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Humor in the essays by Zbigniew Herbert

The analysis of humor in the essays by Zbigniew Herbert needs one crucial reservation. As opposed to poetry, where irony is placed in the foreground and is, as Stanisław Barańczak put it, the author's "poetic manifesto method"¹, in essays it is humor that takes precedence². For this reason, we should agree with Aleksander Fiut, who refused to acknowledge Herbert-essayist's ability to proficiently use irony and its variety called *understatement*³. Even though we regard this judgment as too harsh, there is no denying that even after a fairly cursory reading we realize that a clear, let alone striking, shift of focus from irony to humor is certainly quite significant. It thus makes us believe that what lays at the basis of the essays was a completely different literary strategy which specifies – differently to poetry – the relationship between the persona and the world (re)presented in the text.

Still, humor has a special form here because it evokes not so much laughter but a gentle smile; it smoothes the contours of the world, thereby

¹ S. Barańczak, *Uciekinier w Utopii. O poezji Zbigniewa Herberta*, Wrocław 1994, p. 152.

² Obviously, that does not mean that Herbert's poetry is devoid of humor. The role played by laughter in Herbert's poems (especially later ones) was elaborated upon by Julian Kornhauser (to name a few authors) in the book *Uśmiech Sfinksa. O poezji Zbigniewa Herberta*, Kraków 2001.

³ A. Fiut, *Poeta eseista*, [in:] *Twórczość Zbigniewa Herberta. Studia*, ed. by M. Woźniak-Łabieniec, J. Wiśniewski, Kraków 2001, p. 139. This conclusion enabled the researcher to compare Herbert's works with Jerzy Stempowski's essays. The author understands *understatement* – after A.S. Kowalczyk – as a form of speech where "one speaks less than one means, or rather, a particular situation is described in a manner which does not correspond with reality". A.S. Kowalczyk, *Nieśpieszny przechodzień i paradoksy. Rzecz o Jerzym Stempowskim*, Wrocław 1997, p. 182.

facilitating approval of its imperfections. Rather than intending to make his reader laugh, Herbert wants to put him into an altered, momentary state of obliviousness to the painful and almost inherent and inseparable awareness of the fact that the world in its essence is not a place encouraging selfless joy. My assumption here is that both humor and irony being strictly means of communication, thus belonging to the realm of rhetoric, are also (or rather, may represent) certain attitude to the world of someone who reaches for them⁴. The importance of these categories consists primarily in the fact that, in a way, they define a perspective from which the character sees reality and, as such, they co-create the space of meanings embedded in the essays.

So what is it whereby Zbigniew Herbert puts his reader in the “altered state”? It is not difficult to notice that a humorous effect is mostly found in situations where the essayist explains particular elements of the visible world to the reader. Taming the strange and exotic is achieved here mainly by indicating equivalents in the world shared by the reader and the character. In the very act of translating one world into another, a new world is established; it is the one that “holds” both the reader and the character as well as culture space abundantly depicted in the essays. The estranged turns into the homely and familiar before the eyes of the astonished reader – for example, we learn that “pizza is a kind of pancake with sliced tomatoes, onions, anchovies, black olives”⁵; the tower of Siena Cathedral, in turn, is a “stalk” and its columns are “black and white birch tress”; *funicolare* near Naples turns out to be similar to the “Gubałówka Hill Funicular” (a popular summit in Poland in the vicinity of Zakopane)⁶, a soup eaten in a Provencal restaurant is “in simple words, a fish bouillon with garlic and spices”, although at the same time, “a cousin of the queen of soups – the bouillabaisse of Marseilles”⁷, whereas Madonna “with huge eyes” spotted in the Sienese Pinacoteca is “solid like the Madonnas from Tatra shrines”⁸.

