

The Unfinished Text in the Thickening Description

From Genetic Criticism to Cultural Transfer Studies
(The case of Zbigniew Herbert's *Winter Tale*)

Mateusz Antoniuk

ABSTRACT

On the threshold of the 1970s Zbigniew Herbert, an eminent Polish poet and writer, was working on a play entitled *Baśń zimowa* (Winter Tale), which can be described as a truly international, interlingual, and transcultural phenomenon of textual culture. Written in Polish and ultimately intended for publication in German translation, it was inspired by a short story by James Stevenson published in *The New Yorker* magazine. For a number of reasons, Herbert never completed the text and all that remains is the archival material (plans, rough drafts, a newspaper cutting). Using this case as a platform, I attempt to investigate the potential for cooperation between the disciplines of genetic criticism on the one hand and cultural transfer studies on the other. A discussion of the ontology of unfinished and abandoned work provides a backdrop to the major themes.

Towards a thickening description of an object that scarcely exists

THE INCOMPLETION, UNREALIZATION, AND NON-PERFORMANCE OF any human creation — and art is no exception — is a phenomenon as common as it is fascinating and perplexing. What fascinates and what perplexes in an unfinished novel that has never been published and whose manuscript suddenly breaks off in mid-word? What fascinates and what perplexes in a building whose walls have been erected to a height only half that stipulated in the architect's plan and is now left standing in the cityscape like a hollow tree trunk? For my part, I would answer as follows: what perplexes is the suspicion that we are confronted with evidence of a sudden or gradual draining of the creative energy of an author and of a now irreversible waste of the time and effort invested in the making of

something that was never ended. Our unease is only sharpened when this image prompts the realization that our designs and actions can go the same way too. What fascinates, however, is the ironic change of position. The intended final form of a work abandoned in the flow of its making, an arrangement that was intended to last, but that can now only be imagined, is transformed into a phantasm. At the same time, its transitory configuration, which was meant only to be a moment in the work's existence, is arrested and fixed in a definitive form. In other words, and to paraphrase a classic, that which is (or was meant to be) "solid melts into air" and that which is (or was meant to be) liquid becomes "solid".

The irony of incompleteness and non-performance is exquisite in its artfulness. The origin of this article reminds me of this. In truth, I first wrote it as a paper for a Society of Textual Scholarship conference that was to have taken place in March 2020 in Philadelphia. I wanted to present the case of the play *Baśń zimowa* [*Winter Tale*] by Zbigniew Herbert (1924–1998), who was an outstanding Polish poet, prose writer, and playwright, and one of the most important creative forces in Polish culture in the second half of the twentieth century.¹ It struck me as an intriguing subject for discussion at this very conference, whose theme, after all, was "Borders of the Book". Why? There are a number of reasons. Firstly, the play was in the making on the threshold of the 1970s, and therefore in the Cold-War world, which was divided by powerful political boundaries. Secondly, it was an attempt to cross borders between languages and cultures: it was written in Polish, it drew inspiration from an American text, and its goal was to become known and have a presence in German. Thirdly, it did not succeed in crossing the borders of the book: it was never printed, and that was because Herbert never completed it. Herbert's play also carried the motif of a dangerous outbreak. But when I was planning my conference talk it did not seem relevant. Of much more importance was the fact that an unfinished work would have excited endless playful friction with the notion of borders, which was so important for the conference. But it did not work out that way. In the spring of 2020 the motif of an outbreak suddenly became real: the borders were sealed and a dismal harvest of unaccomplished proj-

1. The most extensive compilation of Herbert's poetry in English, which runs to more than six-hundred pages and contains the poems the author published in his lifetime and included in volumes of poetry, is Z. Herbert, *Collected Poems 1956–1998*, New York 2007 (trans. Alissa Valles). More than seven-hundred pages of Herbert's essays and other writings await readers in *The Collected Prose 1948–1998*, New York 2010 (various translators).

ects and cancelled events, including the “Borders of the Book” conference, ensued. So it was that Zbigniew Herbert’s never-ended play was not introduced in a paper that was not given at a conference that did not take place, which is also a way — apophatic really — of speaking of incompleteness and non-performance. . .

Happily, though, in writing and publishing this article I have succeeded in exchanging *via negativa* for *via positiva*. I will attempt, then, to introduce the case of the unfinished *Baśń zimowa* [*Winter Tale*] not by way of silence, but by way of, so to speak, a double discourse. In fact, this case possesses the special attribute of needing to be discussed in many different ways: we might think of it as the intersection of various research disciplines active in the field of the contemporary humanities. I will therefore address the never-ended play first (in part two) in terms of genetic criticism, which after all is primary here (without the tools of genetic criticism it would not be possible to interpret Herbert’s unfinished work). Next (in part three) I will consider it in terms of cultural transfer studies. As I will attempt to show, these various kinds of ‘studies’ or ‘criticism’ are not immutable matrices that specific textual and cultural phenomena are forced to match for academic effect. On the contrary, they are the languages we need to understand and describe the uniqueness and specificity of the phenomenon. To put it another way, I hope that the dramaturgy of my paper will be the dramaturgy of thick description, to use Clifford Geertz’s famous metaphor (GEERTZ 1973, 3–30). Or, and this is possibly an even more accurate term, a “thickening description”. We will weave a series of layers of interpretive discourse around Zbigniew Herbert’s unfinished play — a work that, seen from the point of view of the reading public, library catalogues, and the publishing market, is wholly absent — to gradually reveal its complexity, ambiguity, and multidimensionality.

Inside the archive: Zbigniew Herbert’s never-ended play through the genetic lens

There was once a prospect that the Zbigniew Herbert archive, whose contents we should now inspect, would be kept in its entirety in the United States: in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the Yale University, to be exact. And that is very nearly what happened. Herbert received the offer to transfer his papers to the Beinecke in the final years of his life. He was close to accepting it, but, in the end, no agreement was reached. The matter of sending the archive across the Atlantic recrudescend

in the early years of the first decade of this century and was again close to resolution. But once more there was a turn of events that meant that the archive remained in Poland. In the end, very nearly the entire archive was deposited in one of the most important institutes of Polish culture: the National Library [*Biblioteka Narodowa*] in Warsaw, while a small selection of Herbert's papers was consigned to the stacks and store rooms of the Beinecke.² The National Library in Warsaw is the place that today stores the archival folder bearing the title of the play that was being written but was never ended, that was contracted but never published (neither in the poet's lifetime nor afterwards; neither in full nor in part), and that was to be called *Baśń zimowa* (*Winter Tale* — from this moment, to the end of my article, I will use the wording of the title in the English translation). There are twenty-eight documents in the folder entitled *Winter Tale*. All but one — a page torn out of a magazine, which, as we shall soon see, was also a 'participant' in the generation of the text — are handwritten.

