The
Hudson
Review
Volume LVIII, Number 1 (Spring 2005). Copyright © 2005 by The Hudson Review, Inc.

TESS LEWIS

Adam Zagajewski: The Wry Metaphysician

THE POET ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI WAS EXILED TWICE, once physically and once metaphysically. His role as dissident in 1970s pre-Solidarity Poland made life increasingly difficult. Although Zagajewski was never imprisoned, he felt it necessary to leave his homeland for France and the United States not long after the imposition of martial law in 1981. And yet, it is his family's forced move from Lvov to the provincial Silesian town of Gliwice shortly after his birth in 1945 that reverberates through his work as a banishment from Eden.

Zagajewski has written of Lvov, that "mythical eastern city," often and affectingly in the four books of poetry and four collections of his essays[1] that have been translated into English. His poem, "To Go to Lvov," opens with the call of his longing:

> To go to Lvov. Which station
> for Lvov, if not in a dream, at dawn, when dew
> gleams on a suitcase, when express
> trains and bullet trains are being born. To leave
> in haste for Lvov, night or day, in September
> or in March. But only if Lvov exists,
> if it is to be found within the frontiers and not just
> in my new passport.

But this Lvov is not to be found on any map. It is a construct of imagination, nostalgia, and aesthetic sensibility.

Zagajewski differs from other lovers of invisible cities—Proust and Illiers-Combray, C. P. Cavafy and André Aciman each with his own Alexandria, Italo Calvino's reflections of Venice, even Bruno Schulz and his magical Drohobycz—in that he did not live in his fabled city. It is a realm of the imagination, fashioned from details embellished by the memories of an older generation. In his essay "Two Cities," he explains

[1] A DEFENSE OF ARDOR, by *Adam Zagajewski.* Trans. by *Clare Cavanagh.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $24.00. The earlier volumes of essays are *Another Beauty* (2000), *Two Cities: Essays on Exile, History, and the Imagination* (1995), and *Solidarity, Solitude* (1990). His volumes of poetry include *Without End: New and Selected Poems* (2002), *Mysticism for Beginners* (1997), *Canvas* (1991), and *Tremor* (1985).

> I spent my childhood in an ugly industrial city: I was brought there when I was barely four months old, and then for many years afterward I was told about the extraordinarily beautiful city (Lvov) that my family had to leave.

The older generations made as few concessions to the drab postwar reality as possible. They "carried their pasts around like moth balls," addressing each other by obsolete titles, Mr. Councilman, Mr. Editor, Mr. President, Mrs. Wife-of-Doctor So-and-So. A downstairs neighbor, filled with hatred and despair by Soviet-style rule, refused to leave his apartment or to change out of his pajamas, choosing instead to remain ensconced in dreams of his former city. Even the somewhat more adaptable elderly sooner or later returned to their beloved past. Zagajewski tells of accompanying his grandfather on walks after the old man's memory had begun to deteriorate. "I was a sober boy with a memory as small as a hazelnut, and I was absolutely certain that in walking the streets of Gliwice, among Prussian secessionist tenements decorated with heavy granite caryatids, I was really where I was. My grandfather, however, despite his walking right next to me, was in Lvov."

A Lvovian aura surrounded the few objects that had survived the deportation. These were, of course, whatever valuables could be carried, but also family keepsakes of purely sentimental value. These, for Zagajewski, were aristocratic objects and even had their own scent. He could discern them with his eyes closed. More mundane things fell into two categories, the bourgeois and the socialist. The first were the utilitarian things left behind by the displaced Germans: appliances, sewing machines, bicycles, and tools, not to mention apartments. The latter were the shoddy goods produced by "the incompetent postwar Polish People's Republic."

In Gliwice, not even nature could measure up to the paragons left behind. When, as a boy, Zagajewski exulted in the emerald green of flawless spring leaves, his elders flaired treachery. Lvov leaves, after all, were peerless, "eternal, eternally green and eternally alive, indestructible and perfect, they moved as lightly and gracefully as dolphin fins. Their only flaw was their absence, and even their nonexistence." But he persisted in taking seriously things others viewed with disdain. In fact, Zagajewski's realization that flashes of beauty and instances of rapture could be found in his dismal surroundings if one simply knew how to look offered him his first intimations of a poetic calling. As an adolescent, he would be astounded to find that great writers confirmed the existence of this spiritual world (that magical Lvov!) hovering above or behind or within "trivial, empirical reality."

