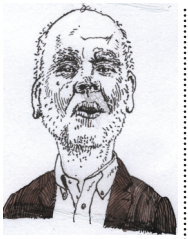

Adam Zagajewski

A Few Magical Moments

March 19, 2007

Irena Grudzińska Gross: Adam Zagajewski was born in 1945 in the city of Lwów, and he grew up in Gliwice. He studied in Kraków, which is the city in which he is residing right now. For twenty years, he lived in exile in Paris, regularly teaching creative writing at American universities. A list of his books that have been published in English includes *A Defense of Ardor,* a book of essays published in 2004, the poetry volumes *Mysticism for Beginners,* published in 1997, *Canvas* in 1991, and *Tremor* in 1985, *Another Beauty,* a memoir, and the prose collections *Two Cities*, published in 1995, and *Solitude and Solidarity,* one of my favorites, published in 1990.

Adam Zagajewski: *Watching "Shoah" in a Hotel Room in America*

There are nights as soft as fur on a foal
but we prefer chess or card-playing. Here,
some hotel guests sing "Happy Birthday"
as the one-eyed TV nonchalantly shuffles its images.
The trees of my childhood have crossed an ocean
to greet me coolly from the screen.
Polish peasants engage with a Jesuitical zest
in theological disputes: only the Jews are silent,
exhausted by their long dying.
The rivers of the voyages of my youth flow
cautiously over the distant, unfamiliar continent.

Hay wagons haul not hay, but hair,
their axles squeaking under the feathery weight.
We are innocent, the pines claim.
The SS officers are haggard and old,
doctors struggle to save them their hearts, lives, consciences.
It's late, the insinuations of drowsiness have me.
I'd sleep but my neighbors
choir "Happy Birthday" still louder:
louder than the dying Jews.
Huge trucks transport stars from the firmament,
gloomy trains go by in the rain.
I am innocent, Mozart repents;
only the aspen, as usual, trembles,
prepared to confess all its crimes.
The Czech Jews sing the national anthem: "Where is my home . . ."
There is no home, houses burn, the cold gas whistles within.
I grow more and more innocent, sleepy.
The TV reassures me: both of us
are beyond suspicion.
The birthday is noisier.
The shoes of Auschwitz, in pyramids
high as the sky, groan faintly:
Alas, we outlived mankind, now
let us sleep, sleep:
we have nowhere to go.

(translated by R. Gorczyński, B. Ivry, and C. K.Williams)

Try To Praise the Mutilated World

Try to praise the mutilated world.
Remember June's long days,
and wild strawberries, drops of rosé wine.
The nettles that methodically overgrow
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.
You must praise the mutilated world.
You watched the stylish yachts and ships;
one of them had a long trip ahead of it,
while salty oblivion awaited others.

You've seen the refugees going nowhere,
you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.
You should praise the mutilated world.
Remember the moments when we were together
in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.
Praise the mutilated world
and the grey feather a thrush lost,
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
and returns.

(translated by Clare Cavanagh)

IGG: I asked Adam Zagajewski to read the poem "Try to Praise The Mutilated World" because this was - as many of you know - a poem that was published by *The New Yorker* in the first issue that came out after September 11, 2001, with the black on black Art Spiegelman cover - the blacker towers on the black background. This is why we made a postcard with that image, trying to awaken people's memory of this poem - we assumed that they would remember both your poem and that image. On the other hand, we were a little worried that you may feel pigeon-holed by it. What does it mean for you that you have been associated with this very concrete historical moment and that the poem you wrote before that event and which is not about it became linked to that tragedy?

AZ: Frankly it's a relief because there's another poem that I'm also afraid somebody will ask me to read, which is "To Go To Lvov," which many of my friends consider my best poem, and they always look at me condescendingly and say, "You'll never write anything like this again." So, having now this poem "Try to Praise the Mutilated World" is a relief because at least I feel there are two poems I don't need to read. But seriously, indeed, sometimes people ask me to read this poem; in this country not so much, more often in other countries. And I usually do it but it's a bit

mechanical if you read it more than once. I think poets try to read different poems. They feel like landowners who have the forest, they have meadows, they have the river, so they want to display everything, not just always the same barn. It's the fear of redundancy when you read always the same poem. But I actually like this poem. There is nothing wrong with it.

IGG: This poem seemed good for this particular occasion because it's close to a prayer. You wrote in *Another Beauty* about a young poet who, while praying, suddenly realizes that in order to pray he doesn't have to repeat the words of the prayer, that he can compose his own words. Is writing poetry related for you to prayer? Is writing poetry kind of a civil religion?