⁴ This is how Izaak Passi means the concept of irony. What he tends to see in humor, parody and irony is a way of thinking and feeling: “But even if they do not represent an outlook – the researcher argued – humor, parody and irony can be features of an outlook; if they are not a way of life, they may be an aspect of a way of life; if they do not represent universal behavior, they may be a moment of behavior. [...] Humor, parody, irony are the forms of ridicule that are ideological by nature and can therefore occupy a fundamental place in an outlook”. I. Passi, *Powaga śmieszności*, transl. by K. Minczewska-Gospodarek, preface by E. Borowiecka, Warszawa 1980, p. 208–209. See also: J. Sławiński [in others], *Słownik terminów literackich*, Wrocław 1988, p. 203–204.

⁵ Z. Herbert, *Barbarian In The Garden*, transl. by M. March, J. Anders, New York 1986, p. 59.

⁶ This vivid comparison is missing in the English version of *Barbarian in the garden*, so I use the Polish version in this translation. Z. Herbert, *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie*, Warszawa 2004, p. 51.

⁷ Z. Herbert, *Barbarian In The Garden*, p. 31.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

The same logic applies to the narrator's attempts to acquaint the reader with historical phenomena – what is remote and incomprehensible becomes familiar using the power of suggestive analogies. For instance, explaining the influence that the letters by St. Catherina of Sienna exerted on the decisions of, as he puts it, “prominent figures” of the time, he compares their efficiency to “the contemporary protests of the League for the Defence of Human Rights”⁹. Aware of his advantage over the reader who is less familiar with the things, he takes the liberty of manifesting some nonchalance by attributing knowledge to the reader he most likely does not have. “This dish – as you know – he states over a plate of spaghetti – is served as an appetizer, as an introduction to the main course”¹⁰. A load of humor released in such situations – just because it reduces the dichotomy between the foreign and the indigenous, the old, and the contemporary – gives some lightness to the world presented in the text and often adds an even absurd and surrealist dimension to it¹¹. The exoticism of foreign realities assumes homely qualities; it becomes familiar, understandable, safe and tamed. The character located on the border of the two worlds is able to see not only more (he avails himself of a perspective provided by distance), but he can also act effectively as a mediator between the world from which he set off on a journey, and the one he visits; thereby maintaining his ambiguous status becomes an important element of his “travelling philosophy”.

A similar type of humor also emerges when simple analogies are not sufficient. The character finds it helpful to take a specific role. In the following passage, he probably impersonates an anthropologist, who dwells on the wonder of an Italian *passeggiata*. He does so with seriousness contrasting with a rather ludic nature of this phenomenon. Consequently, the reader is given an involuntary impression that the description is a parody of a scientific style:

Every Italian town has such a street which fills in the evening with a crowd of strollers, pacing back and forth in a limited space. It resembles the silent rehearsal of a gigantic opera. The elders demonstrate their vigour and rehearse their titles (...). Girls and boys walk separately, communicating

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

¹⁰ Z. Herbert, *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie*, p. 77. At this point, I ALSO ignore the translation by Michael March and Jarosław Anders because THEIR version omits this element of obviousness. The sentence quoted in their version reads as follows: “This dish is served as an appetizer, as an introduction to the main course”. Z. Herbert, *Barbarian In The Garden*, p. 64.

¹¹ The following is an example of an absurd and surreal association found in the essay *Siena*: “Siena smells of boxwood in the morning. Unfortunately, it smells of car excrement. What a pity there no conservers of smells. What a pleasure it would be to walk in Siena, the most mediaval of Inalian towns, in a cloud of Trecento”. *Ibidem*, p. 50.

only with their eyes. That is why the eyes become large, black and expressive; they recite love sonnets, dart flames, complain, curse¹².

Sometimes the “victim” of a parody becomes disclosed – for example, the character describes the Orvieto Cathedral using the idiolect borrowed from ‘the master of inventories’ – Robbe-Grillet: “He stood in front of a cathedral. It was 100 meters long and 40 metres wide; the height of the **façade** along the middle axis was 55 metres”¹³. This description is complemented by the following surprising comment:

Though such description is void of vision, the proportions assure us that we are in Italy, where the soaring Gothic of the Île-de-France was translated into a very specific style, going under the common name (since the zeal for chronology means that everything occurring at the same time must be given the same label)¹⁴.

