

# Invisible but Present

by Zbigniew Herbert



Stephen Anderson

*That Zbigniew Herbert cannot be here with us deserves a few words of comment. Zbigniew Herbert is 71 years old, and an intellectual of that age in the United States is usually perfectly able to travel, speak, and enjoy the golden years. Czeslaw Milosz, another Polish poet and Nobel Prize winner, is 13 years older than Herbert, yet he gives poetry readings and travels around the world. But Czeslaw Milosz spent his life in the United States and in other free countries, including pre-World War II Poland. Zbigniew Herbert spent his life in Soviet-occupied Poland. The last time I talked to him on the phone, he could barely speak. His illness is not so much a function of his age as it is a fruit of many years of privation. The political system whose center was in Moscow not only wrecked the economies of Soviet-dominated countries, it also destroyed the health of their citizens. As I deplore Zbigniew Herbert's absence here today, I cannot but remember its real causes. And I am comforted by the realization that The Ingersoll Prizes promote a worldview which, one hopes, will make a repetition of the Soviet experience all but impossible.*

—Ewa M. Thompson

**I**wish to convey to The Ingersoll Foundation my sincere thanks for the award, which is as prestigious as it is unex-

*Zbigniew Herbert received The Ingersoll Foundation's 1995 T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing, for which this was his acceptance speech. Ewa M. Thompson is a professor of Slavic Studies at Rice University.*

pected. I bow deeply before the memory of the award's patron. I could not, in the brief remarks uttered here, adequately acknowledge the greatest poet of the 20th century. An attempt to do so would quickly slip into banality. Instead, let me tell you about my encounters with T.S. Eliot. The first encounter did not take place in the silence of a library but in the midst of a raging war, with barbarism let loose. At that time, universities, libraries, museums seemed to belong to the world of mythology and fantasy rather than to everyday reality.

I was a teenager then, and I lived in an atmosphere of daily and direct danger. One day I stumbled upon a piece of paper, a page torn out of an anthology containing T.S. Eliot's early poem "La Figlia che Piange." It would be difficult to imagine a greater contrast: the world of chaos and fury that surrounded me, and this poem in a soft and elegiac key, so abounding in delicacy and tenderness. Since that time, I was drawn to the qualities which Eliot's poetry radiates. The tearful girl's little hand led me to Eliot's great works: *Four Quartets*, the plays, and the magnificent palimpsest of *The Waste Land*. The moment I read that poem of Eliot's, I decided to get acquainted with all of his works. But this was not easy. When World War II was over, in the countries of "real socialism" T.S. Eliot became a forbidden poet. Such banishment did not hurt him, of course, but it disgraced the Soviet-bred censors and book burners.

I said that I got acquainted with Eliot's poem by chance, but on second thought this is not true; in fact, it would be blasphemous to say so. Even today, I strongly feel that this first poem

was a gift, that it was bestowed on me by fate.

Please forgive me if I speak an unfashionable language, one ill-adjusted to the analytical epoch in which we live. Yet I think that literature should not yield to the temptation of “keeping up with the times” and genuflecting before the advances of scientific research. Literature is ruled by its own laws, and it disciplines itself according to its own rules; it addresses itself to the regions of the soul untouched by scholarly analysis. Words such as “progress” and “advance,” so ardently worshiped today, do not provide a key to literature. Such is my conviction, and also the justification for my work.

I much admire the men of learning, but I doubt that they could contribute to the restoration of order in the human soul. I doubt that even the most advanced research could bring a breakthrough in curing spiritual illnesses. At the same time, one should not fall in for the worship of the alleged perfection of the premodern age. Some say that our ancestors, whose worldview was built on a solid foundation of faith and a stable social order, were better anchored in reality, and happier than we; that they were able to reach spiritual harmony more easily than we. There exists, of course, a cornucopia of edifying examples that support such views.