This domain of the imagination is accessible only briefly and by chance. The central force of Zagajewski's poetry arises from such moments of illumination set against the awareness of their transience. In the short poem "Moment," the qualities of illumination—clarity, definitiveness, form—are as salient as their brevity.

> Clear moments are so short.
> There is much more darkness. More
> ocean than terra firma. More
> shadow than form.

A moment of illumination can also reveal unsuspected incongruities as in the conclusion of "Ode to Plurality."

> To live, if only to live longer,
> Giving oneself perhaps to the power
> of one of the colder stars and mocking it
> sometimes because it is slimy and cool
> like a frog in a pond. A poem grows
> on contradiction but it can't cover it.

Zagajewski so deftly attends to the intractable complexity of human nature precisely because he offers insights that clarify contradictions without attempting to resolve them. He writes of death, love, power and its abuse, longing, joy, sorrow and despair and does so with a sense of intimacy that is not limited by the personal.

Contradiction is indispensable both to Zagajewski's literary and his political writing. His thinking thrives on the tension between irreconcilable poles, between community and self, between inner life and the exigencies of reality, between ecstasy and irony, between history and the timelessness of art. But this was not always so. As a young intellectual firebrand in 1974, he and another poet, Julian Kornhauser, issued a manifesto in the form of a book of criticism entitled *The Unrepresented World*. Their essays denounced those writers who had retreated into moral and political evasions or pure aestheticism under the pressures of totalitarianism. Zagajewski took, as he says, his "place among the Catos of the world for a while, among those who know what literature should be and ruthlessly exact those standards from others." He and the other poets of the Polish "New Wave" wrote fiercely political poems and expected others to do the same. Zagajewski has come to see his period of "righteous revolt against tyranny" as inevitable, a necessary step in freeing himself from the pervasive falseness imposed by the Communist regime. And yet, he was conscious of its limitations early on and soon turned to poetry that was not limited by political and historical contingencies. Three decades later he looks back upon his literary-political engagement in amused disbelief. "[A]mazingly enough, a program closer to self-flagellation than to art began at some point to attract the attention of a public that would no doubt have remained entirely indifferent if I had stayed true to my leisurely, 'eternal' dreams."

At the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Zagajewski studied philosophy, a complicated undertaking under the Communists. His professors were constrained by official ideologies and forced to stick to the authorized texts. They offered only rare glimpses of their knowledge of

the forbidden riches of Western philosophy, preferring to protect themselves by making their lectures mind-numbingly tedious and abstract.

Zagajewski's philosophical training, spotty at best, as he ruefully admits, is revealed in his poetry as a habit of mind, an exacting clarity and rigorous attention to detail, but also in an enormous range of references and a penchant for large abstractions. Kierkegaard, Hegel, Husserl, Nietzsche and Simone Weil are some of his poems' subjects or narrators. (Composers and artists also abound.) In this balancing act between the serious and the ponderous, his wit saves all. In "Schopenhauer's Crying," Zagajewski gently points out the practical unfeasibility of Schopenhauer's brand of stoicism. The detachment from life and its transitory pleasures, which he sought as the only solution to the error that is existence, collapses before the memory of "a woman he knew in his youth."

> He comes home, locks
> himself in, hiding from a servant. How smoothly
> the lock turns. It is probably
> in on the conspiracy. He's crying.

That the all-powerful Will might have co-opted even inanimate objects in a conspiracy against human happiness is a perfect touch. Yet Zagajewski's humor does not limit his sense of tenderness or his eye for sensuous detail. The poem notes, for example, how Schopenhauer's "solitude, hard-woven, / thin as Dutch linen, trembles."

Zagajewski's poetry is elegant, accomplished, and among the best writing coming out of Europe today. Yet it should not overshadow his prose. His essays offer insight into a refined poetic sensibility and a rigorous moral intelligence at work. A poet's passion for language is evident on his every page. Among the meditations and aperçus of "The New Little Larousse" in *Two Cities*, Zagajewski mounts a defense of adjectives. Students and fledgling writers are constantly warned away from adjectives and told to give their writing strength and sinew with judiciously chosen nouns and verbs. But from Zagajewski's longer view, this question of style is rather more complex.