Let us now endeavour to examine these papers through the lens of genetic criticism, a specialized discourse that aims as fully as possible to understand the process of text creation, which though already completed and belonging to the past, can still be understood through its material trace, that is, through a flawed, fragile, and deceptive — but nevertheless real — representation.³

2. See <https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/resources/752>.

3. The idea of genetic criticism can be understood in at least two senses. In narrow terms it is nothing more or less than the English translation of the French term *critique génétique*, which denotes a research field that arose in France at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, and which, now slowly entering its sixth decade and possessed of a body of unusually rich and diverse achievements, remains alive and creatively fecund (for the very best accounts of the *critique génétique* tradition see FERRER and GRODEN 2004 and HAY 2004). In broad terms, genetic criticism serves as a portmanteau term for research that — irrespective of its methodological, terminological, and linguistic variations — seeks to describe and understand the dynamics of the creative process. In this view, French *critique génétique* is a part (a very important and influential part, but still a part) of an extensive domain (partly coterminous and offering mutual inspiration, and partly isolated) of theory and research practices. This broad and inclusive understanding of the term “genetic criticism”, which does not render it homogeneous, was devised by Graham Falconer (1993, 1–23). A variety of studies first undertaken several decades ago by American scholars can also be included in this broad definition. One of them, which probably remains incomplete, was an ambitious project formulated in 1948 by Charles

French genetic criticism (*critique génétique*) emerged and developed at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s as the rebellious daughter of structuralism (see JENNY 1996, 11–15). Yet even rebellious daughters inherit some of the characteristics of their parents: one of the expressions of the “structuralist gene” in genetic criticism is a passion for models and typologies. This is well reflected in a review paper by Pierre Marc de Biasi (an outstanding representative of French genetic criticism) published in *Yale French Studies* in 1996 that sets out four main phases that can usually be distinguished in the creative process: the pre-compositional phase (in the most general terms, this is the phase in which the necessary materials are gathered and preliminary planning is done), the compositional phase (allowing for a degree of simplification, this can be considered the phase in which the writing of a proper text is done), the pre-publishing phase (this is the phase in which the author edits the text and prepares it for sending to the publisher), and the publication phase (in this period the leading role is now played by the publisher’s editors, who produce a final, printed version — usually in cooperation with the author). In de Biasi’s model, there are genetic documents that correspond with each phase, such as “initial work plans or scenarios”, “notes on plot-handling”, and “chronologies” for the pre-compositional phase, “rough drafts” for the compositional phase, “definitive manuscripts” for the pre-publishing phase, and “notes on layout” for the publication phase. These are only examples of the document types that de Biasi assigns to the various phases. In its entirety, his model and typology of a writer’s creativity is far more complex, detailed, and ingenious (DE BIASI 1996, 33–47).

It is comparatively straightforward to place the history of the making of the Herbert’s play *Winter Tale* in de Biasi’s system, which is structuralist in spirit. Naturally, there will be no mention here of a publication phase (the

Abbott that aimed to gradually reach an understanding of the phenomenon of human creativity itself (see ABBOTT 1948, 31). In my view, genetic criticism is, in 2020, a lively, multi-stream, global project that has secured its place alongside other projects of the contemporary humanities. It is a status that has been confirmed by the series of conferences held in English under the title “Genesis: City Year”. So far, two have been held: “Genesis: Helsinki 2017” and “Genesis: Cracow 2019”. The third edition, “Genesis: Oxford 2020”, has been postponed until 2021 because of the pandemic. More than sixty people from fifteen or more countries, including Poland, France, Portugal, Italy, Holland, Belgium, Finland, Sweden, Russia, Ukraine, Brazil, the United States, and Canada, attended the last Cracow event.

work has never been published) or even of a pre-publication phase (Herbert never ended the action of composing and writing, therefore he could not have prepared the text for the publisher). *Winter Tale* went through a full pre-compositional phase, from which there remain detailed plans of the work that specify the plot (sequence of events) and composition (all the events were precisely written down as discrete acts and scenes). Thus planned, *Winter Tale* proceeded to the writing stage (“compositional phase”), and there came to a standstill. Only rough drafts, by which we mean working manuscripts of various stage situations, dialogues and monologues, survive from this phase.

Rather than taking them in chronological order, one after the other, Herbert wrote the particular stages of the action by jumping between them: for example he was working on selected scenes from the third act, while some earlier scenes (from act two or act one) were left untouched waiting for their turn. So it was that, when he ceased work on the piece — irretrievably and irrevocably as it turned out — the scenes that had been written resembled an archipelago of textual islands strewn about a vast ocean of plans. Genetic criticism integrates what emerges from the written dramatic scenes with what can be understood from the detailed plans for action in a single image, which allows the plot of this never-ended play to be told in chronological order and according to cause and effect. *Winter Tale* is set in an unnamed independent city state that is governed by a mayor and a ‘council of seven’. It is not associated with any particular geographical place, historical time, or culture. The action begins on an October day. The first event is a sudden, premature attack of severe winter weather. The heavy snow cuts the city off from the world, halts movement and traffic in the streets, and poses a threat to the inhabitants. Social unrest soon builds and there are riots. Taking advantage of this wave of frustration, a barber called Fritz seizes power using intrigue and primitive demagoguery. In the city, which remains in the grip of a calamitous winter, the paroxysms of irrational madness continue to intensify. There is an outbreak of a mysterious and fatal epidemic known as ‘White Fever’ and of a curious heresy of ‘Confessors of the Snow’, that is, of a group of people who believe that the Godhead shall descend to the earth in the form of snowflakes. Dictator Fritz institutes an ever more extreme terror (political trials, mass executions) before declaring himself emperor and, finally, a God. The plot concludes in a catastrophic manner. In April, not quite six months after the first stab of winter, the sound of the city bells, which are set ringing by the children, brings a lethal and destructive avalanche down on the settle-

ment. A respectable, rational, and centuries-old republic, which has fallen into lunacy and decadence, perishes along with its history, former glories, pre-death frenzy of follies, heresies, atrocities, and disease.⁴