AZ: Well, that's a complicated question. When you grew up in Poland under the communist government your real teachers were not so much communists but priests, because the Church was so powerful. What I wrote in *Another Beauty* was that I thought that prayers were written for eternity in this black book that you get from your priest. And then later on I understood you can pray with your own words, which is actually a dangerous moment for the Church because this is how mystics are born. Once they understand that they don't need to comply with the written word, the word printed by the Church, a schism is very near. So in theory you can pray with your own words but it's not commendable; the Church doesn't like it. A part of my poems, a small part, is like prayer, I don't think it's the only form. Still, it's a very difficult question. I think that poetry is a combination of intelligence and magic. The proportions between the two vary. Eugenio Montale quotes from the 17th century Italian Jesuit who said that "poetry is a dream dreamed in the presence of reason." It's a very beautiful definition, and you could revert it, you could say that poetry is a discourse in the presence of dream. Discourse is intelligence, the knowledge of the world, something that is rational because the poet should not be stupid, to some extent perhaps, but not too much. And yet poetry is not discourse. It goes beyond; poetry exists for a few magical moments. And poetry without those magical moments is not poetry. They put poetry beyond the rational realm. Of course, it's still somehow rational - it's writ-

ten, it's printed, the critics will review it and destroy it, or not, so it's in the realm of the rational more or less- it's not invisible, it's on the page. But I deeply believe that the raison d'être of poetry is in those short magical moments. And that they bring about something that's close, though not identical, to the religious moment. Poets are like heretics: they're religious people, but they don't belong to any church. So in my private life I'm a sort of a bad Catholic. I don't go to the church because Polish priests are not my favorite people. I look very skeptically at the church as a social institution; I think if you're a poet, you're a one-person church because you established a new church, which is your poetry.

IGG: When you were here the previous time at Boston University, as one of the three poets who spoke about poetry and politics, you said that you grew up in a Soviet block country where you had to fight against the state - in the Soviet Empire, you said, the state also wanted to be a poet. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union you were interested in dissident politics. After 1989, your engagement in politics receded, because then it became parliamentary politics in a functioning democracy. But now we have again conflicts, tensions and very anti-intellectual attitudes on the part of new authorities. Do you feel that in this situation your role as a poet changes and that there is a need to return to certain political responsibilities?

AZ: The answer is again very difficult and complex. For a poet, the main difference between political systems is between totalitarianism and democratic government. It's very hard to be an aesthete under a totalitarian government, to write about flowers and birds, or to be a linguistic poet. It is like a betrayal. You can write a sonnet, but you're not allowed to criticize an inhuman law or inhuman practice. Under totalitarianism language is confiscated by the government. I remember I quoted two years ago one of my friends who wrote a poem called "The Greatest Polish Poet is the State." The feeling among the poets was that the state had the monopoly of language. And if you just write innocent sonnets in such a time, these sonnets sound hollow. You have to do something about the confiscation of language. There are many stages in the development of the totalitarian system, there are even moments when it has some intellectual credence

about it, like the Soviet Union in the 1920s - it seemed then that there was something invincible and maybe very attractive about totalitarian communism. But time makes totalitarianism look shabbier and shabbier, and after a while, in its last decades, it has no intellectual dress; it's naked, it's just naked force. So there's a huge difference between being a poet or an artist in the first stage and in the last stage when it's not very difficult to see through the pretences of totalitarianism. When the democratic system comes you can go back to your study and write sonnets. In democracy what is important is the date of the next election; writing angry poems against your government is problematic because they will be obsolete after two or three years, and it's a very unpleasant situation because we all dream of eternity, of course. We want to write a poem that lasts forever and not for two years. The populist government in my country irritates me immensely, but I still know the date of the next election.

IGG: Your two poems about old Marx are an expression of a very contemplative attitude towards politics, unimaginable about fifteen or twenty years ago. When did you write them?

AZ: Well, two years ago.

IGG: Two years ago, yes. Marx as a sad, irritated person, irritated … Marx was making people alert.

AZ: That's right. I haven't thought of that but it's true.

Question (from audience): There is a quote that's attributed to Auden, that if you have a particular argument you know you want to make, you probably won't be a poet, but if you like to play with language, you enjoy making music of words, you might act like a poet. When you start writing, do you know very clearly what you want to say or do you work the language until the poem tells you what it has to say. And if you are inclined towards the latter, have you ever vetoed a poem because of what it said?

AZ: It seems to me that poets have something to say but they don't know

what, and important poets have something important to say but indeed they don't know what it is. The message is a mystery for the speaker, and it may be deciphered by critics, by readers, and there's never a consensus on what the message is. You know what happens to the poets of the past. You can still discuss that, and, of course, you discuss the poetics, the formal side, as well because there is no choice between having something to say and being fascinated by the magic of the language. You need to have both. Unexpectedly to me I have gained a lot of experience as a teacher of creative writing. What we know about MFA programs in this country is that they're quite lamentable because they deal only with the craft. You never discuss "What do you have to say," as if poetry were a game, a nice game, and everyone has a small field and you have your craft. I think this is a huge diminishment of poetry, so I'd rather stress having something to say because the craft goes without saying. Of course you need craft. Of course you need to know what a sonnet is and you have to have a talent for words, a love for words. But why don't you discuss major issues. Why don't you discuss what is to be said. I think it's a huge problem; it's a huge problem of a divorce between poetry and other fields in humanities, specifically in this country. The MFA programs are intellectually very poor. They only have these handbooks on how to write a poem, how to write a sonnet, how to finish a sonnet, and this is very useful but a little bit errant. Because behind the poetry there is a force; it must be a spiritual force. Of course it's unbecoming and embarrassing to discuss spiritual matters, and I know it's very difficult and people are afraid - maybe you're a priest, not a poet, if you want to discuss spiritual matters, but I must say I feel that it's needed - not, you know, lessons of religion but lessons or debates on what is to be said, what is important.

