

## The Utility of Poems

### Zbigniew Herbert: Mr Cogito Reads the Newspaper

*I wrote this letter when I was deeply troubled by the world, and in particular the ongoing war in Syria and the refugee crisis it engendered. I spoke in my class on poetry about the situation in the world. I gave them so grievous facts about the historical place we are living in. Those facts come at the end of this essay.*

#### Mr Cogito Reads the Newspaper

On the first page  
a report of the killing of 120 soldiers

the war lasted a long time  
you could get used to it

close alongside  
the news of a sensational crime  
with a portrait of the murderer

the eye of Mr Cogito  
slips indifferently  
over the soldiers' hecatomb  
to plunge with delight  
into the description of everyday horror

a thirty-year-old farm labourer  
under the stress of nervous depression killed his wife  
and two small children

it is described with precision  
the course of the murder  
the position of the bodies and other details

for 120 dead

you search on a map in vain

too great a distance  
covers them like a jungle

they don't speak to the imagination  
there are too many of them  
the numeral zero at the end  
changes them into an abstraction

a subject for meditation:  
the arithmetic of compassion

The burning issue of the moment is the terrorist assault on the residents of Paris. One hundred and twenty-nine dead, hundreds more wounded, ninety-nine critically. Gunfire raked a concert hall, several restaurants, several bars. The dead were predominately people 'out on the town' on a Friday night.

Reaction to the events of the ghastly Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> attacks reverberated through much of the world. Shock, horror, outrage. The responses were appropriate: what happened was shocking, horrible and outrageous. There is no excusing this violence against innocents. A few claim that it is the chickens coming home to roost, that the outrage and violence that Western imperialism looses on the world has been paid back in similar coin to the Western nations that countenance such imperialism.

No. Much can be said against imperial policies and the often violent and autocratic means that imperial powers – be they nations or corporations – use to enforce their will on people in less-developed areas of the globe. In my view, much should be said,. But no amount of wrongdoing justifies the wrongdoing unleashed upon the citizens of Paris in these past few days.

In the midst of viewing the tragedy and reading about it daily I find myself thinking, often, of a poem by Zbigniew Herbert, the Polish modernist. This is not his best poem, nor his deepest poem, nor his most eloquent poem. Yet it is the poem, of all other poems by all poets, I think of most often when I encounter the ills of our century.

Often, poems speak to our inner lives, revealing what is going on within us, or what might be going on within us if we paid more attention.

Sometimes poems show us the ‘innerness’ of human beings who are not like ourselves. They take us out of the ‘prison of the self’ and make us aware of what a large and diverse place the world is. As Miranda exclaims in the last act of *The Tempest*,

Oh, wonder!  
How many goodly creatures are there here!  
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,  
That has such people in’t!

Poems, to sum up what I have just said, reveal our inner weather and humanize the outer otherness we encounter, an otherness to which we are all too sadly often blind.

We seldom measure poems by their utility. But poems may indeed be useful. I would argue, strenuously, that in the subterranean recesses where consciousness works and is shaped and questions itself, poems work all the time. But in the common world we share, where people tie their shoelaces, brush their teeth and eat pizza: not so much.

This poem by Zbigniew Herbert, “Mr. Cogito Reads the Newspaper,” is a poem that is of the highest utility, at least for me. It is a poem useful in my daily life. It always reminds me – it is never far from my mind – that there are perspectives I could and should take that the world all too often does not want me to take.

‘The world.’ In the poem, that world is the world of newspapers, of the mass media, of those who shape the mass media, perhaps even of those whose interests the mass media serves. The poem’s title indicates a newspaper will feature prominently in what follows, and indeed the very first line is “On the first page.” Two stanzas later the spatial placement of “the news” anchors the stanza and those following. A reporter provides “the description of everyday horror” that begins in the fourth stanza. In stanza six we discover of the article about the murder, that “it is described with precision.”

If we were to read this poem in a class on sociology or in communications, we would say the poem is about the mass media. But I think that is the wrong way to approach the poem. Well, not wrong, but misguided. Herbert’s words are about the mass media, but they are also about those of us who read the media, in

this case the newspaper. Our needs and wants, our desires, shape what is provided to us. For the poem moves away from the newspaper in stanza seven:

for 120 dead  
you search on a map in vain

The dominant reference is no longer the paper, but a map. The map becomes the actuality of place where “distance” and “jungle” seem appropriate. And then? Imagination is invoked, negatively, while statistics and finally arithmetic take its place.

