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**“THOSE WHO LOST” BY ZBIGNIEW HERBERT  
AS THE RESCUING GESTURE OF IRONY**

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The article is a typical analysis of Zbigniew Herbert's poem “Those who lost”. The composition of the poem is marked by the title phrase, which asks who lost and what was lost. The protagonists are the Indigenous Americans, who abandoned their tradition, “rejected the history.” They perform professions that are foreign to them such as appearing in films and selling devotional articles. However, we come to the conclusion that those who “lie in the tomb next to the faithful stones” avoided the sad fate. Paradoxically, although they met their deaths, they avoided annihilation.

**Keywords:** Zbigniew Herbert, poem, irony, history, death.

**«ТЕ, КТО ПРОИГРАЛ» ЗБИГНЕВА ХЕРБЕРТА  
КАК СПАСИТЕЛЬНЫЙ ЖЕСТ ИРОНИИ**

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Статья представляет собой анализ стихотворения «Те, кто потерял» Збигнева Херберта. Композиция стихотворения обозначена заглавием, которое как бы задает вопрос, кто потерял и что было потеряно. Протагонисты – коренные американцы, которые «бросили» свою традицию, отказались от своей истории. Они выполняют работу, которая им чужда, снимаясь в кино и продавая предметы религиозного культа. Однако мы приходим к выводу, что те, кто «лежат в могиле под надежными камнями» избежали этой печальной участи. Парадоксально, хотя они и встретили смерть, они избежали полного уничтожения.

**Ключевые слова:** Збигнев Херберт, стихотворение, ирония, история, смерть.

In 1970-1971 Herbert stayed in Los Angeles as a “visiting professor” at the State University of California. It is an opportunity for him to improve his finances,

but at the same time it is a clash with the reality of American education, which, to put it mildly, is on a middling level. "What level was there earlier, it is hard to say, at any rate, during his stay – "it was the absolute bottom. Depression of the depression. The deepest in the western hemisphere. The Sea not so much Black as Dead"" [10, s. 309]. The relevance of that period is furthermore heightened as at that time the poet begins his works on the volume of "Mr. Cogito", published in Poland in 1974. The reader will find there a few scattered traces of American journeys, among them the poem "Those who lost". (The poem "Sequoia" is also an overt reference, traces can be found in the poems *Mr. Cogito and pop*, *Mr. Cogito on magic*).

The poem is the aftermath of Herbert's earlier journeys across the southern states, as Andrzej Franaszek writes in his recent biography:

The poet learned about Texas and New Mexico, or as he wrote in a letter to a childhood friend – about "our old cowboy states" [...], and on a suitable postcard, he let Miłosz know that sunburnt regions: "have exhausted me like this donkey in the picture (all within deserved punishment from God)", adding also: "Indians who sell devotional articles are sad. First, I thought that those were the American Cretans (...); but forget about it, it is only sadness and poverty" [5, s. 266].

The title is a puzzle for the reader. Who really lost in Herbert's poem "Those who lost"? Who is the loser, who has won, where to look for the causes of the defeat, what was lost and what was rescued? The answer is not and cannot be unambiguous:

Those who lost (Translation by Anna Sieradzka-Wawryszczuk):

*Those who lost dance with bells on their ankles  
in the shackles of funny costumes in the feathers of a dead eagle  
there is a dust of compassion on a small square  
and the movie rifle shoots gently and accurately  
they raise the axe made of metal sheet with an arc light like an eyebrow and  
murder leaves and shadows  
so only the drum drum roars and reminds of old pride and anger  
they rejected history and entered the laziness of the showcases  
they lie in a tomb under glass next to the faithful stones*

*those who lost, sell next to the governor's palace in Santa Fe*

*(a long, one-storey building of warm baked ocher*

*brown columns made of a tree protruding ceiling beams on which hangs a sharp shadow )*

*sell beads amulets of god of rain and fire model of the Kiva temple*

*with a ladder's two straws sticking upwards on which the bumper crop goes down*

*buy god echo he is cheap and eloquently silent*

*when he hesitates on outstretched towards us*

*Neolithic hand* [8, s. 202].

The dialectics of victory and defeat, so typical of Herbert's entire works, has been clearly included in the discussed poem from the volume *Mr Cogito*. We know perfectly well that for the poet the defeat is an obvious consequence of actions according to the "line of faithfulness". To be faithful to one's values means accepting the life of a loser. "On the one hand fast, winning life that breaks obstacles. Such as, it was painted by utopias and philosophies of progress. [...] On the other hand the truth of pain and suffering" [3, s. 231], as Tomasz Burek stated. There will be no ennoblement, no profits, there is only a "steep path of blood" ("Guesses about Barabbas") and those "who with relief will throw a lump of earth" ("Message of Mr Cogito"), and hope smoulders (if at all) faintly...

