
CURRENT BOOKS

The Discrete Virtues of the Bourgeoisie

STILL LIFE WITH A BRIDLE: Essays and Apocryphas. By Zbigniew Herbert. Trans. by John and Bogdana Carpenter. Ecco Press. 162 pp. \$19.95

The title essay of this exquisite book of reflections on the cultural and artistic legacy of 17th-century Holland illustrates Zbigniew Herbert's unusual sensibility: far-ranging, ironic, and wise. The essay begins with Herbert visiting the Royal Museum in Amsterdam. He encounters a painting not previously known to him. Its subject is ordinary—a still life with some beakers, a wine glass, a piece of sheet music, and a bridle—but it catches his attention in a remarkable way. "I myself do not know how to translate my stifled shout when I first stood face-to-face with the 'Still Life' into comprehensible language, nor the joyous surprise, the gratitude that I was endowed beyond measure, the soaring

act of rapture." The painter's name is Torrentius. Years later, Herbert, still touched by the memory of the painting, delves into the obscure artist's biography and uncovers a mysterious, tangled, tragic life.

Torrentius, whose real name was Jan Simon van de Beeck, was born in Amsterdam in 1589. He was a dazzlingly successful painter: talented, handsome, charming, fashionable, wealthy. A star, we would say. But at the height of his career—he was 38—a cloud began to form over his head. It seems that Torrentius had begun to flaunt an unconventional, sybaritic, and, many thought, impious style. In sober Calvinist Holland, this was reckless behavior. He was arrested and accused of being a member, perhaps even a leader, of the secret society of the Rosicrucians and, equally damning, of being a libertine. There were other charges involving immoral and impious behavior, even heresy. It all came down to, as Herbert puts it, "whether Torrentius, against the background of the manners of his time, was a figure impossible to accept: a malicious type of moral monster."

Dutch justice in the 17th century, its so-called Golden Age, was callous. Torrentius refuted all the accusations and refused to admit his guilt; a panel of judges decided that torture was in order. The painter held fast to his innocence. "If something slips from my lips when you inflict suffering on me, it will be a lie," he shouted at his torturers. Finally, he was condemned



to burning at the stake. Then, an amazing intercession. Charles I, King of England, wrote to his cousin the Prince of Orange, regent of Holland, asking that Torrentius, out of consideration for his great talents as a painter, be released and exiled to the English court. Surprisingly, the prince agreed, and Torrentius was freed, on the condition that he leave for England immediately and never return to Holland. Cruelly, he was also required to pay the costs of his trial.

Torrentius spent 12 years in England; little is known of this period in his life, although Herbert surmises that he took up his old habits. Suddenly, inexplicably, recklessly, Torrentius returned to Holland. What happened next is predictable: He was arrested, tried again, tortured again, and died a broken man.

That is the end of Torrentius, but not of Herbert's essay, for he now turns his attention to the painting itself, which is the only surviving example of the artist's work. Herbert, heretofore chronicler, becomes detective. What does the painting mean? The painting contains what Svetlana Alpers has called a caption—two lines of text on the sheet of music: *Wat buten maat bestaat/Int onmaats gaat verghaat*. Herbert gives their meaning as, "What exists beyond measure (order) /In over-measure (disorder) will meet a bad end." Since Dutch painters and their clients delighted in allegories and symbolism, art historians have seen in Torrentius's painting the popular allegory *Vanitas*. This Herbert rejects, suggesting instead the allegory of one of the cardinal virtues, Moderation. He bases this interpretation on the symbolism of the judiciously half-filled wine glass and the presence of the bridle.

But Herbert is dissatisfied with this explanation also, finding it too simple, too transparent, too logical for such a mercurial talent as Torrentius. He scours Rosicrucian texts for clues, but to no avail. The painting that touched him so deeply refuses to give up its secret. A few years later he receives a copy of a paper on Torrentius by a Dutch scholar who ana-

lyzes the musical score that appears in the still life. He identifies a double fault in orthography and harmony; a misspelling and a false note occur in tandem, a deliberate violation of order. Can it be, the scholar suggests, that what appears to be an allegory of moderation is really exactly the opposite, a hidden paean to disorder?