Mr. Cogito flees numbers that are large, numbers with “the numeral zero at the end.” For him, when numbers become large they become an abstraction. Whatever ‘reality’ the laborer’s dead family presented him is drained away by numbers that he reads as statistics.

In this poem, only the final couplet is challenging, and it is challenging because it presents us with something to think about, “a subject for meditation.” What follows the colon, the last line, is the paradoxical question that the poem has presented to us. Arithmetic, numbers, have nothing to do with compassion. This is unfortunate, the poem would seem to lament, although it does not help us meditate on this misfortune.

It is we, and not just the newspapers we read, that shape what we allow ourselves to know of the world. The poem is neither hard nor difficult to understand, though it presents a very difficult truth: the fundamental position of human beings like ourselves is neither moral, nor imaginative, nor rational. I believe it is ourselves we confront in this short un-lyrical lyric poem.

Because I believe the truth it tells us is so important, here’s the poem, again. I shall add a few hard facts after the poem. They are hard facts because facts are facts, without the fuzziness of ‘views’ or the ambiguities of ‘judgments,’ and so have hard edges. And hard because they are, as the poem indicates, very hard for our minds to comprehend or even entertain.

### **Mr Cogito Reads the Newspaper**

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Fact: One hundred and twenty nine people died in the recent terrorist attacks in Paris.

Fact: More than 4,000,000 refugees have fled Syria as the country spirals into a violence and disorder that far surpass anything Paris is experiencing.

Fact: Another 6,500,000 Syrians are displaced from their homes and still living in Syria.

Fact: 49 percent of Syrians have been displaced by the war in that country.

Fact: 310,000 Syrians have died in the war being waged in Syria.

Fact: More than 300,000 refugees have made the dangerous northward crossing of the Mediterranean, many in overcrowded rubber rafts, seeking to avoid death and destruction.

Fact: In July alone, more than 100,000 refugees sought entry into Europe.

Fact: 174,000 Iraqis were reported killed between 2003 and 2013; civilian noncombatants account for between 112,000-123,000 of those dead. Many civilians died as a result of suicide bombings. (There have been over 13,000 civilian deaths in 2015.)

Fact: In Afghanistan, over 26,000 civilian deaths due to war-related violence have been documented. Over 91,000 Afghans, including civilians, soldiers and militants, have been killed in the conflict. If indirect causes related to the war are included, the number should include as many as 360,000 additional casualties.

Fact: In Saudi Arabia alone, 9,000,000 migrant workers comprise more than half that nation's workforce. Many work under conditions not unlike forced labor.

Fact: *5,400,000 people in the Congo have died since 2008 as a result of war and its aftermath.*

Fact: 663,000,000 people do not have access to safe, drinkable water.

Fact: 795,000,000 people do not have enough food to eat.

Fact: One out of every four children in the world is stunted because of inadequate nutrition and health care.

Fact: Over 22 percent of American children, over 16,000,000 million children, live in poverty.

In Herbert's poem, the imagination cannot and does not cope with figures like these. The zeroes, the poem points out, change individual lives into abstractions. Compassion disappears. The greater the number of casualties, and this is beyond tragic, the less we feel compassion.

A careful and savvy reader might object that the poem is about 'Mr. Cogito,' a persona Herbert created over many poems, and that Mr. Cogito is an everyman, not as smart or as compassionate as, well, we are.

But every time I recall the poem to myself, and I do this often, I think the poem is referring to me and to most of the people I know.

The terrorist attacks in Paris are a tragedy, a horrific tragedy. But I wonder why our compassion, our concern, our sense of the fragility of order, is not called upon more often, why the immediacy of 'people like us' always trumps the numbers, the distances, the jungles.

So I think about this poem a lot. It is useful to and in my life, reminding me that all too often I lack perspective, all too often I flee from the hardest facts of our time on earth, all too often I seek comfort by making tragedy small rather than seeing how many people it affects.