Herbert's hero is surrounded by fusion of evil and suffering, infiltrating different orders, on whose verge man exists: History, the domain of time and the spiritual-rational particle, and of Nature, the biological space in which the body immerses. Herbert has no illusions about history, or more precisely: about the human nature, which is revealed by history [4, s. 45].

The defeat is thus included in the fate of the individual who wants to act with dignity and courage. To act according to one's values means accepting ridicule and contempt in the eyes of many. What remains on the asset side...?

The history is therefore filled with evil and suffering, a fight in which the noble ones always infallibly lose. There are very few of them, the rest of the community

refers to them if not with hostility, then at least with indifference. Historical cataclysm shows that man is more likely to prolong life at any price than to sacrifice it in the name of his homeland [4, s. 46-47].

To accept the loss, acknowledge it at the start, this is the foundation of ethos in the “no-values” world. Herbert himself was devoid of illusions, his point of view was thoroughly pessimistic: “It seems that contemporary history, happening before our eyes, compromises history in general, which, judging from our experience, has been and will be a game of powers, full of lies, crime, rape and unleashed irrationalism” [7, s. 9]. I return to these well-known issues, reaching for a text that is not at all obvious to me, containing a number of interpretative puzzles.

The poem is composed of a sequence of images, the rhythm of which is marked by the recurring phrase “those who lost”. Even at first reading the reader may guess that the poem is about the Indigenous Americans— as evidenced by the typical western movie props (“bells on their ankles”, “feathers of a dead eagle”) and clear topographic clues (“governor's palace in Santa Fe”, “Kiva temple”). Kiva is the name of a characteristic Indian temple with a hole in the roof – *i.e.* the access to the inside. It was often built using with adobe bricks, whose special feature was not being fired, but only dried in the sun. It is worth mentioning because probably the same building material was used for the “governor's palace”, as hints its characteristic colour of “warm baked ochre”).

On closer reading, we will see that the collective hero of the poem does not constitute a homogeneous group. The indicative, accusatory “those who lost” precedes the detailed characteristics of at least two groups. There are those who “dance with bells on their ankles” and those who “sell next to the governor's palace”. In the former we can easily recognize the actors (which confirms the “movie rifle”), although it might be safer to talk about the extras, whereas the latter are the buyers. Descriptions of both groups are similar to each other and based on enumeration, parallelisms, and the accumulation of concrete nouns. There is one more similarity, slightly harder to grasp, a shadow motif appears in both parts of the poem, however in different contexts.

In addition to these two communities, the third group, deprived of such an extensive description, also appears those who “lie in a tomb”. It seems that two adjacent lines refer to them: “They rejected history and entered into the laziness of the showcases / they lay in a tomb under the glass next to the faithful stones”. One can guess that this description is about the mortal remains of those whose destiny was to become a museum exhibit, hence the “showcase” and “glass”.

It is worth noting that although we are dealing with an irregular poem, there is a clear ordering formula behind it. The first six lines (4+2) refer to the aforementioned group participating in the execution of a movie. The two subsequent lines (located graphically in the centre of the poem!) refer to the mentioned dead Indians. The following five, grouped as one strofoidal entity, again are led by the phrase “those who lost” and the last three ones, constituting a distinctive code of the poem, are led by the imperative “buy echo god”, and therefore on the grammatical level they break out of the order of the poem. The ending is in conflict with the whole poem also by the presence of the “echo god” (can it be associated with the mythological nymph Echo? Such an idea is supported by the above quoted, after Franaszek, Herbert's letter) and “Neolithic hand”. The Neolithic is otherwise called the “age of a smoothed stone”, in this way the stone appears in the text in two ways: as “faithful stones: in the eighth verse, and another eight verses later, in the closing line of the poem. It sounds stronger because it is exceptionally short compared to the whole, consisting of six syllables.

What do we know about individual subgroups? It can be easily noticed that both of them (actors and buyers) lost what determined their identity, their relationship with their own culture, their own ethnic group. It is not a coincidence that the image evoked by the initiating verse of the work leaves us uncertain as to whether or not it is a group of jesters, because they are usually presented with the bells on their ankles. The next verse seems only to strengthen this impression when we read about “the shackles of funny costumes” and only further elements unmask the initial misunderstanding. However, “the feathers”, “a rifle” and “an axe” as the attributes of bravery and valour are here only stage props. We know that in Indian cultures the

right to successive feathers were acquired along with subsequent brave deeds, however an eagle should have been hunted and killed, the use of the dead body of a fallen animal was not an option. Thus, it is a kind of masquerade; the descendants of the Native Americans are performing empty gestures. In addition, those are the gestures that should be the object of shame. Also a rifle, treated with blunt irony, is but pathetic.