It is noteworthy that the essayist puts this reference in ironic quotation marks in the style of a *nauveau roman* corypheus just after the paragraph, where he expresses his own inability to adequately describe the edifice he is just watching. His doubts are raised by even the simplest statement: “The cathedral stands”, which is immediately undermined by the comment in parentheses: “if this static verb defines that which splits space and makes your head dizzy”¹⁵.

Let us now move on some examples of what could be referred to as “benevolent humor” since its most important quality appears to be the build-up of the climate of interpersonal closeness. It is the character’s distance towards his own nationality which becomes the road to this closeness and enables him to experience it – as described in the following scene in the essay *Siena* from the volume *Barbarian in the Garden*:

I eat two (...) portions and order a third. The owner of the trattoria is really moved. She says that I am *gentile*. Later she asks about my nationality; learning that I am Polish, she exclaims *Bravo!* with sincere enthusiasm. She calls her sleepy husband and overweight daughter to witness our historic meeting. The whole family declares that all Poles are “*molto gentili e intelligenti*”. Perhaps I shall be asked to demonstrate a Polish national dance and to sing an aria by Moniuszko. Unexpectedly, the owner inquires if there are divorces in Poland. I lie that there are none, and a wave of praise covers my head¹⁶.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

The ironic subtext of the character's behavior is obvious to the reader because it comes from the fact that the character's nationality has been overemphasized by attributing non-existing qualities to it and, in a way, confirming positive stereotypes associated with it. Nevertheless, stressing his cultural "exoticism" allows the character to attract the friendly attention of the "natives" and establish a friendly, though superficial contact. It can be safely concluded that the price he has to pay for crossing the border of strangeness, is his consent to "the foreign definition of himself"¹⁷.

One of the strategies used for interpersonal or intercultural rapprochement or closeness is "surrendering to strangeness", consisting in the traveler's assuming a subordinate attitude towards norms and customs of the culture he visits. He does not want his otherness to stand in sharp contrast to "strangers" he encounters; he does not highlight opposites; he avoids confrontation. Instead of this, he assumes the attitude of mimicry; upon coming into contact with locals, he rather imitates existing customs, norms, behavior patterns and mindset. This also applies to situations where he is – as in the example above – directly affected by them as a representative of a particular nation. An encounter is thus possible by keeping a low profile with regard to one's otherness. Accordingly, paying the price of his own self-restraint, the traveler is given quite a lot – a chance to at least temporarily join the rhythm of life in a foreign world, to make contact, to get a sense of closeness to others. This scheme reverberates in a lovely scene taking place in one of an urban *trattorias* described in the same essay. Treated to a local wine, the character performs a ritual of wine tasting under the watchful eye of the *padrone*:

One has to swirl the glass gently to see how the wine flows down its walls, if it leaves any traces – meticulously explains the author. Next, one has to raise it to one's eyes and – to use the words of some French gourmand – sink one's eyes into the live rubies and contemplate them like a Chinese sea full of corals and algae. The third movement: bring the rim of the glass to the lower lip and inhale *mammola* – the bouquet of violets informing your nostrils that chianti is good. Inhale it to the bottom of the lungs, as if to ingest the fragrance of ripe grapes and earth. Finally – without barbarian taste – sip a little and spread the dark, chamois taste on your palate¹⁸.

The arrangement of the whole scene lends it an air of theatricality; the character becomes an actor who takes an audition for the part. What shows

¹⁷ A. Kunce, *Poddaństwo – dystans. Trudna wiedza w doświadczeniu obcego*, [in:] *Wizerunki wspólnoty. Studia i szkice z literatury i antropologii porównawczej*, ed. by Z. Kadłubek, T. Sławek, Katowice 2008, p. 124.