Genetic criticism achieves its first aim when all of the documents of the genesis are arranged in chronological order and in their mutual functional relationships, when the plans are collated and, where possible, cross-referenced with the rough drafts (that is, we know which of the planned scenes were actually written and which remained unrealized ideas). In other words, this primary aim is achieved when the genetic dossier is no longer an incomprehensible collection of forty or fifty loose, unconnected, and barely legible pages, but instead a cohesive whole. Having ordered and mastered the archive material we are able, in the language of genetic criticism, to make the transition from the genetic dossier (the set of documents belonging to the creative process of a given work) to the *avant-texte*.⁵ As the ambitions of this critical approach are not limited to the reading and

4. The association of a political crisis with an epidemic of a menacing, lethal illness is not, of course, original: it is a recurring topos. It would appear that the first text of world literature to portray a city that is simultaneously troubled by an epidemic and a political crisis was *Oedipus Rex*. In the Thebes 'written' by Sophocles, the epidemic not only destroys the city, but also — indirectly — reveals its dark secret: the sickness, one might say, is here only a physical symptom of the deeper problem that is actually destabilizing society. The numerous infected cities, as it were, of twentieth-century literature (Mann's cholera-stricken Venice, Karel Čapek's unnamed city that is afflicted by Cheng syndrome, Camus's Oran visited by the plague) are in some sense reinterpretations — not necessarily conscious ones — of Sophocles' Thebes. Herbert's never-ended play fits this chain of diverse repetitions of the topos of an epidemic that is both a real disease of the physical body (the bodies of the inhabitants of the city-state) and a metaphysical disease of the body politic (the city-state as a whole). See, especially, Jennifer Cooke's remarks on epidemics as a metaphor of political theatre (2009, 44–72).
5. The notion of "avant-texte" (possible English translation: "foretext") plays a crucial role in the lexicon of *critique génétique*. De Biasi defines it as follows: "The avant-texte is no longer a set of manuscripts but an elucidation of the logical systems that organize it, and it does not exist anywhere outside the critical discourse that produces it. It lies in the jurisdiction of the critic-geneticist who establishes it using the results of the manuscript analysis" (2004, 43). For further readings see also BOWMAN 1990. Here the avant-texte is defined in a more semiotic way. The move from "genetic dossier" to "avant-texte" is described by Bowman as the move from "the undifferentiated documentary mass" to "a corpus of signs", that is, a configuration of significant elements ("mostly words,

ordering of archive material, the critical-genetic mission does not end here. In fact it is only now that the most interesting, most exciting part of this approach really begins: the opportunity to conduct further analytical and interpretive operations that cause the description to continue to thicken and lend its object more and more complexity. I shall mention only four of these operations.

Firstly, genetic criticism can serve as an instrument of poetics (genetic poetics, let us say) and in this way consider the conventions and formal devices Herbert applies in the work (and, which is important, find out whether these conventions and devices changed in the course of work on the piece). Put briefly, otherwise a separate essay would be needed, Herbert consistently writes *Winter Tale* as an epic drama (SZONDI 1987). A narrator hovers above the setting and even, as it were, two narrator-commentators: one “lower” and one “higher”. The former comments on the course of the dramatic action involving the *dramatis personae*, while the latter comments on remarks made by the former. In practice this means that the dialogic scenes involving ‘ordinary’ *dramatis personae* are separated by speeches of the “lower” narrator, and the whole play is enclosed in the framework of a prologue and epilogue, in which the “higher” narrator speaks.

Secondly, genetic criticism can serve as a specific kind of interpretive discourse that seeks to comprehend the meaning or meanings of a work *in statu nascendi*.⁶ An interpreter informed by genetic criticism might, for example, state that *Winter Tale* is political fiction scripted for acts and scenes, dialogues, monologues, and epic narrative parts. But this fiction is not pure fantasy. On the contrary, it would seem quite powerfully mimetic in its relation to the non-fictional world. A revolution, which is an anarchic movement, overthrows the existing order and offers the prospect of rapid social advancement, but at the same time it employs terror and leads, in the end, to the establishment of a more oppressive form of rule: all of

but including punctuation, crossings-out, at times drawings” [634]), that can be interpreted by genetic critic.

6. Jedd Deppman’s statement (2006), “Most geneticists are zealously committed to close reading, even more than the New Critics were” strikes one as accurate. Once it has performed its fundamental task — that of putting the genetic documents of a given work in chronological order and establishing their mutual functional relationships — genetic criticism can be very smoothly transformed into a passionate hermeneutics of the rough draft. It can then examine, for example, the minute stylistic refinements of the final paragraph of a Flaubert story in its eleven archival versions, which prove relevant for interpretation (DEBRAY GENETTE 2004, 74–93).

this appears to be a transposition of the realities of the French revolution to the dimension of fiction. Indeed, the career of Fritz is reminiscent of that of Napoleon I. Yet this despotic barber is also equipped with some of the features of Hitler: he makes the journey from the underclass and the social margins to the summit of power swept along by the adoration of the crowd, which is obtained thanks to primitive but effective demagoguery. One of the scenes presents the trial of five people accused of attempting to overthrow the system. It is clearly a show trial and part of a display of propaganda choreographed by Fritz and his retinue. This vividly resembles 'judicial' practices known in the countries of the communist bloc, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, in the Stalinist era. In this way, Herbertian political fiction proves in the end to be a re-enactment of themes and phenomena from the political history of the 'real' world.