At this point, Herbert brings his essay to an abrupt close. One senses an impatience with his own curiosity and with his own searching intellect. "After all, the painting does not live by the reflected glow of secret books and treatises," he writes. "It has its own light, the clear, penetrating light of clarity."

It's easy to understand what drew Zbigniew Herbert—who, along with Czesław Miłosz, is usually described as one of the two most admired Polish poets now living—to the 17th-century Dutch painter. Herbert, born in 1924, studied art history, philosophy, and economics, and like Torrentius, at one point in his life he too found himself cast outside the pale for heresy. Herbert fought in the underground resistance against the Nazis, but after the end of the war, unlike many Polish intellectuals, he refused to join the new Stalinist order, and despite his academic qualifications he was reduced to menial and inconsequential employment. It was not until 1956, during the cultural thaw that followed Stalin's death, that the poetry he had continued to write for himself was published. His reputation as a poet grew quickly at home, and as he was translated—*Selected Poems* (1968) and *Report From the Besieged City and Other Poems* (1985)—he was recognized abroad.

In addition to being a poet, Herbert is also known as an essayist; *Barbarian in the Garden*, an earlier collection, appeared in English translation in 1985. *Still Life with a Bridle* is more than a collection of essays, however. It represents the author's attempt to use the poetic sensibility to penetrate the past. In these 16 pieces he covers various aspects of life in 17th-century Holland: the tulip mania of the 1630s, the economics of painting, the bourgeois themes of Dutch art. Herbert is a beautiful stylist,

at least judged by this very able translation by John and Bogdana Carpenter. Here he is on Dutch painters:

They can only be envied. Whatever their greatness and miseries, the disillusionments and failures of their careers, their role in society and place on earth were not questioned, their profession universally recognized and as evident as the profession of butcher, tailor, or baker. The question why art exists did not occur to anyone, because a world without paintings was simply inconceivable.

And casting a baleful eye on the present day, he adds:

It is we who are poor, very poor. A major part of contemporary art declares itself on the side of chaos, gesticulates in a void, or tells the story of its own barren soul.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his own experiences in the face of totalitarianism and his resistance to a dehumanizing regime, Herbert is particularly sympathetic to the bourgeois culture of the Dutch. In his own work, homey and solid "bourgeois" materials furnish a refuge from the grand-sounding lies and treacherous behavior of the totalitarian state. We see this theme crop up again and again in his poetry, nowhere more explicitly, perhaps, than in his prose-poem "Objects":

Inanimate objects are always correct and cannot, unfortunately, be reproached with anything. I have never observed a chair shift from one foot to another, or a bed rear on its hind legs. And

tables, even when they are tired, will not dare to bend their knees. I suspect that objects do this from pedagogical considerations, to reprove us constantly for our instability.

When he moves from his own poetry to a consideration of Dutch art, Herbert, not surprisingly, approves its avoidance of grandiose, heroic subjects:

Freedom—so many treatises were written about it that it became a pale, abstract concept. But for the Dutch it was something as simple as breathing, looking, and touching objects. It did not need to be defined or beautified. This is why there is no division in their art between what is great and what is small, what is important and unimportant, elevated and ordinary. They painted apples and the portraits of fabric shopkeepers, pewter plates and tulips, with such patience and such love that the images of other worlds and noisy tales about earthly triumphs fade in comparison.

Simon Schama, the author of a recent bestselling history of 17th-century Holland, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, has called for a revival of narrative history. In *Still Life with a Bridle* Herbert gives us that and something else, a sort of poetic history that is concerned not only with facts but with personalities, not only with events but with the human contained, but not trapped, by them.

—*Witold Rybczynski teaches architecture at McGill University; his latest book is Waiting for the Weekend (1991).*

Portrait of the Artist As an Artist

THE INTERIOR CASTLE: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford. By Ann Hulbert. Knopf. 430 pp. \$25

An advance review in *Publisher's Weekly* professed disappointment with Ann Hulbert's new biography of Jean

Stafford. Citing the self-destructive momentum of the writer's private life, the unnamed reviewer found Hulbert's treatment "flat," inadequate to the sensational attributes of her subject. In other words, Hulbert, a senior editor of the *New Republic*, had not Middlebrooked her Sexton,