufrock, "the seventh angel" Shemkel, suffers in his body because, again in contrast to the Eliotic character, he, so to say, *is* his body. Prufrock treats his corporeality in a distantly critical way: he is concerned with his outward appearance, yet yearns to exchange his physicality for the shape of "a pair of ragged claws", which is tantamount to a desire to disembodify himself. To him corporeality is an

¹² For an interpretation of the medieval fantasy of Angels as inhabiting the sphere of non-successive time see F. Kermode *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 70–71. Kermode traces this idea to back to St. Thomas Aquinas, who saved of Aristotle as much as went in accordance with the revelation. Among the ideas appropriated from the Greek philosopher, medieval theology adopted the notions of "matter" and "form", which were later linked to the concepts of *nunc movens* (material, potential, subject to the changes in time – proper to the human) and *nunc stans* (immaterial and eternal – describing God). Angels came in between, as neither matter, nor pure act, neither of time nor of eternity, but of time's third order, *aevum*. As Kermode notes, things which are of *aevum* are immaterial, but they have "a before and after", so angels exist in successive time, but their acts are not tainted with material consequences.

aesthetic object, endowed with mass and motion, but its function is reduced to that of a vessel embodying his consciousness. So, while Shemkel's physicality eventually kills the angel, the angelical Prufrock renders himself eternal through aesthetic appropriations which safeguard his imaginary a-temporal contiguity by comprising Lazarus, and Hamlet, crab and the mermaids he "heard singing".

Reduced to a disembodied, abstract existence Prufrock does not share in the dynamics of community. Always apart, observing and observed, he only seemingly invites the other's participation in the broadly quoted line "Let us go then you and I". In fact, the "you" does not reappear in the poem as a distinct quality and never imparts to Eliot's verses a dialogic character. The pronoun suggestive of an alternative presence becomes promptly engulfed within Prufrock's sphere of consciousness, or a "circle closed on the outside"¹³, which prevents further interaction, as the "you"'s uniqueness is blurred and overlaid with the "I"'s personal "certainties" and "uncertainties", "visions and revisions". Prufrock's socially inviolate profile prompts opposition with another exemplary Herbert's *persona*: the Olympian messenger, Hermes. Similarly to Shemkel, Hermes is entangled in human choices and marred by the imperfection of "mire and blood"¹⁴. He "abstains from voting" to stay faithful to himself and drowns himself in a river.

All too human, Herbert's god Hermes and angel Shemkel stand in contrast to his Apollo, the perfect, the inhuman, the one who like Prufrock is abstracted from the world of flesh, which is unavoidably marred by uncertainty and fallibility. Yet, as Barańczak notes, on hearing Marsyas howling of pain (after the offended god has punished the silenus for arrogance) even Apollo has to consider the possibility of a non-abstract art (58), an art of earthly involvement. He is left to wonder:

whether out of Marsyas' howling
there will not some day arise
a new kind
of art – let us say – concrete.

Herbert's poetry calls into question the ideal of aestheticized abstraction. His art, as well as his angel Shemkel, cannot be easily accommodated within the geometrical, ordered aesthetics removed from the individual and the concrete. Shemkel, the seventh angel in the poem causes much embarrassment to Byzantine painters, so, to be on the safe side, they abstract him from reality in an over-aestheticized picture to render him perfect:

¹³ Cf. A paragraph from Francis Herbert Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*, Eliot added to *The Waste Land's* annotation: "My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it" (qtd. in Kenner 38).