> Nouns and verbs are enough for soldiers and leaders of totalitarian countries. For the adjective is the indispensable guarantor of the individuality of people and things. I see a pile of melons at a fruit stand. For an opponent of adjectives, this matter presents no difficulty. "Melons are piled on the fruit stand." Meanwhile, one melon is as sallow as Talleyrand's complexion when he addressed the Congress of Vienna; another is green, unripe, full of youthful arrogance; yet another has sunken cheeks, and is lost in a deep, mournful silence, as if it could not bear to part with the fields of Provence.

This stylistic question is not simply a matter of aesthetics or subtlety and precision in language. Zagajewski points out that "Ethics is another area that wouldn't survive a day without adjectives. Good, evil, cunning, generous, vengeful, passionate, noble—these are words gleaming like razor-sharp guillotines." Language may indeed serve as an indispensable guarantor of individuality. Yet it also lends itself to more sinister ends. Of course it takes a good ear and a sure touch to wield adjectives as justly as Zagajewski.

Zagajewski's nonfiction writing has followed the same arc as his poetry, gradually evolving from direct engagement with social and political affairs to a concentration on the private, inner life of the individual. His focus on the private does not exclude a concern with political matters, rather it is a crucial question of perspective: the world examined through the prism of individual experience rather than an examination of the world as a force exerted upon the individual. The essays in *Solidarity, Solitude*, written before Poland's first postwar free elections in 1989, are his most explicitly political. They were written, of course, at a time when avoiding political involvement—Solidarity, in short—was unthinkable for a man of Zagajewski's convictions. However, he immediately felt constrained by the active civic life. It left little room for solitude, "for literature, art, meditation, for immobility," and intensely private experience. Zagajewski does not set solitude against solidarity. It is matter of balance, not exclusion. Although he describes the debilitations of life under Soviet rule and the excitement of resistance, his main concern in this book is what a future for Poland with a free political life would look like. Would the "splendid spiritual tension" that grew out of Polish antitotalitarianism survive without an enemy against which it could react? One of antitotalitarianism's dangers is that it offers its proponents the seductions of a Great Alibi. By concentrating all evil in the oppressors, it absolves the victims from examining their own failings. And this habit of limited vision will be the victims' greatest handicap when they are finally able to define and shape their identity proactively rather than in reaction to subjugation.

Identity, whether national or personal, is a complex, fluid affair, and for Zagajewski works of art are every bit as essential to self-understanding and definition as history and public life. "To think—and speak—seriously, one must acknowledge that the structure of the world has a hierarchic nature. A hierarchy of values, people, events, and obligations is something unwavering and specific, just as in works of art and thought . . . Meanwhile one of the greatest pleasures flowing from intimacy with works of art is the constant, joyous affirmation of the belief that hierarchies exist." In the final essay, "Flamenco," he describes one moment of epiphany, when, seeking refuge from the chaos of New York, he slips in to the Frick Collection and is mesmerized by Vermeer's *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*. The cacophony outside is calmed. Drawn into the work's harmony, Zagajewski feels that Vermeer's painting has "simplified the cosmos, but differently: it diminished but did not dissect it." The vision lasts no more than a moment, but for Zagajewski, such

stillness and clarity are essential to understanding oneself and the world. It is interesting to note that the president of the court in the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal often returned to the Vermeers in The Hague's Maritshuis museum for respite from the accounts of atrocities he heard day after day.

Two Cities is a more eclectic mix of themes and styles. It opens with a memoir of Zagajewski's coming of age under the Communist regime in the small town of Gliwice and his growing awareness of the discrepancy between official reality, mundane reality, and the life of the imagination. In the title piece he recalls that the adults of his childhood "were very tired and apparently only pretended that they still believed in something," going to mass out of habit rather than belief. But also, these men and women who had survived unimaginable horrors by "accident or miracle . . . or by paying a terrible price," seemed to have retreated into a voluntary amnesia. The "entire secret reality of memory —the reality of interrogations, searches, camps, escapes, and unbelievable coincidences—disintegrated without a trace."