¹⁸ Z. Herbert, *Barbarian In The Garden*, p. 79.

that the actor has succeeded in passing the audition is the *padrone's* approving smile rewarding his efforts. Employing a game convention, Herbert introduces ambiguity to his description, blurs the clear boundary between what is spontaneous and "artificial". The character plays his role, carefully and meticulously making sure that all the elements of the ritual are completed. At the same time, though, he demonstrates a distance towards them by emphasizing the conventionality of the performed actions. ("One has to swirl..., Next, one has to raise..." etc.). The revelation of the conventional nature of the actions does not become a reason for challenging their reasonableness. What is most important – the ritual becomes something that enables their mutual understanding and allows the character to sense some momentary closeness to the *padrone*, above whose head "a huge lamp of joyful pride lights"¹⁹. This closeness is announced with the character's emphatic (and, as it were, histrionic) shout: "Life is beautiful and people are good"²⁰. A way to transform Herbert's character from a foreigner into a stranger is his knowledge of the world. The otherness of a stranger is less alien; the stranger rather than provoking the locals' aversion or hostility, arouses curiosity.

In the situation described by Herbert, humor played a substantial role. Above all, it helped to reduce the risk concealed in the acceptance of "foreign self-definition" – the risk of losing the character's own identity and "melting into" the foreign reality. This is how the "definition" has been changed into a sort of costume, and, as a result, lost its limiting power. Furthermore, humor made it possible to see the consumption ritual as a game, i.e. something, in principle, conventional, and, in a way, "strange" to all the participants. It is this awareness of conventionality and, at the same time, proficiency in its use common to all of them that has created a spirit of community. The third party of this scene – the reader – has witnessed the character's transformation, who has once again, before his eyes, turned into a local (not so much, though, to stop keeping what he participates in at a distance). The *padrone's* approving gesture shows that it is a success. Humor has created an opportunity to display emotions. Hence, it became an integrating force. The two scenes quoted above are insomuch significant as we are dealing here with just few cases presented in the essays where the character does not only become a participant of the events, but also establishes direct relations with people.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

In this context, it is, as it were, the “gastronomic” aspect of the scene that is undoubtedly important. Sensual sensations of the character which act as a counterbalance to purely visual ones, undoubtedly contribute to his opening up to the others. Paradoxically, the language barrier becomes advantageous in such a situation; the traveler, who is free from the temptation of getting into banal chatter, can focus on what is really important. What proved much more helpful to open up to otherness are the senses. These are universal as they break down barriers placed by culture and ways of thinking. This quality makes one look more attentively at this dimension of the character’s experience and admit that the traveler’s “unhealthy” (as some critics point out) interest in culinary delicacies – or broadly speaking, openness to the realm of sensations – has evidently an important place in his itinerary²¹.

The examples cited above could be aptly commented using the words of Izaak Passi who saw humor as a driving force behind the “conciliatory joy”. Humor is not only an instrument used for expressing critical distance, but also affection to what is observed. This remark entails that “the humorist must love people (...), it is only someone who loves people with all his heart that has a right to laugh at them”²². And it is exactly this quality that makes humor a “serious” phenomenon, i.e. something that fills up the space between comedy and tragedy, “between optimism and pessimism, seriousness and jest, bliss and pain”²³.

This understanding of the nature and function of humor resulted in the researcher’s contrasting humor with irony – he perceived the latter as an attitude which is far more detached, cool and even “aggressive” than humor. It can be argued as follows: although both have some differentiating potential which makes it possible to see reality from a distance, humor enables one to “come back down to earth”, thus re-defining the relations with the world. As a consequence, humor is used to express not only a critical distance, but some sensitivity to what is observed. Both humor and irony are primarily expressions of individual autonomy, “the results of creative spirit, regardless of whether it is as an artist that is their creator, or a talented, though devoid of artistic ambitions, humorist, parodist or ironist. Yet, in each of these forms the gravity of subjectivity and a degree of objectivity is different”²⁴. Either of the said forms represents also a different attitude to

²¹ It was Ryszard Twardoń who showed it convincingly (*O sztuce gastronomicznej Zbigniewa Herberta*, „Pismo Literacko-Artystyczne” 1989, no. 2).

