



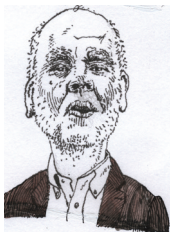
**Robert Pinsky, Derek Walcott, Adam Zagajewski:**

***Poetry and Empire***

**October 5, 2004**



*Irena Grudzińska Gross:* Robert Pinsky is professor of English and Creative Writing at Boston University, and former Poet Laureate of the United States. While he was the Poet Laureate, he founded the still continuing “Favorite Poem Project.” His latest poetry volume is entitled *Jersey Rain*. Derek Walcott, 1992 Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature, is also professor of English and Creative Writing at Boston University. His latest poetry volume is *Tiepolo’s Hound*, and he’s also an outstanding playwright and painter. Our third guest, Adam Zagajewski, resides usually in Kraków, Poland, and teaches every spring at the University of Houston, where he is Associate Professor of English in the Creative Writing Program, a remarkable fact for a non-native speaker of English. He comes to us from Oklahoma, where he was honored as this year’s recipient of the Neustadt Prize, and we congratulate him wholeheartedly on this important award.



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What brings them here together, these three poets, is their interest in the question of empire. It is especially true about Derek Walcott, who is from the West Indies, and so from the colonial and post-colonial context, and Adam Zagajewski, who grew up in a communist country, a satellite of the Soviet Union, an empire that has recently collapsed. They have different perspectives on empire, coming from different places, and, actually, from different empires.

**Derek Walcott: *The Prodigal Part 1, Section 3.1***

Blessed are the small farms conjugating Horace,  
and the olive trees as twisted as Ovid's syntax,  
Virgilian twilight on the hides of cattle  
and the small turreted castles on the Tuscan slopes.  
To live in another language with the swallow's wings:  
*chelidon* beating over the rye, shadows on the barley,  
between the peeling farms and the rusted poplars,  
the bright air full of drunken insects,  
the *Pervigilium Veneris*, Latin words leaping to life  
as the train glides into dividing Florence.

Outside Firenze the hill offered itself,  
erect-flame cypresses and an ochre castle  
sepulchral towards evening, a star's first spark,  
over the red-brown tiles of roofs through the olive grove,  
dusk delicate as an old gentlemen  
with mottled hands and watery eyes, our host.  
Diabetic, dying, my double.  
And here again, a digit in Rome's bustle-  
"Rome's bustle," a phrase as casual as a cape  
tossed over the shoulder of a dimming pilgrim  
in an obscure, anonymous altar-piece.

Those serene soft mountains, those tacit gorges-  
that was Abruzzi. I remembered Abruzzi  
from *A Farewell to Arms*, with the soft young priest  
who invites Frederic Henry there after the war,  
and perhaps Frederic Henry got there, whether or not,  
here it was now, with small hill towns on the ridges,  
where it could be internally cold. The precise light  
defined bright quarries. It looked incorruptible  
as the faith of a young priest. Its paint still wet.  
It spun past, saying, "You swore not to forget  
fighting and the rattle of gunfire in the mountains."  
Gone, without echo: Only the tight fine towns,  
church tower or spire, the steep rust roofs  
revolving slowly past the carriage window.  
We drove through the wet sunlight into Pescara.

