

Interview with Adam Zagajewski, 24 January 2003

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LL: Where do poems come from?

AZ: I think there's a source of poetry—an inner source—something that disappears from time to time and then reappears. A poem comes to being when the inner life meets the outer world. I very much see poetry as a clash between the inner life and something that's external, but there must be something else—vivacity. With-out vivacity I have these days when I'm silent and slightly melancholy. Another day, I'm excited, and there's this something inside me, inside us, this silent wonder.

LL: So poetry involves a certain amount of waiting?

AZ: It demands a certain amount of patience, of being able to survive bad days or even bad weeks. One hopes that this inner source will reappear.

LL: Do you just wait for the poem, and then one morning you recognize it?

AZ: More or less. There are days or weeks when I feel this strange silence inside myself, and I don't even try. I'm reading, I'm studying, I'm a little melancholy, and I live, but I don't try, no, because it would be impossible. I do other things, but I'm never trying to write during this lower period.

LL: You've read a good deal of student work. How do poems go wrong? Is there a common denominator?

AZ: Often, younger poets don't find the central something that makes a poem live. When I read journals and see poems that I don't like, there's a kind of anemia, words not alive enough. In every country, probably in every language, there's this kind of contemporary anemic poem—pre-poetry, or a diary entry, a few observations. Put them together, but they do not constitute a living poem.

LL: In your own work what role does revision play in transforming early notes into a poem?

AZ: There's no rule. When something comes to my mind on a plane or train or in an uneventful moment, I jot it down. Two years later, even five years later, those lines are very helpful. They're like very small inspirations, an image. I find a line in a forgotten notebook, and suddenly I see a new possibility. It usually takes three to four days, and during these few days I feel like a blacksmith. The poem is malleable. I can shape it, because I have this living block of hot iron. I am constantly rewriting, sometimes ten drafts, one after another, because the poem is hot. When this fever goes out, I cannot do any revision. It's over, it's finished, it's cold. Either the poem is successful, and I'm happy and I keep it, or it's not, and then I'm unhappy. I see revision as working on a living body.

LL: Maybe we could talk about your poem "To Go to Lvov." Do you remember the circumstance of its composition?

AZ: I wrote it in April 1983, one of the first poems I wrote after I moved from Krakow to Paris. When my wife went skiing, I was left alone in the apartment, and this is just purely anecdotal, but at this time I lived between my wife's apartment and a small apartment I rented for myself. We couldn't live completely together because her divorce was not yet final. My apartment was horrible, just horrible. I hated it, and coming to her apartment was to me like paradise, and it gave me extra energy. I had this combination of solitude and being with somebody. She wasn't there, but she was. The poem just came. I had this idea to write something with motion, with traveling. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" was a distant model or at least an ideal poem of motion. Then, I had three days of incredibly intense writing where I rewrote this poem maybe six, seven times, and then I stopped.

LL: You've mentioned that you don't often read this poem at readings. Could you talk about that?

AZ: Well, when I finished this poem, I felt it was good, and it made me happy, but in the months afterwards many friends told me, "This is your best poem. You'll never write anything as good as this." So it started to have its own life, and then later, much later, it was anthologized and translated. I read it from time to time, but I don't want to be perceived as an author of one poem. If someone tells me, "This is your best poem. You'll never do anything better," my growth is over. This would be very gloomy, to be defined forever by one poem.

LL: One of your most widely read poems is "Try to Praise the Mutilated World." Could you talk about how you came to write that poem and whether the poem changed for you following its publication in the black issue of the *New Yorker* following 9/11?

AZ: I wrote it a year and a half before September 11, in Houston, on one of my writing sprees. I opened this old notebook, and there was this line, just this one line, "Try to praise the mutilated world,"

and I understood this was the essence of what I'm trying to say in poetry, this combination of praising the world, but also feeling that the world as I have known it has always been mutilated. I was born into this mutilated world of central Europe, horribly mutilated. I grew up near Auschwitz, and this was my very deep conviction, that ours is such a world.