Here is Cicero’s story about the young Roman tribune named Scipio who visited paradise in his sleep. The paradise turned out not to be otherworldly at all. It looked rather like the capital of the Empire, and was inhabited by the spirits of the great Roman statesmen. With ostentation, they urged the young Scipio to work incessantly for the good of the Republic, submit himself to its laws, and be always ready to die for it. Thus the netherworld extended a helpful hand to the earthly reality of the Roman Empire.

Similarly, William Wordsworth once described Sir Isaac Newton readying himself for sleep. Lying on his pillow, Sir Isaac serenely watched the moon and the stars of whose assigned course he was so sure. And during his daily walks, the sickly Immanuel Kant liked to imbibe both the smell of horseradish and the aroma of the harmonious universe.

But we could not possibly ascertain whether these and other ancestors of ours were less prone to metaphysical disorders than we, even though the world that surrounded them seemed relatively harmonious and comprehensible. We should not engage in comparing the state of their souls and ours. The most astounding scholarly discoveries of today cannot help us in solving these problems of human identity.

Literature, however, is relevant to these problems. Literature and its only subject matter, the only game it pursues: the human person. Literature has pursued this game for millennia. It keeps pulling out of the anonymous human mass an individual (always in the singular, never in the plural) to whom it gives the body and soul, face and character, and whom it leads through a certain course of events toward, perhaps, an immortality. It pursues that person’s earthly fate. It lights up the brief moment between two dark unknowns: before and after. It insists that the individual whose life it illuminates is unrepeatable, that he is a person, and thus different from anything else in the universe. It diligently researches that person’s virtues and trespasses, dreams and crimes. Sometimes it offers forgiveness, at other times it is unyielding and austere as if it itself had to answer for its judgments to a higher authority.

Literature is down-to-earth, but it yields a sympathetic ear to dreams. It understands solitude *and* human solidarity. It holds

sovereign power over time. T.S. Eliot expressed it best as he discovered the undercurrent of poetry under the pedestrian rules of grammar:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.

Every year, I undertake an imaginary journey to Greece, in order to experience pure joy and to drink from the sources of our civilization. The Acropolis and the Greek temples in Sicily, lonesome columns, and the Epidaurus theater: these are perhaps the greatest concentrations of beauty in the world. I repeat to myself that beauty is a vehicle for passion and virtue, and this thought offers peace. Yet an evening spent in one’s library over the volumes detailing Greek history may fill one with horror and demolish the comfortable thought of past perfection. Sophocles, Socrates, and Plato witnessed events that seem carbon copies of present-day tribal wars, so deftly served up in newspapers.

Literature shares with man his solitude and the urge to oppose evil. My philosophy professor, Henryk Elzenberg, used to say, “One has to undertake, with all the courage one can muster, a struggle to bring into being areas of order and meaning in this transitory world of chaos and cruelty, fatuity and uncertainty.”

I think, indeed I know, that in this struggle we are assisted by Thomas Stearns Eliot. Though invisible, he is present among us. c

