

Press release

Warsaw, May 23 2024

Yang Lian, outstanding Chinese poet receives the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2024

On May 23rd the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2024 was presented at a Gala Ceremony, held at the *Teatr Polski* in Warsaw. This year's recipient was Mr Yang Lian, outstanding Chinese poet, who fought for freedom of speech in China. The PZU Foundation is the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award's strategic partner.

The Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award is a distinction on the literary world stage, presented in recognition of outstanding artistic and intellectual achievements, inspired by the ideals which Zbigniew Herbert's work exemplifies: independence, love of freedom, intolerance of deceit, inequality and violence.

Conferred since 2013, the Zbigniew Herbert Award, Poland's only truly international prize, with a uniquely global reach, underlines the presence, role and position of Polish literature – and more widely Polish culture – in the international arena. The Award is conferred by a jury, composed of poets, essayists, translators and publishers from Europe and the United States: Krystyna Dąbrowska (Poland), Edward Hirsch (USA), Michael Krüger (Germany), Mercedes Monmany (Spain), and Aleš Šteger (Slovenia).

This year's Zbigniew Herbert Award ceremony was part of the celebrations of the poet's 100th anniversary observed in Poland and around the world under the auspices of UNESCO. Poets Tomasz Różycki and Ryszard Krynicki participated in the ceremony, reading Herbert's poems.

The Laudation was given by Mr Aleš Šteger, Jury Chairman of this year's Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award Jury, who said: "Lian's poetry embodies the steady flow of a river—strong, unwavering, and deeply connected to the roots and landscapes of his life. [...] His verses meander through the currents of history and human experience, shaped by the tumultuous events that have defined his journey. (...) As a voice against totalitarianism and state control, Lian advocated for the marginalized and oppressed. Through his poetry, he shed light on issues ranging from systemic exploitation to the erosion of freedom of expression."

Yang Lian (楊煉 Yáng Liàn), a Chinese poet, was born in 1955, and now lives in Berlin. He is one of the most important representatives of the so-called Misty Poets (朦朧詩人; pinyin: *Ménglóng Shīrén*) authors, who, writing in the modernist poetic style since the 1970s, managed to inculcate their work with what was officially banned in the aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. His poetry is close to Herbert's understanding of art, through creative references to tradition and an unceasing dialogue with poetry from the past (the Searching for Roots school). As Ai Weiwei commented, his poetry: "is rigorously and precisely thought through: it links history and reality with metaphysical speculation, as layer by layer it goes deeper and deeper down, until he has transcended tradition".

Brought up in Beijing, he understood the power of oppression of the totalitarian system at an early age, when as a young man he was forced to interrupt his education to undergo 're-education through labour' in the provinces. He decided to emigrate, following the bloody suppression of the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protest. He nonetheless remains a staunchly Chinese language poet, as well as a critic of oppressive governments, and a freedom of speech campaigner.

In his acceptance speech Yang Lian, among other, states:

"Nightmares come and go, throwing us into a situation that is both familiar and entirely strange. What can we do? What can poetry do? Are there even answers to these big questions? If there are no answers, where are these questions taking us to?"

Here, I have to go back to Qu Yuan, who lived 2,300-year ago and the first recorded name of poet in the entire Chinese poetic tradition, and his splendid epic "Heavenly Questions" (Tian Wen). This poem employs nearly two hundred questions to walk through mythology, history, and reality, eventually reaching the poet himself, going deeper and deeper, without however finding an answer. [...]

If the author of "Mr. Cogito" would hear about "Heavenly Questions" and "Thinking Poetry", I believe he would smile knowingly. Because questioning is the source of all thinking. Questioning the world, questioning oneself, and deepening the questioning of the world through the questioning of oneself—the vigor of thinking provides the essence for poetry."

MIĘDZYNARODOWA NAGRODA LITERACKA IM. ZBIGNIEWA HERBERTA

The Award ceremony was enriched by performance of The New Vibes Duo, Piotr Kopietz on accordion and Sebastian Wypych on double bass. The renowned musician gave a concert, which combined classical music, tango and open improvisation.

The PZU Foundation is the Strategic Partner of the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2024.

The Zbigniew Herbert Foundation Partners include: the Warsaw based Arnold Szyfman Polish Theatre (*Teatr Polski im. Arnolda Szyfmana*), and Poland's National Library (*Biblioteka Narodowa*).

Polish Radio (*Polskie Radio*) is this year's media patron.

More information about the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award at:

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