Wind folded the deckchairs on the esplanade,  
slamming them shut. A detached, striped umbrella  
somersaulted over the sand. A dishrag sky.  
Then the weak sunshine strengthened steadily  
and colour came back into the sea's face.  
The waitress moved among the afternoon tables  
setting and straightening the dinner linen;  
a girl with jet hair, black as her skirt, red mouth  
and cheeks that were brightening now with the sun  
and the drying sand. The sky grew Caribbean.  
The breakers chumbling in from the Adriatic,  
the folded beach umbrellas like a Chinese army  
waiting for the drop of their Emperor's sword.  
Through the dirty glass of the hotel in Pescara  
a mixture of spume and grime, a quiet  
like an armistice, the clink, like small weapons, of cutlery,  
the rumours darkening like smoke over Albania,  
the palms on the sea-front ceaselessly tossing,  
the traffic with slow headlights inching through rain.  
And O it was lovely coming through the mountains,  
castles on the far crests, the flashing olives  
and the halted infantry of the pines. All the wars  
were over and far away. But the young woman on the bus  
past whose beauty the pines, the olives and the small castles swept  
in the clarified window, and whose sadness I thought  
was like a holiday resort-town in the rain,  
the lights of her grey eyes like glistening traffic  
whose name, she told me, was a mountain flower's  
but one that was quite common in her country,  
spoke softly as the drizzle on Pescara's shore-front  
of Serbia and its sorrow, of the horrors she had seen  
on the sidewalks of Kosovo, and how it was, all war,  
the fault of the Jews. Yet she said it with calm eyes.  
I learnt this later. I learnt it from the drizzle  
and the car lights of Pescara lancing the dark  
and the folded umbrellas, quiet as banners  
of the long brown hair that bracketed her face.  
Leon. Yehuda. Joseph. The war was their fault.  
But it was lovely coming through the mountains  
That they said were the Apennines when I asked their names.

**Robert Pinsky: *Samurai Song***

When I had no roof I made  
Audacity my roof. When I had  
No supper my eyes dined.  
When I had no eyes I listened.  
When I had no ears I thought.  
When I had no thought I waited.

When I had no father I made  
Care my father. When I had  
No mother I embraced order.

When I had no friend I made  
Quiet my friend. When I had no  
Enemy I opposed my body.

When I had no temple I made  
My voice my temple. I have  
No priest, my tongue is my choir.

When I have no means fortune  
Is my means. When I have  
Nothing, death will be my fortune.

Need is my tactic, detachment  
Is my strategy. When I had  
No lover I courted my sleep.

**Adam Zagajewski: *Summer's Fullness***

In summer, above a mountain stream scented with willows  
where purple butterflies, red admirals, and swallowtails, heavy with beauty  
perform their final flight above the glittering water and above  
the glittering alder and above the glittering world; where the air  
is so drenched in essential oils that you could pour it  
into glasses and feel its convex lens beneath your fingers,  
in August, when resin burns above the boughs of pines and pinecones

crackle as if licked by tongues of everlasting flame,  
and a sea authentically blue sways peacefully below  
like a victor, a king who's conquered the Persians, and all  
his yachts bow gently with every passing wave,  
and swimmers submerged in translucent bedding  
move with infinite slowness along invisible lines,  
along the white threads binding every substance,  
and to hear the vast whisper of creatures finally content,  
when it seems that even insects must have their own Dionysus,  
in August, when Europe's bustle suddenly ceases  
and factories stop short, and tourists laugh loudly  
on the beaches of the Ligurian Sea, just take two steps  
behind the scenes-and there a dense grove's semi-darkness may conceal  
the shadows of those who lived briefly, in fear, without hope, the shadows  
of our brothers, our sisters, the shadows of Ravensbrück and Kolyma,  
poor angels of a black salvation, watching us greedily.

*IGG:* My first question is to Derek Walcott. Your poetry is very much pre-occupied with the issue of empire, actually, surprisingly, with the beauty of empire, the beauty and decay of empire.