In the book's second section, "From the Archives," Zagajewski recreates a bit of this suppressed reality through monologues by former Party functionaries and victims. For all their weakness, cowardice, and self-delusion, these men strike an unexpected, sympathetic chord. They tried to withstand enormous pressures with small compromises but were inexorably drawn in. Zagajewski has written that resistance was not primarily a matter of courage or heroism but rather an inborn reflex. One has it or one does not. He quotes Zbigniew Herbert's poem, "The Power of Taste."

> It did not require great character at all
> we had a shred of necessary courage
> but fundamentally it was a matter of taste

He does not include other lines from the poem, typical of Herbert in their wry undermining of any definitive declaration.

> Who knows if we had been better and more attractively tempted
> sent rose-skinned women thin as a wafer
> or fantastic creatures from the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch

It was a matter of taste, but even taste has its limits.

Herbert, who suffered a great deal under the regime, is a presiding spirit over Zagajewski's entire oeuvre. Herbert's fastidious irony, his taste, both literary and moral, and his faith in the redemptive power of art have served as models for Zagajewski ever since he first saw Herbert speak at his high school in Gliwice. In a short piece, "Two Books," Zagajewski posits Herbert as an antidote to Nietzsche's anti-historicism. Nietzsche's disgust with his professors' pedantry turned him against methodical, positivist historicism, and even against memory itself as a

stifling force. Herbert, however, had lived in the shadow of the Communists' war on memory. Zagajewski describes their assault on all of the past that did not fit their agenda. "Feeling uncertain about its freshly declared utopia, Communism was like a madman who throws his most valuable possessions from a fifteen-story window." Historical memory, in those barren times, became for Herbert "something absolutely vivifying." Herbert wrote lyrical and empassioned essays about his pilgrimages to the churches and museums of Siena and Arles in his book *Barbarian in the Garden*. And this Zagajewski sets against the nihilism inherent in Nietzsche's "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life." Neither book, of course, is the final answer. Although it is clear which one Zagajewski prefers, he finds that the dialogue and contradictions between the books enhance them both. "One must think against oneself," Zagajewski insisted in *Solidarity, Solitude*, "otherwise one is not free."

Zagajewski does have his reservations about memory. As indispensable as it is, it must remain at the service of creativity and ethos and not control them. It is a bridge between moments of vision and should not be mistaken for vision itself.

Zagajewski's third volume, *Another Beauty*, is his most diffuse work. It is primarily a memoir of his university years in Krakow. However, interspersed throughout his reminiscences are observations about his present preoccupations, micro-essays on music, art, and literature, as well as aphoristic sentences. As in his other books, memory and history are prominent and urgent matters.

> I didn't witness the extermination of the Jews, I was born too late. I bore witness, though to the gradual process by which Europe recovered its memory. This memory moved slowly, more like a lazy lowland river than a mountain stream, but it finally, unambiguously condemned the evil of the Holocaust and the Nazis, and the evil of Soviet civilization as well (though in this it was less successful, as if reluctant to admit that two such monstrosities might simultaneously coexist).

This book is an extended reclaiming of memory, of historical events and personal moments, and a reclaiming of works of art and literature that are significant to him.

Another Beauty takes its title from one of his poems, which begins with the claim

> We find comfort only in
> another beauty, in others'
> music, in the poetry of others.
> Salvation lies with others,
> though solitude may taste like
> opium. Other people aren't hell

> if you glimpse them at dawn, when
> their brows are clean, rinsed by dreams.

Yet one has the sense in the pages that follow that Zagajewski, impeccable and refined humanist that he is, occasionally must remind himself that others are not in fact hell after dawn has ceded to the glare of the midday sun or in the endless black hours of a sleepless night. But his conviction that consolation or even salvation is to be found in the beauty created by others needs no shoring up.

Zagajewski is an acutely sensitive reader. His earlier books offered glimpses of his critical gifts in small essays and asides within his memoirs. The writers presented in brief essays in *Two Cities* are, with the exception of Schulz, men who intrigue rather than inspire Zagajewski. He sees Paul Léautaud, Gottfried Benn, and Ernst Jünger as writers of exceptional artistic vision who nonetheless proved surprisingly myopic when faced with brute reality. Each drew, in his own fashion, his ethics from aesthetics but were hobbled by their deficiencies: Léautaud by his lack of imaginative versatility, Benn by his extreme aestheticism, and Jünger by his perverse ambivalence. Zagajewski values these writers, largely ignored today, not only for their relative achievements but also for their skirmishes in "the permanent conflict between 'beauty' and 'honesty.'"