Thirdly, genetic criticism is capable of producing a close study of the specificity of this particular process of textual creation and comparing it with the histories of the origin and development of other plays by Zbigniew Herbert (this, of course, is hard and time-consuming work because it means 'digging around' in the genetic dossiers of Herbert's five published plays and those of at least a further five that were not finished and published). Once complete, this labor reveals that the history of the generation of *Winter Tale* is idiomatic and exceptional. The singularity of the creative process that led to the writing of *Winter Tale* (but not to its completion) lies in the meticulous planning of the chronology of the action. When working on other plays, Herbert had never given so much thought to the temporal aspect of the setting. Here is an example of what is something of an obsession with being precise about time: one of several schedules of events drawn up to allocate the final action sequences to specific days of a month (but no years are given; the drama takes place, as has been mentioned, in non-historical time). This plan, as all of the other plans and rough drafts, was of course written in Polish. I present it here in translation and transcription (see Fig. 1).⁷

7. I use the convention of a diplomatic transcription, which aims (as far as is possible) to reflect the spatial structure of the inscription. The following signs have been adopted for the transcriptions: [. . .] — illegible word or part of the illegible word; [?] — interpretation uncertain (refers in all cases to the inscription preceding the sign).

- 24.II Decree of silence
- 28.II Fresh wave of arrests
Intensification of the White Fever epidemic [Death of the painter]
- Cemetery in the *Biały Koni* tavern [White Horse] because the road to the cemetery is blocked by snow
- 3.III Lifting of the decree of silence Fritz is chosen as emperor Magpie – cobbler
Court poets – Cobbler Hymn Catechism. Genealogy of the emperor
Deification ceremony From that time the emperor is not seen He Governs [...]
- 5.III Trial of the boss [?] defenders of the fatherland believes [.....] [.....] Bricked up windows
and doors
- ∇ Conversation before death. Declaration of faith in the emperor
[Death of Romeo and Juliet] → suicide they knew a lot
- 7.III Warm southern wind. Full moon. Snow stops falling. Thick clouds It is now possible to take full measure
of the catastrophe
- 15.III Snow falling again Third wave of White Fever epidemic [Death of the librarian]
- 19.III Meeting of the Free Association of Artists. Overthrow [...] [...] Symbolists [?] Apocalypses and [...]
- 20.III Beginning of spring aesthetic commentary
- 25.III Rumours of the death of Emperor Fritz [...] with [.....] Leaden light
Petitions for the emperor to appear. Mass hysteria of women
- New wave of terror
- Song of the women
- 2.IV [Death of the great Sexton]
- 5.IV Children ring the bells

Figure 1. Zbigniew Herbert, plan of the action of the play “Baśń zimowa” [“Winter Tale”]. Zbigniew Herbert’s Archive, National Library of Poland in Warsaw, akc. 17 884, s. 21. Translation and diplomatic transcription.

Surely, the meaning of this plan is partially obscure to us, which is not surprising as these annotations were not addressed to readers, but to the author himself, who probably understood all of his abbreviated thoughts, allusions, and technical remarks.⁸ We can also take it for granted that all of the inscriptions were legible for him (the brackets with dots are used

8. Some genetic critics claim that such documents of genesis do not qualify as “text”. Daniel Ferrer, for example, makes the following claim: “the draft is not a text, or a discourse; it is a protocol for making a text. It can be compared to a musical score, which is not melodious, not even sonorous, but engenders music; or to the color names jotted down by the painter on a rapid pencil sketch, which are not pictorial elements in themselves (although they may acquire a secondary pictoriality, for instance in the paintings of Jasper Johns) but instructions toward a future picture” (1998, 261). Of course, the above transcribed document is not a draft and, according to Ferrer’s opinion, should be described as “plan” or “scenario”, which provides instructions towards a proper rough draft.

above to indicate the words and phrases that are illegible for me). But what is striking here is that two months of dramatic action is allocated almost day by day. It is interesting to note that the scenes in the rough drafts, which are the result of this plan, contain no information whatsoever about the specific days on which the events being presented take place (to give an example: there is a rough draft of a scene from a political trial but the date of 5 March is not given, nor are any other dates). There is every indication that Herbert did not intend to introduce this detailed calendar to the text proper of the work, and that, quite simply, it was not intended for its readers or audience. He compiled it because that was what his imagination required in that precise place and for that specific piece. He wanted to envision the events he had imagined one after the other and according to the months on the calendar. He wanted to produce a simulation of the temporal realness of his fiction. He wanted to feel time flowing in the fictional world of which he was the demiurge.

Fourthly and finally, genetic criticism can be applied in a particular form of intertextual investigation that examines the relationships between texts in the making and other, earlier texts that have already assumed a final form and been published. Here, among the twenty-eight pages in the *Winter Tale* dossier, we find a page that has been cut out of the American magazine *The New Yorker*. By clicking on this link [<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1971/05/08/oberfest>], which leads to the digital archive of *The New Yorker*, readers of *Textual Cultures* can see a reproduction of the page Herbert extracted (of course this is not the exact physical page, but a page from another copy of *The New Yorker*). And what do we find in the Zbigniew Herbert archive in Warsaw? A page containing a micro-story by James Stevenson (1929–2017) entitled “Oberfest”, which was published on 8 May 1971. It takes only a few minutes to read and can be found at the link above. Nevertheless, I shall recount its plot here for the sake of continuity. One morning in the early spring of 1873 all of the inhabitants of the small alpine town of Oberfest are seized by a collective psychosis. They abandon their homes and, driven by an irrational fear of an unspecified threat, they take refuge in the town hall. The frightened people barricade themselves in the municipal palace, nail the doors shut, and await the arrival of the danger they are unable to name and that is foreshadowed only by their own fear. At a certain moment the bored children, who are also shut in the building, find a rope and begin to pull on it. The bell in “Oberfest” is a signal warning against danger. Hearing its ominous tolling, the adults fall into a mass frenzy and hysterically begin to ring all of the remaining town hall bells. The wave of sound set in motion by the bells triggers an enor-

mous avalanche, which buries the entire town, destroys all of the buildings, and kills all of the townspeople.