²² I. Passi, *Powaga śmieszności*, p. 234.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 210.

the world. In this respect, Passi treats irony primarily as a way of manifesting criticism: “negation is what gives life and strength”, while this strength has primarily a differential effect and is a way to express distance towards reality. Humor, in turn, in the author’s opinion turns out to be slightly more complex: it causes something determined in its meaning to lose its unambiguity. In other words: “It is in humor that things go out of their ordinary, customary, normal and generally accepted state”. However, it must have the basics of the knowledge and feel of the world, it must be “rich in life experience” so as not to be solely a shallow demonstration of subjectivity. It can be said that it is via humor that distance may be transformed into – let me quote Aleksandra Kunce’s definition – “participatory observation”²⁵, and become a way of peacefully coexisting with others. By filling up the space between an observing subject and an observed object, humor enables us to see this space as a unifying force, which breaks down barriers separating the two parties, and annuls differences arising from the diversity of languages, cultures and experiences.

In Passi’s definition of humor it is quite easy to find a “serious” approach towards humor so typical of Herbert. This definition also grants it the role of a category by which a specific attitude towards the world is expressed, i.e. “benevolent” and warm distance to it. Doubts arise where it comes to a way of appreciating irony. It seems that Herbert considers it not only to be a quality opposing to humor, but also one that gives humor some sharpness and increases its power. This is the case, for example, in the scenes when the character realizes that confrontation with the artistic works of his predecessors results not only in benefits but also threats; that it leaves him with a very real question about his own place in what is ready, inherited and created by others. Also, Herbert’s barbarian communing with culture is associated with the risk of exposing his own sense of redundancy. “«Why do you toil? – hears the voice in the essay *Animula* – Everything has already been written, there’s nothing left to contribute in this field. The only role that may fall to you is the role of a compiler»”²⁶.

However, this “anxiety of influence” that Harold Bloom wrote about (if you regard the word “anxiety” as appropriate), is seen by the character primarily as an anxiety of being destined to repetition, which is forced, and which is not differentiating; it is a fear of an inability to muster up his courage to read it on his own, to see a particular phenomenon as an autonomous fact, which is not affected by existing readings. Herbert’s character

²⁵ A. Kunce, *Poddaństwo – dystans*, p. 132.

²⁶ Z. Herbert, *The Collected Prose 1948–1998*, ed. by A. Valles, transl. by M. March, J. Anders, J., B. Carpenter, A. Valles, New York 2010, p. 462.

knows that in this case his success depends of whether he manages to find a viewing perspective, which will hold his distrust of predefined and fixed reading methods and enable him to track down prejudices, habits and stereotypes in his mind, i.e. everything that makes him depend on given and fixed meanings. And this is where humor and irony prove helpful. Distance achieved with their use enables one to perceive culture as an area where it is not the objectification of an individual that takes place. On the contrary, it is the individual that brings himself to act in autonomy and criticism of what is learned. It is not only language, i.e. an imprecise, susceptible-to-distortion and always someone's tool, which is incapable to represent what is described (as illustrated by numerous passages which express a distance towards fixed description procedures), that becomes an object of his ostensible distrust. Distrusted are also those who consider their own opinions to represent objective knowledge and interfere with the "natural" rhythm of divisions, borrowings, influences. Natural – in this case – means subject to laws, which govern art itself, rather than those which arise in the minds of professional art interpreters, who normally do not have enough humility to mute their own voices and listen to the voice of the artist. For this reason, the essayist mocks at those who are guilty of the sin of exaggerated scientism. They are taunted by means of ironic epithets such as "destroyers", "aesthetic purists" or "scribes", "solid, reliable icon painters", "staid icon painters". It is in such cases that humor and irony mitigated by it acquires sharpness and focus, thus revealing its destructive power. It is mostly scholars following Wölfflin's formalism that draw the writer's fierce criticism²⁷. Only genuine zeal and selfless passion are seen as mitigating circumstances. It is by virtue of these qualities that probably the greatest of all "destroyers" famous for unearthing the palace of Knossos, Arthur Evans, cited by Herbert, and portrayed in the essay *The Labyrinth on the Sea* was granted "absolution". It was even Eugène Fromentin who did not escape an ironic remark. Still, distancing himself from his romantic emphasis, the essayist refers to him (not ironically at all) as "my master Fromentin"²⁸. The fact that, after all, he quotes his words, allows us to see the author of *The Old Masters of Belgium and Holland* as a mouthpiece of this side of the narrator's personality, which he would not rather uncover in his direct declarations. Herbert also distrusts instances of utilitarian approach to art as well as its often ridiculous involvement in politics