Only in Zagajewski's latest collection of essays, *A Defense of Ardor*, do we have extended considerations of other writers. The volume opens—after a brief invocation of Lvov—with a manifesto of sorts. It is a call to defend ardor, metaphysical seriousness, and beauty from the corrosive irony of our skeptical age. This is not another facile, tub-thumping attack of the Earnest upon the Ironic. Irony as a species of metaphysical wit, an awareness that Truth is an elusive, protean quarry, is an essential element of Zagajewski's writing. He is concerned rather that the humanist irony Thomas Mann directed against the ideological violence and simplifications of Nazism and fascism and the more pointed irony with which East European writers goaded totalitarianism has been hardening into a dogmatic, obtuse sense of certainty. Zagajewski is wary of broad generalizations but nonetheless asserts that "writing and thinking in recent years have come to seem meager, gray, anemic." Poetry, in particular, once a bastion of unselfconscious inspiration and love of beauty, "is marked by a disproportion between the high style and the low, between powerful expressions of the inner life and the ceaseless chatter of self-satisfied craftsmen." He attributes the decline of literary style in great part to the poetry of World War I, which tried to describe inexpressible horrors as bluntly and simply as possible. The horrors of World War II simply upped the ante. Paul Celan and Osip Mandelstam did find their solutions to this challenge. Yet they are exceptions. Stylistic simplification depends for its effect on contrast with a more elevated counterpart, and the high style has largely been drowned out by the "tepid, ironic, conversational" drone of the low.

Inspiration's main threat today is less the weight of history or oppressive political systems, than the "amorphous power of stupidity that typifies mass culture." Contemporary culture, in its ignorance of the inner life and aversion to quiet reflection, not only can "not create this [inner] life, it drains it, corrodes it, undermines it." These are not mere rhetorical flourishes. Zagajewski has witnessed the deadening effect on a society caused by the suffocation or attempted regulation of the individual's inner life. The writers he treasures are those who possess the ardor necessary to enrich the inner life and defend it from indifference and lethargy as well as from those who would regulate or censor it.

In the essays that follow, Zagajewski recalls the excitement of his first encounter with the "desperate yet joyful affirmation of our fragile human existence" in Nietzsche's early writings, and his disenchantment as the voice of the "nimble and buoyant" artist was overwhelmed by that of the "perverse moralist obsessed with settling scores with Christianity, socialism, morality" in *Zarathustra*, *Ecce Homo*, and *Will to Power*. Another essay is a eulogy of the painter and essayist Joseph Czapski, known as the "Witness of Katyn" for his efforts to uncover the fate of the almost fifteen thousand Polish officers murdered on Stalin's orders. Zagajewski remembers Czapski drifting "through Paris, sketchbook in hand, waiting for some sunbeam to open the doors of vision, . . . some color to speak in the language of ecstasy." Zagajewski also considers Zbigniew Herbert, the "ecstatic pessimist" Czeslaw Milosz, and, unexpectedly, the cynical pessimist E. M. Cioran. Cioran's posthumously published diaries, which he had ordered burned, reveal a surprising religious dimension to his thought. As a result, Zagajewski finds a place for him in the French tradition of Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, and Chamfort with their "malicious mockery that conceals a rarely expressed maximalist ideal of humanity with religious overtones."

Although all of these particular embodiments of ardor and metaphysical seriousness are dead, Zagajewski is not an embittered cultural conservative pining for a golden age. He praises chaotic, omnivorous reading, insisting one read the authors who inspire as well as those who challenge and elicit despair, that one read because one's life—inner and outer—depends on it. For all his strong opinions, Zagajewski has left his place among the Catos of the world. He is not content to scold or praise but also leads by example with his own poetry. He ends his poem about Lvov with an affirmation of that elusive but omnipresent mystery: the spiritual world:

> and now in a hurry just
> pack, always, each day,
> and go breathless, go to Lvov, after all
> it exists, quiet and pure as
> a peach. It is everywhere.