It can be stated based on a precise analysis of the plans for the play *Winter Tale*, of the written scenes, that the page from *The New Yorker* did not become entangled in the file from the *dossier* of this work by accident but was an integral part of it. It is of course difficult now to resolve the question of whether, in cutting out the page containing Stevenson's story, Herbert already knew that he would want to use it as inspiration to write his own drama about a town smothered by an avalanche, or whether he simply found it interesting and wished to keep it — just in case — as a find he had come across that had the potential to be useful. One thing is certain: in writing *Winter Tale* Herbert clearly used Stevenson's "Oberfest" as material for his own composition. 'Inclusion' is the term I would be most inclined to employ to describe the intertextual relationship linking the written and published "Oberfest" with the written, but never ended, *Winter Tale*. The Polish poet simply seizes Stevenson's plot and implants it in his own as the finale. Yet viewed from a different angle he adds his own story to Stevenson's plot. It can also be argued that the American prose writer was presenting the annihilation of a town, while the Polish dramatist took the final months of its existence as his subject. Either way, Herbert's never-ended play carries within it Stevenson's story as if as its hidden spiritual force, its "succubus".

The longer genetic criticism is brought to bear, the more observations and operations on the never-ended play it carries out, the thicker the description of the twenty-eight pages becomes. They are transformed from a mute archival deposit of no profound significance into a genetic dossier, which in turn becomes an *avant-texte* (a paradox because it has no text). From this there emerges an outline of the poetics and theme of the work coming into being which, it turns out, is bound up in an intertextual relationship with another work. In this way the description thickens to reveal the object described in all of its complexity and shades of meaning. This is not to say, though, that genetic criticism is omniscient and omnipotent as a method of description. In fact, time and again, over and again, its explanatory power fades. For example, when the question arises of why Herbert did not finish this work, it would be fruitless in the plans or rough drafts to seek some decisive restriction or obstruction: a long-sought resolution that discouraged the artist because he could not find it, or a scene that kept refusing to be written to its end. The scriptural, material sign of this creative block could, for example, be a page crossed out with particular fury or vigour or, on the contrary, a blank page: a visible sign of the creative

process shutting down before coming to a dead halt. Occasional epiphanies occur when addressing an intellectual difficulty with the aid of genetic criticism. Then it is possible to see the moment when energy expires and discover the nature of the blockage that could not be overcome. Not in this case. The never-ended *Winter Tale* gives the impression of a building that its constructor has simply abandoned: a constructor who, for reasons best known to himself, has turned his back on what he has begun and devoted his attention to other projects and pursuits.⁹

Nevertheless, I will continue to attend to the never-ended drama and persist in thickening its description. My interest is aroused by that page: the one Herbert cut out of *The New Yorker*. It seems like a simple matter: between September 1970 and June 1971 Zbigniew Herbert was in the United States, so it is not surprising that he was reading the American press and found a text in a magazine published in May 1971 that then proved useful as a substrate for Herbert's own textual creation (a story not uncommon in the annals of world literature). Except that behind this seemingly straightforward, transparent, and obvious sentence "Zbigniew Herbert was in the United States in 1970–1971" there lies an extremely complicated political, social, economic, and cultural reality that needs to be unearthed. Only then will the description of the never-ended play continue to thicken.

Inside the Cold-War period: Zbigniew Herbert's never-ended play through the lens of cultural transfer studies

The term 'cultural transfer studies', which is already well established in academic language, can be regarded as a blurred (but therefore capacious) collective description that covers various research practices that address "phenomena of the circulation, transformation and reinterpretation of cultural and textual goods across geo-cultural areas".¹⁰ Research into intercultural relations in the Cold-War period also falls within this scope. Indeed,

9. It should be added that Zbigniew Herbert has never commented on his unfinished project (at least I didn't find any mention of it in his articles, interviews, letters or annotations).
10. Here I intend to employ the definition used in the call for papers of an academic conference entitled *Paradoxes and Misunderstandings in Cultural Transfers*, which was organised by UCLouvain in May 2019. See <https://uclouvain.be/en/>

the history of circulation and transmission across the iron curtain in (let us say) 1945–1989 both fascinates and excites — especially when it is told in an absorbing manner, such as in an outstanding book by Justin Quinn entitled, *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold-War Poetry* (2015), which — broadly speaking — addresses the interactions and exchanges taking place in the second half of the twentieth century between Czech literature and the Anglophone world. “The war shut down many traditional channels for the passage of artefacts from one culture or language to another”, says Quinn, and immediately adds, “[. . .] but having stymied these, cultural currents built up tremendous pressure that eventually carved new conduits through the lands and languages of the world” (2015, 32). Quinn performs a number of operations to reveal these ‘new conduits’, including describing direct contacts between Czech and western writers, tracing the bilateral flows of ideas and inspiration, which did not require direct, physical contact between the authors, uncovering the work of critics and translators, reconstructing the sociological conditions of literary production and reception on both sides of the iron curtain and, at the same time (and perhaps primarily), practicing an insightful close reading of lines of poetry as they voyage between languages. This is precisely the discursive framework that needs to be adopted to retell the story of the writing (or non-writing) of *Winter Tale*. We will then understand that cutting an article out of *The New Yorker* is not just a manual action performed with scissors or exclusively an act of textual creation as understood through the lens of genetic criticism. It is also an action accomplished in a specific (social, political, economic) situation by a participant in a global network of culture.

It is necessary to begin the story, which for want of space is heavily curtailed, in this way: on the threshold of the 1970s Herbert is a poet deeply embedded in the everyday life of a communist state that is undemocratic and deprived of its sovereignty: this is post-Yalta Poland. This is in no way to state that Herbert supported the communist regime and its policies. Quite the reverse: he opposed them (though his means and opportunities to express this opposition were very restricted). Yet deep roots attached him to communist-governed Poland. It was where the majority of the readers of his verses, essays, and plays lived, where the literary critics most important to regulating the reception of his work operated, and, ultimately, it was the

research-institutes/incal/ecr/news/call-for-papers-paradoxes-and-misunderstandings-in-cultural-transfers.html.

land that had imposed the censorship that filtered each line of his verse before it could be printed. Such was the field of cultural production (BOURDIEU 1993, 29–73) — on the one hand oppressive and restrictive and on the other stimulating¹¹ — in which Herbert learned to play and to win, and in which he constructed a powerful creative presence.