*DW:* My experience of empire is not a severe one. My experience of empire is benign. The ruling technique of the British Empire was to educate the native population, and advance them, and promote them to a point where they would be just short of being in charge. In other words, there'd be an administrator, and he would have an assistant administrator, who would be a native. By contrast, the first time I went to Martinique, and I saw a *gendarme*, white gendarme in Martinique, I thought, "These people are crazy." They are white police officers, they enforce the law, and in the British Empire, the British Colonies, the law was represented by the constable, who was unarmed, and that has remained for me permanently as an example of why the stubbornness of the French led to disasters like Algeria and Dien Bien Phu. I think that the manifestation of justice and equality, if you want, couldn't be born out by the presence of the gendarme, and that has led to the vehemence of French political revolt, intel-

lectual revolt, in people like Frantz Fanon. We don't have a Fanon in the English speaking Caribbean; we have C. L. R. James, but he's not as polemical. The other thing that is true and can't be denied is whatever you were taught was what the British public school boy was taught. You were taught Shakespeare, and Dickens, and the classics, and I can't regret that; in fact I am grateful for that. It is easy for anyone to say that if you were brought up as a British colonial subject, you were brainwashed. Well, it's okay to be brainwashed by Shakespeare, I think.

*AZ:* My empire was not British, and was not even French - it was Soviet, so I have a completely different experience. It was a modern empire and a modern dictatorship, which tried to impose everything, the entire vision of the world. One of my friends in the 70s wrote a poem that he called "The Greatest Polish Poet is the State." And this was true: the state, the Communist State, had poetic aspirations. Before 1956 there was a normative aesthetic, which meant that the state defined what kind of music should be composed, what kind of poems should be written, and what kind of paintings should be painted. It was a very active, aggressive empire, an ideological empire, an empire that wanted to compete with poetry. I think the essence of totalitarianism is this inherent conviction of the state that the state knows better. As a young poet, I was irritated by this. Who is the greater poet, the state or the poet? Finally we have an answer, I think, because the state stopped writing poetry.

*IGG:* I would like to move now to the second topic, related to the previous one, the relationship between history and poetry. Czesław Miłosz, the Polish poet who died recently, used to say that the difference between Polish poetry and American poetry is that poetry in Poland is steeped in history, and this is where its strength and richness comes from, while the poetry in the United States is much more individualistic. Robert Pinsky translated a Miłosz poem called "Song on Porcelain," quoted below. This poem is about history and was written right after World War II.

**Czesław Miłosz: *Song on Porcelain***

Rose-colored cup and saucer,  
Flowerly demitasses:  
They lie beside the river  
Where an armored column passes.  
Winds from across the meadow  
Sprinkle the banks with down;  
A torn apple tree's shadow  
Falls on the muddy path;  
The ground everywhere is strewn  
With bits of brittle froth-  
Of all things broken and lost  
The porcelain troubles me most.

Before the first red tones  
Begin to warm the sky  
The earth wakes up, and moans.  
It is the small sad cry  
Of cups and saucers cracking,  
The masters' precious dream  
Of roses, of mowers raking,  
And shepherds on the lawn.  
The black underground stream  
Swallows the frozen swan.  
This morning, as I walked past,  
The porcelain troubled me most.

The blackened plain spreads out  
To where the horizon blurs  
In a litter of handle and spout,  
A lively pulp that stirs  
And crunches under my feet.  
Pretty, useless foam:  
Your stained colors are sweet  
Spattered in dirty waves  
Flecking the fresh black loam  
In the mounds of these new graves.  
In sorrow and pain and cost,  
Sir, porcelain troubles me most.

*IGG*: Robert Pinsky said that once, after he read this poem in Berkeley, he was hissed by somebody, probably because that person thought Miłosz should have said: "Of all things broken and lost/ The Jews trouble me most." But, Pinsky continued, the poem is saying something much more drastic, because the porcelain, with the pastoral scenes on it, is the history of the European culture which maimed and destroyed itself.

(Turning to Derek Walcott): It seems that in your poetry you are building history, you are creating a history of your country, of your place, of the people you are writing about.