The fifth line becomes particularly interesting in this context. It can be read in two ways, depending on where we pause: “They lift the axe made of sheet metal with an arc light like an eyebrow”. And a separate semantic entity would be: “they murder leaves and shadows”, or “lift the axe made of sheet metal” and the rest of the verse remains as a coherent, sensible entity as “an arc light like an eyebrow murder leaves and shadows”. The arc loses a distinctive meaning. It is not obvious if it is an object or a form of movement (the arch-eyebrow also appears in the poem “Architecture”, but it is undoubtedly a fragment of the building there). Objects appearing in the enumeration from “bells” to “arc” thus lose their basic meaning in a certain gradual order, whereas the last element makes us directly doubt its ontological status, it is and simultaneously it is not an arc. It is suspended on the verge of being and non-being. The counterpoint for this would be the roaring “drum”. It takes over the function of others, refers to the past, asks for (so important in Herbert's axiology) valour, defined by “pride and anger”. The drum is in the opposition to the rifle, it is devoid of any gentleness. In all military formations it served to warm up the soldiers before fight, it raised the morale of the fighters. Here it remains lonely, unsuitable, which is further emphasized by the repetition used in the verse.

Particularly noteworthy is the context in which the word “anger” appears, since it seems that Herbert returns to the original meaning of this word. Anger is not an attitude here that characterizes someone who “loses self-control” or “loses his temper” but a radical standing up for something that is fair. This is biblical anger, free of hatred or vindictiveness. That is the anger that Fr. Jan Sochoń was writing about: “Today, hardly anyone can be angry, and the word "anger" itself has lost its original meaning and means being offended. Instead of anger, there is nervousness or hysteria.

The liberation of anger requires courage, because it is a special kind of emotion that implies combat, which is a response to fear” [11, s. 18].

The very melodic line of the drum, which monotonously roars, cuts out the sharp sinusoid of extreme negative emotions. It also triggers a “special combat feeling”.

“Dancing” and “selling” are the gestures of the loss of self, the thing that has been irrevocably lost is freedom, hence the metaphor of “shackles”. Indians selling devotional articles represent a tragicomic fakelore; the items on sale are significantly reduced, these are “little beads”, “temple model” and “two straws of a ladder”, one would like to say: bric-a-bracs. Trash offered for next to nothing to jaded visitors. Similarly as in the part of the poem devoted to “actors”, here the things are used to depreciate people. They reveal their spiritual devaluation.

This direction of interpretation seems to confirm the introduction of the shadow theme in both expanded parts of the poem, each time it appears in a way suggesting that it is the object of aggression. In the first situation, murdering shadows is directly mentioned, in the second one we read about the shadow hanging on “ceiling beams”. In the first situation, the Indians playing in the movie are the agents. In the second one, the explanation does not come so easily, but the fate of the shadow by analogy can also be related to the behaviour of the Indians selling goods. Both are the perpetrators of the death of the shadow ... What does it mean? Not to have a shadow? What can the fact that you are killed by your own shadow mean? Tomasz Garbol, analysing two unpublished poems by Herbert, *temptation* and *exorcism*, states: “Also the ending evokes the conviction about a future that does not annihilate man: “my shadow will follow me.” The context of temptation suggests that we are talking about a posthumous future that is connected with prospect of preserving identity but not melting into nothingness, saving everything that constitutes man, not excluding the imperfection of human nature, which is defined by Herbert as a “shadow””.

What interests us the most is expressed by Garbol, the shadow is the guarantee and confirmation of our existence. Interestingly, also after death. Existing, however,

means preserving identity. “The first association, with the nihilistic belief that death is the end of everything, we should not accept too easily” [11, s. 18]. The image of the shadow is also closely related to history. We are talking about “shadows of the past”, “shadows of ancestors”. “Both our and flowers' shadow is falling on the ground: / What has no shadow, has no strength for existence” [9, s. 202]. So murdering shadows would be equal to “giving up history”, turning your back on your own history. Perhaps the location of the second shadow indicated in the text should also be read in the spirit of the Gospel; it hangs on “ceiling beams” that, as it is easy to guess, connects with “columns made of a tree”. We can add that they combine to form a cross.

At this point, I come to an important conclusion, which would not be attainable if it had not been for the analytical build up in the preceding paragraphs. It appears that the implied accusation and lecture inherent in the text are strongly emphasised by the titular phrase, which furthermore, reappearing twice in the text, determines its hidden composition. Simultaneously, the text asks a question, or rather a series of questions: Who exactly lost? What was lost? and Why? The answer appears to be openly articulated: “they rejected history and entered the laziness of the showcases”. Breaking up with the tradition and with the past is commensurate with the laziness of the spirit. However, following the interpretative path, we should probably read the two adjacent lines, graphically accentuated to represent oneness, as an example of logical order of cause-and-effect: (Because) “they rejected history and entered the laziness of the showcases,” (as a result) “they lie in a tomb under glass next to the faithful stones”. The situation of those who have become buried and placed in public view as an exhibit appears to be the fate continuum of those who “dance” and “sell”. Their departure from life is for ones literal, for the others metaphorically expressing their vegetative existence of empty gestures.