For all that he was deeply ‘embedded’ in the everyday life of Poland under communism, Herbert strove to circulate as an international poet rather than as one excluded by the iron curtain. It was possible for these strivings to achieve at least partial success due to the professionals — translators, literary critics, publishers — who were organizing a network of interlinguistic and intercultural transfers at this time. One such professional was Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), an outstanding Polish poet and writer, who from 1960 was a professor at Berkeley (University of California, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures), and who, by 1970, already occupied a quite powerful position in American literary culture.¹² Moreover, in addition to pursuing his own writing, he also translated Polish literature into English.¹³ Another such professional was Alfred Alvarez (1929–2019), a British literary critic who was without doubt an influential opinion-former in the Anglophone world and who was very interested in infusing the bloodstream of western literary culture with 1960s east-European poetry (QUINN 2015, 98–111).¹⁴ Or — to depart the realm of the English language — such characters as Karl Dedecius (1921–2016), a translator who was assiduous in presenting Polish literature to German readers.¹⁵ Thanks

11. But, in truth, is this not a duality inherent in the very idea of a field of cultural production? It is easy to draw exactly that conclusion from Bourdieu’s analyses.
12. Though of course still not as strong as in the 1980s after he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (1980).
13. Among other things, it was Miłosz’s idea to compile the anthology *Postwar Polish Poetry*, which was published in New York in 1965 and to which he contributed as an author and editor. He also collaborated on translations of Herbert’s verse, which were collected in the volume *Zbigniew Herbert: Selected Poems* and published in 1968 by Penguin Books.
14. Alvarez, who wished to assign it a high place in contemporary world literature, discussed Herbert’s work on BBC radio (1961) and in *The Observer* (1962). In 1965 he published an important article entitled “East is East”, which was partly devoted to Herbert, in *The New York Review of Books*. He also wrote the introduction to *Selected Poems* and, it would seem, played a decisive role in Penguin’s interest in that volume (see footnote 13).
15. Dedecius’s translations into German of a selection of Herbert’s verse were published in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1966 under the title *Gedichte*.

precisely to these people and their effort, talent, position, and influence, an eastern European poet of the Cold-War period, such as Herbert, was able to partake of a continental, or even global, flow of ideas, images, and themes without, however, becoming detached from the modalities of his immediate, national system.

Zbigniew Herbert did not restrict himself to 'exporting' his books and poems abroad, he also attempted to physically cross the border of the 'two worlds', that is, to simply travel around the countries on the other side of the iron curtain. It should be added that the liberalization of communist Poland following the death of Joseph Stalin (1953), which was proceeding there slowly and very moderately but nevertheless systematically, meant that writers from eastern European countries were able to embark on even long journeys of several months or a few years to the West. Before doing so, though, it was necessary to negotiate a variety of bureaucratic obstacles. For example, the citizens of the People's Republic of Poland had to follow a long and humiliating procedure when applying for a passport. Once issued, the document could not be kept at home. Instead, people were forced to collect their passports from a special office before their journeys and to return them to the same office immediately on their return. What is more, each moment of this procedure could be exploited, and often was exploited, by the secret police as an opportunity to interrogate citizens. In some cases, passports were only issued if applicants made a formal declaration of cooperation with the so-called security service. Yet once writers had managed to leap this highly unpleasant barrier, they could be certain of compensation for the psychological costs they had incurred because they were then able to make relatively unhindered journeys around the world on the other side of the iron curtain. The word 'relatively' is very significant here, as writers 'released' across the border were perfectly aware that all of the moves they made in the 'free world' were being monitored by the relevant agencies of the 'communist fatherland'. Overly strong political statements, especially public statements, could expose authors to a range of repercussions from the system, including restricting access to domestic publishers or, quite simply, refusing to issue any further passports. For some Polish writers on temporary stays abroad this state of suspension proved psychologically unbearable. They therefore decided to break with Poland and enter a condition of permanent, formal emigration, with all of its glitter and gloom.

Herbert chose his strategy, which involved living in a permanent state of 'in-betweenness' and simultaneously existing within and without the domestic system of literary life, and he stuck with it. He paid the price in

the form of frustrating interviews with functionaries of the political police, which he could not avoid if he wished to obtain consent for a further trip to the West.¹⁶ Yet he gained a number of benefits: the opportunity to experience direct contact with other cultures, occasions on which to make contacts with writers and other professionals associated with the literary world,¹⁷ more exposure, so that his work would be read by a wider audience in a variety of languages and, finally, the chance to earn a respectable income.¹⁸

Such — put simply and briefly while offering as many different perspectives as possible — were Zbigniew Herbert's circumstances as an east-European writer of the Cold-War period operating on both sides of the iron curtain in the early 1970s. These are precisely the contexts — political, social, psychological, economic — in which it is necessary to place the still-unfinalized writing project entitled *Winter Tale*. Let us now turn to the details. There were a number of aspects to Herbert's stay in the United States in 1970–1971. Firstly, it was designed to repair the finances of the

16. To be quite clear: Herbert was never recruited by the communist security agencies. The necessity of being interviewed by the political police was in itself a stressful and humiliating experience for him. In 1969 from West Berlin (and therefore after a further 'release into the west'), Herbert wrote the following to Miłosz, who was in the United States, "They [Functionaries of the political police] took an interest in many things, including currents of Trotskyism in the West, but mainly Polish émigrés, who they would very much like to lure back into the snare. They also kept asking about you: whether you would not like to return and whether I could give them a summary of *Dolina Issy* [*The Issa Valley* — Miłosz's novel] and I analysed your poetry arguing that you interest them as the greatest living Polish poet. I played dumb but it was unpleasant. I recognised with horror that I'd lost contact with normality, that I can't really walk around with all this shit in my head, and that I'm a coward because I'm afraid about the rest of my life. But I got over it (insomnia, depression) and now it's fine and I'm working" (MIŁOSZ 2006, 104–05).
17. Herbert's correspondence, some of which has been published and some of which remains in his archive, is one of the records of these contacts. Herbert exchanged letters with, among others, Ted Hughes.
18. Capitalist publishers paid in American dollars or in West-German marks, which were worth far more than the *złoty* (the currency of communist Poland); the purchasing power of money earned abroad grew at home. On the other hand, in Poland's communist economy, which suffered from a permanent shortage in the production and distribution of goods, the buying power of money often proved illusory. Furthermore, spending months at a time abroad meant that Herbert had to pay bills presented in capitalist currencies.