When I was very young, I didn't think of praising. I thought I must mourn or rebel, and then much later, I saw that rebellion was a short-sighted response, since not many enemies nowadays deserve such a great rebellion. Also, reading old masters, I discovered that praise is the main tone of poetry. In Baroque music there's this notion of *basso continuo*—the rhythmical base. I think that the *basso continuo* for poetry is praising, but it is a complicated praising. This world has probably always been mutilated, not clean or innocent. I think in life there are contradictions, so this line—"Try to praise the mutilated world"—just jumped on me, and I wrote the poem. Much later, by pure coincidence, it was published in the *New Yorker*, but it hasn't changed the meaning for me. I know that for many readers the poem meant something slightly different, as being linked to the moment. For me it's still this more general reflection.

LL: Rereading your book, I noticed its allusiveness—so many poems addressing painters, poets, philosophers, and so forth—which made me think of Auden's line: "Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead" (qtd. in Levy 42). What's behind your interest in art and philosophy?

AZ: I love this Auden quote. I wrote one of my poems, "Late Beethoven," in 1982 under martial law. It was a very gloomy historic moment, political moment. I wrote a few poems of anger—maybe not so much of rebellion—anger. Writing this poem was a way of breathing a purer air. It just came to me that this poem was an homage to greatness, to purity in art. And it helped me to survive these bad months.

Very recently, I came across a sentence in one of Rilke's letters. He says that all poetry has been written by one poet—a very beautiful sen-

tence that means the whole human culture was produced by one artist. When we celebrate Schubert or Mandelstam or Simone Weil, we are celebrating these coproducers of this amazing building we call human culture. So when I celebrate one of them, I don't see a grave or cemetery. I see a fountain of creativity. So this "breaking bread with the dead"—I do it but without thinking they are dead.

LL: I notice a strong dialectical movement in your poems, as if you're trying out both halves of an argument or stuffing two opposing spirits into one body. Do these tensions emerge early? They seem to structure so many of your poems.

AZ: I think this is the crooked nature of my mind because I don't plan it consciously. For me poetry grows where contradiction is, beautiful contradiction, even ugly or boring contradiction. There's this idea of change built on Parmenides and Heraclitus. I have this kind of mind. If you're a poet, you have a new definition of poetry every month. This month, poetry is a recapitulation of human thinking, not an escape from the business of thinking as it goes on every day in universities, in intellectual journals, in science. Instead, poetry arises from all that's being said and proposed, then adds a drop of magic. Poetry should not flee from what's philosophy, what's journalism, what's the debate of the day. It should listen, take in, then give this other spin or speed, inject some magic. Then, the contradictions are not only in your mind but in this intellectual universe.

LL: Do you think that when you tap into these contradictions the poems have more weight and seriousness?

AZ: Yes and no. A poem takes on all this heaviness, all these heavy things, but this spin adds light. It's another contradiction, but you have to accept this heaviness of history. As a poet, you're not as happy as a bird singing in a tree. You'd love to be, but you have to enter Auschwitz, you have to enter the abyss of the twentieth century, you have to enter the murky waters of modernity. And still you have

to sing. First, you have to accept this heavy load, and then you have to liberate yourself. This act of liberating yourself is poetry.

LL: A number of your poems take up Poland—Poland as place, Poland as political identity, Poland as self and other, Poland as emblematic history. What keeps Poland a fresh subject?

AZ: Well, it has something to do with my previous comment, this heaviness of history. Poland is a very unfortunate country, not very attractive, but it's *my* country. It's very strange to be born into such a country, much less defined than other European countries and only existing for two hundred years. It has known some greatness and resistance but also a lot of meanness. Poland is not very pretty. If you go to Italy or France, it's prettier. I see not just myself but many Polish poets being constantly amazed: so this is my homeland?

LL: How has Polish literature been shaped since World War II?

AZ: For a long time in Poland the word *literature* was kind of provincial. Polish Romantics were wonderful poets, but in a way they were lost in this hopeless commentary on the loss of Polish independence. Then comes this incredible moment, with Milosz, with Herbert, with Aleksander Watt, with Szymborska, also with Stempowski, Gustaw Herling, and Gombrowicz. I think Polish identity has been redefined by Milosz and these others. It's a different identity—richer and more intelligent, quicker. It interests me a lot to participate in this adventure of redefining this provincial identity, to make it into a smart identity, a polyphonic identity.

LL: How has your return to Krakow this past summer affected you?

AZ: My return to Krakow is a challenge for me. It's more than a return to Polish identity, which in a way you can never quit, if you write any poems. I could have lived to the end of my days in Paris, and I would still be the same Polish voice, Polish writer. Krakow is the stones, the smells, the whole organic site of being in a place with

friends. It has this provincial but universal feeling.

