

**REPORT FROM THE
BESIEGED CITY
and Other Poems**

by Zbigniew Herbert
translated by John and
Bogdana Carpenter
Ecco, 1985
82 pp. \$12.50

**BARBARIAN IN
THE GARDEN**

by Zbigniew Herbert
translated by Michael March
and Jarostaw Anders
Carcenet, 1985
180 pp. \$14.95

Polish émigré poet Czeslaw Milosz is the winner of the world's splashiest literary awards, including the Nobel Prize, but to a growing number of readers, Zbigniew Herbert, the poet who remained behind, is the poet who matters most. Although his verses look sleekly modern, Herbert belongs to the classical tradition. Severe in his self-restraint, noble (yet unstuffy) in tone, he would be the last to promote his own importance. In our century, he writes in "To Ryszard Krynicki—a Letter," only Rilke, Eliot, and "a few other distinguished shamans . . . knew the secret/ of conjuring a form with words that resist the action of time without which/ no phrase is worth remembering and speech is like sand. . . ." Herbert apologizes for the pettiness of his political verses, lamenting that "we had opponents despicably small," for whom it was hardly worth lowering "holy speech/ to the babble of the speaker's platform the black foam of the newspapers. . . ." But Herbert is too modest. His poems tackle important themes: the brute mendacity of leaders, the hollowness of ideologies, the cost of giving in to history's Big Lies. He also writes poems that verge on piety, as in "Prayer of Mr. Cogito—Traveler," where he thanks God for letting him visit "places/ that were not the places of my everyday torment."

Travel, too, is the motive behind the 10 essays of *Barbarian in the Garden*, but while they are inspired by visits to Western European places—to the painted caves of Lascaux, to the Gothic cathedrals of France, to the Italian city of Siena—they are not travelogues. They are, rather, encounters with works of art as well as meditations on history. In one, he recounts the story of the Templar Order. Founded in 1128 to protect the Holy Land, this powerful body of knights flourished for almost two centuries before the French king Philip the Fair deemed it a threat to his power. To quash the Templars, Philip accused their leaders of heresy. "Progress in our civilization," Herbert observes, "consists mainly in the fact that simple tools for splitting heads were replaced by hatchet-words, which have the advantage of psychologically paralyzing an opponent." But the work of our best poets—Herbert's included—remains the greatest impediment to such progress.