Polish poet. Herbert took up the post of visiting professor at California State College in Los Angeles¹⁹ with a contract for USD 18,000, which, as Herbert's biographer Andrzej Franaszek observed,²⁰ was not a dazzling sum in US terms, but was quite substantial from the Polish perspective. These earnings were intended for a definite purpose, "Life's vicissitudes mean that, among other things, I have to raise some money for a flat in Poland. As you know, my poky room won't do for two", wrote Herbert in a letter to one of his friends (the other person was the poet's wife, whom he had recently married).²¹ The second aim of 'American mission' was to strengthen Herbert's reputation in America, which was already established but required further consolidation.²² Thirdly, and finally, Herbert wished to experience as many dimensions of American life as possible and take what interested him and what he needed from it.²³

The page from *The New Yorker* is one of those objects that — in a completely literal and material sense — Herbert 'took' from America and brought back to Europe. He certainly 'extracted' other cultural goods from America: both material goods (books) and those that represent an accumulation of symbolic capital (the two domains inevitably intersect). The page from *The New Yorker* was probably not the most precious of them, but it was important, nonetheless. It was, after all, utilized in the Polish poet's creative practice.

And now we come to a very important matter: the play *Winter Tale*, derived and drawn from a reading of an American story, was itself to become an object of cultural transfer. Herbert was not writing *Winter Tale*

19. Herbert ran two courses: Modern European Poetry in Translation and Modern Continental Drama in Translation. The archive holds extensive notes and plans for both.
20. Andrzej Franaszek published an extensive, very competent and superbly written biography of Herbert in two-volumes in Poland in 2018. The third section of the paper benefits in several places from important findings made by Franaszek.
21. This phrase comes from the unpublished letter, quoted in Herbert's biography; see FRANASZEK 2018, 331.
22. Herbert first visited the United States in the summer of 1968, when he presented his work at two poetry events (the World Poetry Conference at State University of New York, Stony Brook and the Lincoln Center Festival) and promoted his *Selected Poems*, which had recently been published.
23. See an entry in Herbert's unpublished notes, "to be at university in the United States does not mean to lock oneself in an ivory tower but to be at the very centre of the political and intellectual life of this enormous and fascinating country".

in a vacuum or in an intimate tête à tête with the page. He wrote it to fulfil a commission proposed by *Westdeutsche Rundfunk*,²⁴ which was, in turn, a consequence of Herbert's burgeoning reputation on the radio market in the Federal Republic of Germany (Herbert's plays were written in Polish, published in Poland, and staged in Polish theatres, but from 1959 they began to be regularly translated into German and adapted as radio dramas by various radio stations in the Federal Republic of Germany). Though Herbert's German was serviceable, it was insufficient for writing a long text in the language — especially a long literary piece. The arrangement was as follows: the author was to write a creative and challenging poetic radio drama in Polish, for which the West German station would pay him a fee. It would then order a German translation, which would be broadcast as a radio drama.

It turns out that the story of the emergence of the drama *Winter Tale* — the story that I told in part two of the article by reference to genetic criticism — is one not only of the writer's 'mind at work', but also one of cultural transfer. It was a transfer taking place between texts: the plot was transferred from an American story to a Polish play, while the entire Polish piece (along with its implanted American plot) was to become a German radio drama. It was a transfer taking place between languages: from English via Polish, and with German as its final linguistic destination. Lastly, it was a transfer between institutions: from *The New Yorker* to *Westdeutsche Rundfunk*.

The point is, though, that this cultural transfer never occurred. It came to a standstill. *Winter Tale* was never broadcast on German radio. It was not broadcast because the translators did not translate it from Polish into German. They did not translate it because the author did not supply them with the Polish text. He did not give it to them because — despite his efforts and endeavours and all of the time and ingenuity he had invested in the undertaking, and in the face of the pressure of having already signed a contract — he was unable to end it. Why was he unable to end it? If genetic criticism could not provide an answer then it is even less likely that the discourse of cultural transfer studies can do so. After all, the problem was not the appearance of some sort of political or cultural barrier, such as, for example, the intervention of the censors. The play was simply never ended.

24. A West-German radio station based in Cologne, which broadcast mainly to an audience in North Rhine-Westphalia but could also be heard throughout the country.

Productive non-completion?

We can apprehend a never-ended play, novel, or poem through various filters of mythology and imagination. Of these, the thanatotic metaphor is probably one of the most powerful. An ironic remark made by Julien Benda over one-hundred years ago provides a fine example, “Let us note that our contemporaries have a proclivity for exhuming drafts and unfinished works” (see JENNY 1996, 21). If reading unpublished works in rough drafts is tantamount to exhuming them, then the papers deposited in an archive of creative work are bodies and the archive itself a cemetery. This is the powerful rhetoric I surrendered to when writing about *Winter Tale* for the first time. That was in 2017, and the text — written in Polish for historians of Polish literature — was constructed in a completely different way from the text now published in *Textual Cultures*: its composition was different and it had different points of focus and paragraphs. I shall rehearse the English translation of its final passage here, however, because it provides a good illustration of the elevated, sombre stylistics that steps forward when we are attempting to name the ontological status of a never-ended literary work:

the characters in this work were brought to life — brought to life in notes, plans and in the first rough draft. Yet they never approached complete existence. Unlike the protagonists of *Lalek*, a work that was not only planned, but also completed, they do not experience all of their potential episodes and adventures, or the full extent of their intended fate, in the drama. They cannot live in the imaginations of readers, they cannot, like the characters of *Jaskinia filozofów* [*The Philosophers’ Cave*], become animate either in the bodies of the actors treading the boards or, like the protagonists of *Drugi pokój*²⁵ [*The Other Room*], in the voices of the actors in a radio drama. Instead they cling in the manuscript to the half-life of the rough draft. They are living — if they can be said to be living at all — in the sarcophagus of the archive.