LL: There's a sense of ironic division at the root of many of your poems. Sometimes, you use irony satirically, sometimes as a tool to clear a little space for mystery and mysticism, and at times you yearn to be free of it altogether, as in the closing lines of "Long Afternoons": "Oh, tell me how to cure myself of irony, the gaze / that sees but doesn't penetrate; / tell me how to cure myself / of silence."

AZ: Irony is a very important thing for me and for all of us. I see irony as a rhetorical weapon, but I'm against irony as a world vision. It seems to me that postmodern culture is deeply mired in irony.

LL: A necessary evil, then, not something we should embrace for its own sake.

AZ: Yes. I see irony as a weapon against what's low and mean, and not against what's high. Postmodern culture employs irony against what's high, against spiritual pursuits. In the highest spiritual pursuit, irony disappears. I don't think that mystics are ironical. I want to keep some irony, but I see it more as a cleaning tool against what's low, what hinders me from attaining something higher. I would never try to use irony against something that's high, against God, because that's just perverse.

LL: In one of your poems you talk about being at a museum, and then irony vanishes. Is such clarity only available in epiphanic moments?

AZ: I think poems change the poet. Even if poems come only in rare moments of epiphany or inspiration, whatever you choose to call it—every name for it is provisional—you are changed by the poems, tempered by them. You're mitigated by them. I think I used to be more ironic in my poems, but there's also something else. There's this sense of humor, which cannot be confused with irony. Irony's more

malicious. Irony may be more brilliant in intellectual terms, but there's something in humor we deeply love. I think I wrote somewhere—and I still believe it—that a mystic can love. A mystic cannot be an ironist. But laughter—it's a very beautiful gesture which can be pious. There's nothing unbecoming in laughter. This sense of humor is much less a saboteur of the higher things than irony. My ideal is to keep the sense of humor and irony but not make them my supreme guide.

LL: Your poems at times are quite personal, though never confessional. I wonder if you could comment on that distinction and perhaps discuss the Eastern European sensibility that seems to gravitate against the confessional mode.

AZ: It's a very fine distinction between personal and confessional. For me, being personal in poetry means that you show your reader who you are. You don't shy away from exposure, but you try to show yourself as an entire being. Being a confessional poet, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, has coincided with the victory of psychoanalysis. Confessional poetry's mainly about divorce, about all those disasters of home. It's a very narrow definition of being human—being middle-class and unhappy. Personal poetry is closer to pre-psychology, just what we are. To gain some trust of our readers, we have to show ourselves. The master of this personal poetry is Zbigniew Herbert, whose poetry always has two things: a moral presence or purity of quest, but he's also mocking himself all the time, how hopeless he is in many regards. Also, to be personal means that there's something spiritual about the way you encounter those higher things, and you try to convey them in your poem.

LL: It seems to me that your poem "Self-Portrait" is a great success in the personal mode. You introduce the person, not as a self-involved creature but as an individual with ties to country, history, and others.

AZ: Well, thank you, but that's not a question.

LL: I guess not.

AZ: But back to this Eastern European sensibility, as you called it. I like this approach: to show who you are but not too much. Let me use Herbert again as an example. He suffered from bipolar disorder. He knew what it was, knew its name, but would never write about it in his poems or his essays. One could say, well, that's a mistake: a writer should tell everything. But Herbert's is a different tradition, a tradition I was born into.

LL: There's something potentially reductive in confessional poetry, in representing a personality and struggles and desires solely in terms of a medical condition. It can rob a person of spiritual and psychological richness.

AZ: Absolutely. What's interesting about someone like Herbert is not his bipolar disorder but everything else: his imagination, his quest. He was right not to give us details or to mention the fact of his illness.

LL: Quite a few of your poems take up, either implicitly or explicitly, a search for God. What role does belief play in your work?

AZ: A central role, I think. I'm Catholic in my passport, so to speak, but not a good Catholic because I do not agree with everything the Pope tells me. Yet I take the liberty of being a religious, resolved being, a veritable Catholic. This search for God is a discreet and private thing, and I'm very happy I can do it in my poems and that I don't need to preach sermons, for example. I wouldn't be able to preach sermons because the only way I can search is through this one-quarter ironic and three-quarters serious quest.

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