²⁷ It was Ewa Wiegandt who noted that (*Eseje poety*, [in:] *Czytanie Herberta*, ed. by P. Czapliński, P. Śliwiński, E. Wiegandt, Poznań 1995).

²⁸ Z. Herberet, *Still Life With a Bridle. Essays And Apocryphas*, transl. by J. Carpenter, B. Carpenter, Hopewell 1991, p. 7.

or economics on an ad hoc basis. In the essay titled *Arles* he approaches humorously and ironically both critics who have lost a sense of proportion by placing Frederic Mistral higher than antiquity classicists, resorting to descriptions such as “Provençal Virgil”. By the same token, he mocks at the artist himself, who agreed with humility to play the role of a living symbol.

It is the complicated ritual of mask changing mentioned earlier and the character’s impersonating various roles that are used to achieve distance towards what is ready-made and fixed. It is irony – or specifically an ability to visualize and sharpen contradictions attributed to it – that undermines the unequivocalness of each of the roles taken by the character; it explains the ease, with which the protagonist changes his impersonations²⁹. Putting on masks is a method which enables him to escape routine. It is also an opportunity to observe what he already knows (at least from books) anew, in a different way and from a different point of view. He therefore changes masks to see better, which in his case, means going beyond a scheme imposed by a particular viewpoint, i.e. beyond the framework set by fixed and seemingly unchangeable definitions.

At this point it is Kierkegaard and the vision of humor proposed by him, in particular, that should be referred to. The author of *Either/Or* understands it as something more than a way of expressing one’s attitude to the world (as was the case with Passi). In her interpretation of the philosopher’s words, Alina Dżakowska will refer to it as “an existential stance”; it differs from irony in that “it is always already lined with *liking*, and its communication strategy holds a *possibility of community* in itself”. Why community? The following argument brings the answer: “As opposed to the exclusivity of irony in the world of a humorist, there is always room for *another man*, a final replica cannot be thought of, and the humorist (...) grants another man a right to another replica, thus tipping the scales in favor of solidarity around common foundations of life. (...) Humor does not only refer to the ethos based on courage and liking, but is also associated with fun, with the free space of an experiment, with what is existentially not yet resolved, and as such needs attention and flexibility in relation to posing a problem”³⁰. “It is about (...) opening a meeting space – adds Piotr Bogalecki – since this best way of expressing in question, this beam of en-

²⁹ Herbert’s proclivity to assume various roles can also be noted in his correspondence. It appears that this strategy achieved particularly interesting forms in the correspondence of the author of *Barbarian in the Garden* with Czesław Miłosz. On several occasions, Herbert specifies here the role he impersonates, e.g. “Zbigniew-Pilgrim” or “Zbigniew-Servant”. Obviously, any conclusions and analogies to the essays require the consideration of peculiarity of epistolary communication. Z. Herbert, Cz. Miłosz, *Korespondencja*, ed. by B. Toruńczyk, M. Tabor, Warszawa 2006.