¹⁴ Cf. W. B. Yeats: *Byzantium*: "A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains/ All that man is,/ All mere complexities,/ *The fury and the mire of human veins*" (italics mine).

the Byzantine artists
 when they paint all seven
 reproduce Shemkel
 just like the rest
 because they suppose
 they might lapse into heresy
 if they were to portray him
 just as he is

Herbert, in order to account for the howling Marsyas, a non-angelical angel, the "black nervous Shemkel" and the suicidal Hermes, far from the utopian, restores his art to "messiness"¹⁵ and this way challenges the abstract aesthetics of English high modernism. Herbert's philosophy of the concrete and the mundane looks as if shaped in opposition to the pre-war high modernism which let the ethical collapse into the aesthetic under the demand of the abstract. (Such was, for example the case of Eliot, who replaced the idea of history with the notion of an abstract, synchronic and controllable tradition, thus, as he believed, endowing the art of the past with the quality of contemporaneity – a peculiar version of artistic perpetuity). What Barańczak describes as Herbert's "rapacious love of the concrete" in poetics seems to be his defense against the totalitarian, the utopian and the abstract in politics. His classicism – unlike high modernist classicism – was not elitist. It was the reverse of T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot's Parnassian aloofness. His poetry was defending the tangible against the abstract, and the humanly imperfect against the perfection based on utopian harmony.

It is curious to see how effective a tool of political manipulation the idea of aesthetic abstraction became in the hands of censorship. What the imagi-

¹⁵ Cf. Levenson: *A Genealogy of Modernism*, p. 99: The modernist aesthetics is presented as underscored with "a desire for austerity and bareness, a striving towards structure and away from the messiness of nature and natural things".

Interestingly, also W. Lewis's aesthetics is underwritten with the idea of permanence, a quality of a-historical paradise, the reverse of human mortality. Paradoxically, this immortality is safeguarded by the deadness of art: as put in Lewis' *Tarr* "deadness is the first condition of art. (...) The second is absence of soul in the sentimental human sense" (Nicholls 268 – 269). It seems pertinent to note here that Christian metaphysics is not at odds with the concrete: the individualized and the tangible is recognized and valued as perfectible. The perfect, however, is safely placed elsewhere. True metaphysics locates paradise out of human confines and renders it safe from human manipulation by the insistence on the parabolic nature of the Garden of Eden. Totalitarian utopia, in contrast, having placed paradise on the earth, can exert control over it down to the minute detail. Thus, geo-political location of earthly "Jerusalem" was of significance both to Fascism and Stalinism: for Hitler "Mecca" was identified with Munich and opposed to corrupted Vienna – the Babylon. The communist paradise also arrogated geography by changing cities' names, as in the case of Novokuzneck re-named Stalinsk in the years 1932–61.

The political dimension of abstract aesthetics is also discussed by Stanisław Barańczak in his *Poetyka i etyka (Poetics and Ethics)*, where he replaces the notion of the abstract with the idea of "abstract authority" (15), thus imparts to aesthetics the political and ethical significance.

nary painters did to Shemkel, by distorting the angel's individual features, so that he might fit abstract icons, political censors did to Herbert's poem to render it purely aesthetic, not tainted with the concrete truth value of political allusiveness. In 1956, Herbert reacted to the Budapest uprising with a poem entitled *To the Hungarians (Węgrom)*. A year later, as noted by Barańczak, the poem was published, however devoid of its date and the title. This way it was extricated from the political context, that was inconvenient for the communist regime. Marked with asterisks in place of the title, the poem acquired a purely abstract ring, causing the critics to discuss it in terms of purely aesthetic and philosophical categories, such as the stoical philosophical speculation concerning the great fire in which the world is cyclically consumed, rather than the fire that actually burnt in Budapest. In a likewise manner, abstracting the poem from its historical context, encouraged interpreting the phrase "string made of air" as a fanciful and novel juxtaposition of "substances", instead of simply reading it as a poetic allusion to the planes that transported medicines and blood for transfusions (*Uciekinier* 47-48). The distrust of the abstract and overtly harmonious in the realm of aesthetic might have been partly induced by a personal (but at the same common to Poles of his generation) experience of the man who, on the one hand, had to cope with the cruelty his father's anonymous death (Herbert's father disappeared in the mass graves of Katyń) and, on the other, could observe the absurdity of the communist utopia from a very peculiar perspective of the Peat Works employee. No wonder, then, that utopia and abstraction acquire a pernicious quality in Herbert if moved out of the aesthetic into the political and then linked with the totalitarian artful utopia.