## LIBERAL ARTS



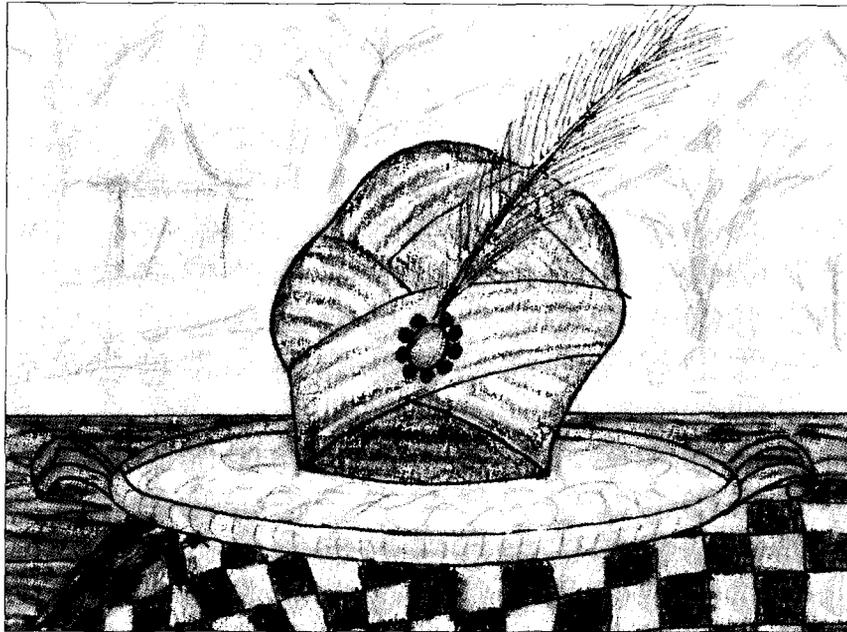
### I'M OK, YOU'RE OK

The April 16 edition of the *Rockford Register Star* reported that John Bisbee, the lawyer for Bruce Black, a man in Urbana, Illinois, facing federal charges for collecting child pornography, has demanded that the charges be dropped on the grounds that pedophiles are unable to control their desires, and that punishing them would therefore be “cruel and unusual.” Prosecuting Black, he insists, would be akin to “prosecuting an epileptic for having a seizure.”

# Don't Give Us India

The Multiculturalist Case

by George Watson



Stephen Anderson

“Don't give us India,” Samuel Johnson once told Boswell, when the talk was about how widely mankind differed in its view of chastity and polygamy. Montesquieu, he said, the great pioneer of anthropology, was in many ways a fellow of genius. But

whenever he wants to support a strange opinion, he quotes you the practice of Japan, or of some other distant country, of which he knows nothing. To support polygamy he tells you of the island of Formosa . . .

“Giving us India” means offering an easy moral excuse, and Johnson was above all concerned that anthropology might be used to justify abandoning our moral certainties in favor of a facile relativism. He was no doubt aware, what is more, that you do not need to cite foreign and exotic lands—minorities at home will do—in which case he would find no shortage of relativists if he were alive today. We are always being given India or Japan nowadays, or gays or blacks or women. There is even a familiar barrage of polysyllables to characterize the mood, like multiculturalism, positive discrimination, subculture, Eurocentricity, and political correctness. Some of these causes may be justified, but the more confident claims of multiculturalism now need to be scanned, especially the notion that the world has some sort of moral duty to defend, even to promote, a variety of incompatible moral views in order to uphold the due rights of minorities, whether one's own or others. In its latter-

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day form, which involves encouraging as well as accepting ethical diversity, it is a notion far odder than anything that Johnson or Boswell knew.

Multiculturalism offers itself as a defense of the outnumbered and oppressed: of subcultures which, rightly considered, have as good a right to exist as traditional culture itself. Traditional culture is conceived of here as white, male, and dead, and it is above all the humanism of the Dead White European Male (DWEM) that the multiculturalist most commonly has in his sights. The case can be openly self-interested, as in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), a book by a New York Palestinian protesting against alleged Western contempt for the cultural traditions of Asia; or it can be made by whites against whites. To go back a century: it was a titillating implication of J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which began to appear in 1890, that Christian dogmas like Virgin Birth are the less plausible because they can be paralleled in other messianic cults—all of which, as an argument, struck a subtle blow against the Western religious tradition and its claim to uniqueness. Frazer loved to give us India, so to speak, which helps to explain why his big book was enormously influential in an era of advancing skepticism. It can be profoundly exciting, after all, to lose faith in one's own gods and heroes. In a Spanish city in 1992, for example, an unknown artist decorated a large public wall with a painting meant to belittle the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America; it shows a crowd of brown Caribs laughing heartily at a medieval Spaniard, and one of them is announcing: “He says his name is Christopher Columbus and that he has discovered us.” The implication that you would have to be some sort of neoimperialistic Eurocentrist to be impressed by what Columbus did in 1492 is perfectly plain;