³⁰ A. Dżakowska, *Mgła ironii i przezroczystość humoru*, [in:] *Powaga ironii*, ed. by A. Doda, Toruń 2004, p. 116.

ergy launched towards the reader «focuses on a replica», that is, it requires the presence of another man”³¹.

Ultimately, however, Kierkegaard does not refuse to acknowledge the irony’s ability to be a cohesive, integrating force. Yet, he will introduce a separate category: “controlled irony” that variety of which called “stable irony” he will identify with a distance towards a set of fixed concepts, definitions and systems. It differs from the “unstable” one in that it has managed to “liberate the soul from the trap of relativism”³². So it is a force that facilitates both a distance to reality (and in this sense it performs the function similar to what doubt does in science, i.e. it helps us avoid taking things for granted which are not obvious at all, thereby throwing us off the routine of our knowledge of the world, it “interrupts the continuity of the narrative”, thus enabling us to repeat what is important³³), as well as to get closer to it, providing at the same time that this approaching may take place only because what has been experienced, has been put away and placed at a safe distance. Humor brings one nearer to the world and to people directly, thus weakening the dichotomy of opposites and carrying a load of affection. Irony, on the other hand, brings one nearer indirectly by creating a gap, making it possible to achieve the necessary space of independence. Irony thus understood, is no longer only a way of distancing oneself to the world and others. By the same token, humor is not only an expression of playful attitude to a particular phenomenon or an object, but a specific outlook. In either case we should mainly speak about a reflex of subjective autonomy, which enables us to achieve freedom from what already exists and is fixed in its meaning. Freedom appears in this context as a result of weakening the world’s dialectics because – as Agata Bielik-Robson aptly puts it – “(...) where a being reveals its soft plasticity and non-accomplishment, it is subjective freedom that steps in. It is only in the

³¹ P. Bogalecki, *Rozstaje: ironia/religia/repetycja. Na marginesie „Powtórzenia” Sorena Kierkegarda*, [in:] *Wizerunki wspólnoty. Studia i szkice z literatury i antropologii porównawczej*, Katowice 2008, p. 87.

³² A. Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*, Kraków 2000, p. 214. The author interprets this distinction, which is fundamental for the understanding of Kierkegaard’s irony, as follows: “Stable irony which Kierkegaard refers to as Socratic one, suspends the soul between two, typically modern traps: the threat of absolutism, identifying oneself totally with a chosen system, identity, doctrine – and the threat of relativism, or an impression that concepts do not mean anything at all and lack any foundations. It has trust in neither skeptical nor expressly absolutist option”. *Ibidem*, p. 214–215.

³³ Kierkegaard wrote on this as follows: “Just as scientists maintain that there is no true science without a doubt, so it may be maintained with the same right that no genuinely human life is possible without irony. As soon as irony is controlled, it moves in a direction opposite to that in which uncontrolled irony proclaims its existence. Irony limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, and consistence...” S. Kierkegaard, *The concept of irony, with continual reference to Socrates*, transl. by H.V. Hong, E.H. Hong, Princeton 1989, [in:] A. Hannay, *Kierkegaard: a biography*, Cambridge 2003, p. 151.

shadow zone, where things lose their ontological solidity, that it becomes possible to bring the two poles together, i.e. the subject and the object, which are theoretically excluded by Cartesian dualism³⁴.

Tragedy builds a spirit of community on a sense of common disaster towards fate; it is «community of victims». Irony, in turn, does not build a sense of solidarity against any fate however defined, but against differentiating endeavors of individuals themselves: it penetrates makeshift walls of their leaky monads and gives them an impression of community despite themselves and against their will to be solely individuals. So tragedy is metaphysical, whereas irony is post-metaphysical, that is to say, it is concerned with only human affairs (...). Irony plays here an analogous role to tragic *catharsis*, although both attitudes achieve a similar goal, by approaching it from two different ends of the 'history of civilization': *tragedy is a postphilosophical pre-irony*³⁵.