An interesting pictorial analogy to the situation of overlapping of the ethical and the aesthetic concerns¹⁶ is provided by M. C. Escher's etching titled *Reptiles*. In Escher, little crocodiles, subject to a physical change while on the trek, go in a circle. The creatures emerge from a flat picture, climb up a thick, closed book, scramble over a set square to reach a polyhedron and struggle over the edge of a fancy brass container only to sink back into the picture. Their peregrination alters their shape. Once they leave the safe

¹⁶ In the realm of early Polish modernist literary criticism, the traffic of concepts over the border of aesthetics and politics is discussed by Karol Irzykowski and Stanisław Brzozowski, however, from theoretically contrasted positions. While Irzykowski believes that art is independent from economy, he still claims that art shapes our reality, the *Lebenswelt*, by altering the ways of perception, in which he is very close to Russian formalist Shklovky. To back up his views Irzykowski quotes Oscar Wilde's observation that English fog had not existed before William Turner made it appear in his paintings. Similarly, Polish romantic enthusiasm did not spring from the nation's spirit but was taught by Mickiewicz, a Romantic poet-prophet, and then taken for granted (Nycz 161-162). In contrast, Brzozowski claims that literature is a direct instrument of action, language being a kind of a social glue, and social reality being modeled on the linguistic habits of a particular community (Ibid. 128-129).

confines of a flat pattern, the fanciful shapes of a flat jigsaw puzzle are puffed into little three dimensional monsters. The framed aesthetic pattern renders them pleasurable to watch. Those liberated from the confines of a flat drawing, however, change into uncanny creatures with their most triumphal representative – the miniature dragon – blowing smoke and spitting fire from its nostrils. The dragon-crocodile is promptly domesticated when returned within the confines of a fanciful geometrical shape, much in the manner of artistic transformation employed also by Eliot in the London bombing scene in *Little Gidding*, where he imaginatively turns Messerschmits and Spitfires into "the dove with the flickering tongue" and "the dove descending" of Pentecostal fire. The transformations of Escher's reptiles (when in and out of the aesthetic pattern) seem a good illustration of the way I view the circulation of modernist artistic theorizing when it transcends the realm of the aesthetic proposition and aspires to the status of political ethos, with the effect that an uncanny (*unheimlich*) socio-political vision is born of the ideas that were originally rendered innocuous (*heimlich*) within the realm of art⁹.

It seems, however, that Herbert, the poet of the late phase of Polish modernism, the one who lived the cruelties and absurdities of two totalitarian utopias, still paid a peculiar tribute to the modernist aesthetics by transforming, or to be more exact, reversing their mythological method.

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¹⁷ I consider the problematics of linking modernist predilection for abstract aesthetics with the poets' lapsing into the totalitarian authoritative thinking in the paper *Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Turning Aesthetics into Political Ethics* (pending publication).

The idea of linking Escher's picture with political transformations of the modernist aesthetic assumptions was suggested to me by the reading of Robin Lydenberg article entitled *Freud's Uncanny Narratives*. Lydenberg uses the picture as a direct allusion to a *Strand* story, a fantastic story of ghostly crocodiles, Freud admits having read. In the story, the crocodiles that were carved as a decoration in a wooden table, by night, turn into real creatures. The uncanny status of their transformation from ornamental to threatening is described with the German equivalent of the English word "uncanny", "unheimlich". The word, as noted by Lydenberg, unlike its English equivalent, has a positive antonym "heimlich", which means "familiar and agreeable" as contrasted with "unheimlich", meaning "concealed and kept out of sight" (1073). So while standing in opposition, the contrasted "heimlich" / "unheimlich" are like head and tail of the same coin, which makes them of particular value when referring to the ideas that are essentially of the same nature, yet of a different impact, depending on whether considered within the aesthetic or political context.

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