

Zbigniew Herbert

Mr Cogito and the Imagination

1

Mr Cogito has never trusted
the tricks of the imagination

the piano at the top of the Alps
played concerts false to his ear

he had no regard for labyrinths
felt revulsion from the sphinx

he lived in a cellarless house
without mirrors or dialectics

jungles of tangled images
were never his homeland

he rarely got carried away
on the wings of a metaphor
he then plunged like Icarus
into the arms of the Great Mother

he adored tautologies
explanations
idem per idem

a bird is a bird
slavery slavery
a knife a knife
death is death

he loved
a flat horizon
a straight line
earth's gravity

2

Mr Cogito
will be counted
among the species *minores*

he will receive indifferently
the verdict of men of letters

he employed the imagination
for wholly different purposes

he wanted to make of it
an instrument of compassion

he longed to understand fully

- Pascal's night
- the nature of a diamond
- the prophets' melancholy
- the wrath of Achilles
- the fury of mass murderers
- the dreams of Mary Stuart
- the fear of Neanderthals
- the last Aztecs' despair
- Nietzsche's long dying
- the Lascaux painter's joy
- the rise and fall of an oak
- the rise and fall of Rome

in order to revive the dead
and maintain the covenant

Mr Cogito's imagination
moves like a pendulum

it runs with great precision
from suffering to suffering

there is no place in it
for poetry's artificial fires

he wants to be true
to uncertain clarity