What was previously taken for certain becomes less clear. The first sources of uncertainty are “faithful stones”. Faithful are those that have remained faithful to their owners, but also those that, we must add, to whom their owners remained faithful as well. Stone is perfect as both weaponry and the object of cult. The

remaining objects in the text are “unfaithful”, however awkward it sounds, for the reason that they have been cheated on. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the “showcase” against the “tomb” does not go unnoticed. The “showcase” brings to mind a series of associations with school, school display, in service for generations, accumulating dust and sinking into oblivion. This “showcase” has become a synonym for boredom and mediocrity. The tomb on the other hand will never become a showcase, it is majestic and dignified. The former expresses contempt, the latter elevation.

I am in no doubt that the entire structure of the poem is supposed to emphasise the juxtaposition between the central eighth line and the remaining text. Arranging two apparently similar in meaning lines next to each other serves to elevate the contrast. Faithfulness from line eight contradicts laziness. The multi-level, intricately crafted irony cleanses what exists with merit. As Barańczak put it: “Irony as self-defence and defence of “the weaker”” is what determines Herbert’s poetry’s unique character. Rather than on the winners, his poetry puts more emphasis on “*Those who lost*” (*Mr Cogito*), the defeated individuals and civilisations” [1, s. 178].

In the case of the poem in question, the sting of irony is pointed at those who lost, it seems, willingly. There is a tone of voluntariness felt behind the phrase “they (...) entered the laziness of the showcases”. Herbert’s trick consists in the implementation of irony, which misleads, puts everyone off track. At first, the reader is tempted to believe that those who have been buried with honours are partners in defeat. However, the irony reveals an existential paradox: those literally dead have retained the essence of life, they are still the same. Those we would readily call “the living” are in fact the ones consigned to oblivion; or as Garbol has put it, have agreed to “melting into nothingness”.

Who then is “god echo” and why the “neolithic hand”? What is the sense of the ending, which would appear to be clearly destined for the close composition? Echo is determined not to perform its primary function – to reflect the other’s voice. The silence itself is an act of refusal, however, what might be the key is the drum (*nota bene* – echoed!), which “roars”. The drum refers to the past; something that echo is unwilling to do. God is a caricature of god; *he* should have spoken in his own voice.

The gesture of an outstretched hand is a recurring motif in Herbert's poetry ("To Marcus Aurelius," "To the Hungarians," "Mr Cogito Encounters a Statuette of Great Mother in Louvre") and was many a time the subject of interpretative endeavours. It refers to something intrinsically humane, to the discovery in yourself (and the other) the weakness, which may become the foundation of communication, the superpersonal solidarity. As in "To Marcus Aurelius," the gesture comes through the barrier of ages and constitutes a plea for help. The gesture expresses both dread and a glimmer of hope: dread, because the defeated are doomed to the obscurity of ages, and the return to their barbaric state. Hope takes the form a hand of somebody who becomes aware of his defeat and accepts his weakness. It's a gesture that entreats for mercy.

In Herbert's texts death is never the same. One death is never equal to another. Death may touch us like the palsy, turn us into only apparently alive, like the protagonists of the poem, melted into nothingness, playing the game of appearances. The distinctiveness of their existence is lost. The "ethical" Herbert reveals the consequences of the "sin of omission". "If dying is submerging into chaos, then death itself, it would seem, is the effect of total and complete submerging into chaos, it is the nothingness, the one that recurs in Herbert's works", writes Garbol [6, s. 78]. If there is the death which comes as formlessness, then there must exist the death that is the next chapter of the life of dignity and virtue.

Irony, which I attempted to echo in the title, is not a gesture of mockery then, it does not expose, does not devalue, I see it as a shift of marks and stresses. To follow after Błoński: "...In Herbert's poetry, irony is a means for neutralising the discrepancy between norms and the reality, between ideals and experience, between tradition and what is contemporary.

However, is it attainable? Towards whom should the sharp blade of delicate mockery be turned? Not towards the values: these should be saved. Not towards the reality: who can beat reality? Irony should be aimed for the place of mediation, against the man, where the law and the fact meet: that is against the poet himself, or to be more precise – the speaking voice" [2, s. 66, 67].

Admittedly, those who lost are dead, but they are standing on the winners' side. Those who believe to be living are lifeless, and it is none but them that have brought it upon themselves. The irony's gesture is forgiving inasmuch as it restores the faith in resistance, in the fight when the matter seems lost, because, as it appears, hope transcends the grave.

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