Question: I read a wonderful essay of yours a couple of years ago - I don't know if it's collected or not - about why you write in Polish. I think it was in the *London Review of Books.* I was wondering if you could talk a bit about reading your poems in English to us. You mentioned Claire Cavanagh as your translator. Do you sometimes translate your poems yourself? Could you just tell us a little bit about your relationship to these translations as you bring them to American audiences?

AZ: My love for the English language is uncreciprocated. I just love this language, your language. I write in my language because I love my language too and Polish is my first language, a language of images. And I don't think I'll ever switch. I sometimes write essays in English with the dictionary not far from me. I don't need the dictionary when I write in Polish so it's obvious for me that my poems are part of Polish poetry. In my language I have my masters, people I don't like and people I adore, people I reject. This is where my strong poetic tradition comes from. I like reading in English, but as for the translations I sort of appropriate them. My accent is terrible, but I like reading in English and I feel that this is my poem. It's an act of imagination, which I accomplish by telling myself, "This is my poem." When you read a poem in your own language, you feel like there is a cloud beneath it and you feel the same cloud under the English text. Each poet while reading poems remembers exactly the moment of writing this particular poem. It comes back to life and this is for me, by the way, the best thing about reading: that the poem which is already dead on the page, sometimes for years - you resuscitate it when you read it, and suddenly you remember again the day when you wrote it, or the days, or the weeks, or just one hour when you wrote it, and it's also magical. It's very revivifying to do this. And it happens with the English translation as well for me; it's not just with the original version. Of course, it's not the same poem but it's very similar to the original one.

IGG: Let me ask you a question that I was asked many times after my coming to the USA: When did you come to America and how do you like it? And what do you think about exile now that the word exile has become obsolete with the possibility of going back to Poland? What role has exile played in your poetic life?

AZ: Well, it's a large field, as Günter Grass would say. My exile was not very typical because I left Poland in 1982, in the time of the repression after the introduction of martial law. I was a partial dissident, not a radical one; I preferred writing poems to other things. I signed many oppositional manifestos but actually I left Poland for a woman and not for a system. It was a very bizarre situation when I came to Paris in December 1982.

Everybody who was coming from Poland had come for political reasons, or economic reasons, and all thought that they would stay for good. But I came for a woman so I was not a hero. I came to Paris and I couldn't live with my future wife because she was in the process of divorcing her first husband and if we lived together right away it would threaten her divorce, and she would not be able to get her child, so I had to find another apartment. I was looking through this Polish network and suddenly a nice apartment appeared in a good suburb. I took it, but then this woman called and she was very angry; she told me, "You cheated me." Did she mean that I was not a political exile? Was it that somebody told her I was an "erotic" exile? I was to some extent a political exile because I hated the government in Poland, but I would have stayed.

You cannot imagine how sweet the life of a dissident in Poland was. It was poor and yet you lived among friends. It was like a living Utopia to be a dissident in Poland in the early 80s. It was very pleasant. You could have problems with the police but in a way this was a wonderful life. You lived in this community, which was pretty large - the community of other dissidents. There was a lot of help, a lot of solidarity, not the solidarity as a movement but just a human solidarity. And I loved this life. Going away was hard for me because I didn't like the French so much, and my spoken French was pretty bad, but I went to Paris and I was very happy. The first year in Paris was the embodiment of happiness. I was incredibly poor. I really had no idea how I would make a living in France and nobody wanted to help me and yet ... I just love strangeness and I loved Paris, which was so new to me, and I learned the language and I saw my future wife a lot. Exile for me was a liberation to some extent. After a while I returned to Kraków, so, you see, finally I had enough. When Ovid went from Rome to Tomi this was a disaster because he had to go from the biggest city in the world (Rome was the New York of antiquity), to Tomi, which was a village, where almost nobody spoke Latin and there was no cinema, nothing. But the exiles of the 20th century mostly went from Tomi to Rome. They would go from Romania to Paris or from some obscure part of Russia to New York. It was a completely different direction.

IGG: Isn't this a matter of your character? You were very happy in Kraków

when the life there was definitely very hard for many people, political people, and you felt very happy in exile….

AZ: Now, I have to defend myself. What I said tells you not so much about my character, but that I'm not a political animal. There was something sweet in this life and the sweetness came from the fact that dissidents, although unable then to change the system, created sort of a village of their own, and they lived in a world of their own, not geographically. I am speaking of those who were not in prison, because of course many were in prison and I was not. And this is of course an important reservation, which should be made. Still not everybody was in prison, and not all the time. And some wrote beautiful books in prison.