(ANTONIUK et al. 2017, 370)

Yet this sort of rhetoric — elegiac and mournful — does not have to govern our narratives about never-ended works. This is the argument of the stimulating and interesting book *Afterlives of Abandoned Work: Cre-*

25. *Lalek*, *Jaskinia filozofów* and *Drugi pokój* are the titles of works by Zbigniew Herbert that were completed, published, and performed on stage.

ative Debris in the Archive (2019) by Matthew Harle devoted in full to the phenomenon of never-ended creative processes. In it, Harle writes of novels that were being written but were never ended, of screenplays that were in preparation but were never shot, of buildings that were thoroughly planned but never erected, and of projects (urban, social, political) that began but were interrupted. In short, the theme of this book is the unimplemented plan, the discontinued creative effort and the abandoned work-in-progress. Harle identifies this stylistic (and at the same time interpretive) matrix, which he describes as “nostalgic and melancholic”, and which he wants to recast as “active and dynamic”, at the beginning of his account (HARLE 2019, 3). He then proceeds to show how this other, vitalist description of the abandoned work is possible in practice. Broadly speaking, Harle demonstrates that never-ended and abandoned works are not always left stranded somewhere out of time and out of space. There are instances of their unseen influence on, and their participation and existence in, the time and space of completed, fully realized literature and culture. This happens where a writer, though abandoning a work in mid-word and consigning the interrupted manuscript to the bottom of the drawer, transfers its motifs or elements (including reworked ones) to a new work that this time is published. It also happens where work on a piece is halted by the death of the writer and editors have obtained the never-ended text from the archive and published it in unfinished form, following which it has inspired other artists to create their own work. But, says Harle — and this is the statement that fascinated me most — another variation on the “afterlife” is possible: one whereby a never-ended work lives or is reanimated in the discourses that seek to describe and understand it. Harle even takes a step further by attributing some sort of creative potency to not finishing — some power to release or stimulate new stories: “It is quite likely, that the debris left by abandoned work can only be explained with more writing — more unfinished writing about finishing, and more finished writing about unfinishing” (HARLE 2019, 214). In fact, I might venture that my article, which is now drawing to a close, confirms Harle’s observations: given the encouragement they offer to write about their unfinished state, never-ended texts possess an exceptional capacity to generate texts.

The twenty-eight pages in the *Winter Tale* folder in the Herbert archive, as viewed through the lens of genetic criticism in part two of this article, document the process of text generation and can be assigned either to the pre-compositional phase or compositional phase of this process. But also, as seen through the lens of cultural transfer studies in part three of this article, the twenty-eight pages in the *Winter Tale* folder in the Herbert

archive represent a thread plucked from the intercultural transfers and exchanges of the Cold-War period. Neither perspective is better or worse than the other, and neither of the two methodological lexicons offers a better or worse fit with the reality they help describe. The papers from the *Winter Tale* folder are both a thread plucked from intercultural transfers and exchanges and a set of genetic documents. As such, they should be described through a thick, or thickening, description, composed of diverse, but closely interwoven discourses.

Fifty years ago, a Polish poet was able to extract a particular plot from a short story written by an American author and begin to construct a text around it that was intended for a German radio audience. It is true that he did not finish building it and, as a result, the page from the American magazine became lodged — somewhat unproductively — in the Polish poet's archive. What is more, the German radio audience was not introduced to the fictional world imagined by the Polish poet and inspired by the page from an American magazine. Yes: but as I tell this story now it seems a little bit as if this cultural transfer, blocked and frozen half a century ago, has come to life again. I should probably publish this article in a German journal — and definitely in German. The never-ended *Winter Tale* would then become — in however flawed a form — what it was always meant to become, and would now be known as *Wintermärchen* (because that is perhaps how the translators employed by *Westdeutsche Rundfunk* would have rendered it). Well, perhaps I will write and publish that German text after all! For now, though, I am publishing a text in an American journal about a never-ended Polish play derived from an American short story — and that is also something to savor. It might be said that the circle has been completed.

But what if it were not a circle but a spiral? Let us surrender to imagination. This article is being read now, in 2020, by a writer. Let us call the writer X. Much as Herbert did with *The New Yorker* fifty years ago, the writer tears out a page from *Textual Cultures* and takes advantage of my article to write his own work (I do not care what kind: it could even be a malicious campus novel about a university in the time of the pandemic, in one of whose episodes I am the somewhat pitiable protagonist; I dare not hope for a better fate). Of course, the novel never emerges. Work on it is interrupted and all that is left is a rough draft. But probably not nowadays a paper one: more likely an electronic one stored on a hard disk.²⁶ In fifty

26. Yet it is still possible to identify writers who, apart from computers, also use traditional rough drafts in paper form. Olga Tokarczuk, Polish writer and Nobel

years' time, counting from today, a cyber-critic — of the genetic variety of course — accesses the writer's archive and reads the rough electronic drafts.²⁷ The critic writes and publishes an essay based on them, in which they fervently argue . . . (It does not matter why they are arguing. I would not dare to guess what truths and post-truths scholars will be attempting to demonstrate in journals in 2070). Here is a tale. But this time not a winter one. It is a tale about the inexhaustible fecundity of writing, about unending textual transmission, about eternal repetition (and eternal difference), and about the discursive *perpetuum mobile*. As the author of *Afterlives of Abandoned Work* envisions it, never-ended projects generate, “more unfinished writing about finishing, and more finished writing about unfinishing” (HARLE 2019, 214). That is well put.

This, of course, will not happen. The page from *Textual Cultures* will not be torn out by writer X any more than it will be removed by writers Y and Z. There are many different reasons for this. But the most straightforward is that *Textual Cultures* has no pages. At least not pages you can tear out and store in an archive.

Jagiellonian University

Prize winner in 2018, spoke in an interview of the plans she wrote on paper for the plot of perhaps her most important book, *Księgi Jakubowe* [*The Books of Jacob*]. Its nine-hundred pages and multiple themes make it a vast and complex novel that must have required precise and detailed planning. Tokarczuk achieved this using something like a blank scroll, which permitted her to manage the flow of note-making with a degree of freedom that a stack of separate pages would not have allowed. It must be remembered, though, that Tokarczuk was born in 1962, which means that her scriptural habits were formed in the pre-digital age.

27. This is not in fact pure fantasy: attempts are already being made to perform electronic genetic criticism, whose subjects are “digitally-born texts”. This research focuses on the traces left by the creative process on the hard disks of computers and in the search histories of Internet browsers. See for example: KIRSCHENBAUM 2016 and LEBRAVE 2011.

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