Kierkegaard's controlled irony combining both irony and humor is able to resist the need for definition. Thus it may create a kind of "negative community" among people, i.e. the community whose foundation is any identity, but rather "the same" distance towards differences developed by the philosophy of differentiating definitions, "by means of which I separate myself from others while others do from me"³⁶.

The understanding of "stable irony" proposed by Kierkegaard characterizes well this peculiar alloy of humor and irony, which can be found in the essays by Zbigniew Herbert. We find that the author of *Still Life With a Bridle* advocates both the vision of irony as a way of achieving a "healthy" distance (meaning: not running the risk of negation) to what is inherited – so akin to that proposed by the author of *Repetition* – and the awareness that this dimension is possible to achieve as long as specific frameworks are imposed on irony. Also, in Herbert's vision these frameworks, the particular boundary, which keeps a tight rein on the anarchic potential of humor and irony constitutes – we ought to subscribe to Stanisław Barańczak's point of view here – "the presence of certain imponderables, which irony is not able to undermine, and does not even try to touch"³⁷.

³⁴ A. Bielik-Robson, *Granice ironii*, „Teksty Drugie 2003, no. 3, p. 168.

³⁵ A. Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność*, p. 212–213.

³⁶ There, p. 211–212. Pointing to the integrating dimension of irony, the author thus becomes involved in the discussion resulting from Richard Rorty's proposals expressed in his book titled *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989).

³⁷ S. Barańczak, *Uciekinier z utopii*, p. 193. Irony is, according to Barańczak, a means used for revealing „insoluble contradiction” marking the character's personality. It was Jan Błoński (*Tradycja, ironia, i głębsze znaczenie*, [in:] J. Błoński, *Romans z tekstem*, Kraków 1981, p. 29) who was close to such an understanding of the function of irony in Herbert's poetry. Cf. K. Dedecius, *Uprawa filozofii. Zbigniew Herbert w poszukiwaniu tożsamości*, [in:] *Poznanie Herberta*, ed. by A. Franaszek, Kraków 1998, p. 165–166.

The attitude of the character of Herbert's essays viewed "by Kierkegaard" (as well as exegetes of his time) can be read as one of the elements of the strategy for establishing a peculiar community of beings, whose sense of identity does not fit in with ready-made patterns and traditional attributions. Here, in the traveler's eyes, regardless of the mask, he has just put on now, what makes us different, is suspended for a moment and loses its power. Irony and humor are not so much a tool to fight a particular vision of the world, a particular adversary; irony and humor are primarily an energy that is able to provide the visible world with coherence, to see it anew as an indivisible whole, to save its own autonomy in relation to what already exists, is given and ready-made, and finally, to awaken the potential of interpersonal solidarity and compassion which are dormant in us.

Michał Kopczyk

Humor w esejach Zbigniewa Herberta

Artykuł zawiera analizę roli humoru w eseistyce Zbigniewa Herberta. Autor zauważa, że efekt humorystyczny towarzyszy najczęściej sytuacjom, w których eseista tłumaczy czytelnikowi określone elementy świata, który odwiedza w swych podróżach. Oswajanie tego, co obce i egzotyczne, dokonuje się przez wskazywanie odpowiednika w świecie wspólnym dla czytelnika i bohatera. Ta sama logika rządzi próbami przybliżenia czytelnikowi zjawisk historycznych – to, co odległe i niezrozumiałe, staje się znajome dzięki sugestywnym analogiom. Funkcję, jaką pełni w badanych utworach ironia, autor artykułu wyjaśnia natomiast przez analogię z pojęciem „ironii zdrowej”, jakie zaproponował Kierkegaard. „Ironia zdrowa” jest czymś pośrednim między ironią a humorem. Ironia i humor umożliwiają osiągnięcie dystansu do reguł, jakimi rządzą się kultury – dzięki temu pomagają bohaterowi zobaczyć innych w ich wymiarze egzystencjalnym, ludzkim, a dzięki temu obudzić poczucie solidarności z nimi.