*DW*: Basically I am voiceless, I don't have a voice. I come from a voiceless culture, one that has absolutely no power in the world, and no voice in the participation of the judgments of the great movements of the world. But, the alternative to that is art, and that's what we try to establish from what we have suffered. I don't like to use the phrase "from what we have suffered," but I know what I've had to go through. We, as colonials, were told whom we have to hate. And, we were manipulated, and I think we're still manipulated, we are still being told whom to hate now, by America. We don't necessarily have a war with Iraq - obviously, they haven't done anything to us - but if we want to align ourselves, then we better be on that side. Empires don't only dictate to their own people, they dictate abroad; that's what an empire does. We didn't have a choice about whom we were supposed to align with. But I think out of that, there comes distance. For us in the Caribbean, to align our fealty to some particular empire abroad was absurd.

*IGG (to AZ)*: Until approximately the beginning of the 80s you wrote a number of poems that could be called political, *engagé*; or at least they were a sign of resistance to political reality. And then, I think, you moved into writing about history. Now I wonder if this is true, and I wonder if history is not a burden to the Polish poet, if there is a certain kind of duty and obligation that a poet has towards his nation that may be very limiting.

*AZ*: I don't think history is a burden; I would say there are two ways of living with history and poetry and literature. One way is nationalistic or par-



tisan, and even our great Romantic poets were using history in this way, dreaming of an independent Poland, of an independent country. And I have a lot of admiration for their talents and for what they had written, but I'm not quite convinced that that's the best way of writing history and poetry. The other way would be to treat history like someone who wakes up in the middle of the night and is amazed by the world, by the historical events, because amazement is always a source of poetry. So the second way of experiencing history is in amazement. It's one of the main sources of art, of poetry, and then there's no big difference between experiencing history and experiencing love or fear or aging or any purely lyric state of mind. There is this kind of love affair between poetry and history, because poetry is purely ahistorical, but it needs contradictions - poetry would die without contradictions. When it meets history, it's like the cold front that meets the warm front, and the storm is the poem.

*Question* (from audience): Pursuing the question, or differentiating between history and politics, I wanted to ask Mr. Zagajewski whether a political perception and an aesthetic perception can ever be a single perception, whether one can have a perception that's both political and aesthetic, or are these two modes of perception always distinct?

*AZ*: It seems to me that they are always distinct, quite different. In many definitions of politics there is the element of antagonism, like Carl Schmitt's famous definition of political fact as built on having an enemy. I don't think aesthetic activity involves having an enemy. Sometimes poetry is being put into the political position, and this was the very peculiar position of poetry under totalitarianism. But it's very different in a democratic situation, when this antagonistic relationship does not exist. In the 90s, many writers, many artists, especially poets had a very strange symptom, a kind of sadness, that this wonderful enemy has disappeared and what remains is the vagueness of democracy. Democracy, unlike totalitarianism, has no claims to any kind of knowledge, to any kind of wisdom. It just has claims to vagueness; it's the best possible system, but it's a very vague system. In a democracy the political role for poetry could consist in presenting a much richer version of the human situation.

*Question:* I think I am noticing that all three of you, different poets that you are, in one way or another, seem to bring up issues either of the Nazi Holocaust or contemporary anti-Semitism.

*DW:* The horror of the Holocaust for me is its calculated character, the nonexistence of the idea of evil, the scientific experiments, that's the real horror. The calculated non-development of conscience, bringing human perfectibility to that Faustian point, where the question of God doesn't arise, and there is simply a procedure to go by. And I think that after the Holocaust there can only be repetition. That was the final assault on divinity.

*AZ:* There's a certain inertia in poetry, in literature. It's very hard to notice new dangers, to name new dangers, new crimes, and there's a perverse dignity to the huge crimes of the Holocaust, or of the Gulag on the Soviet side. I think we are all still obsessed with those huge crimes, which may sometimes eclipse the new dangers, the new crimes. But it has to be seen very personally: each writer, each poet, has a different story. I grew up in a city that was 50 km from Auschwitz, so for me Auschwitz was a neighbor. It doesn't mean that I'm only writing on Auschwitz, but to some extent it's a part of my biography, so I will never completely outgrow this shadow.

*IGG:* Let's then ask Adam Zagajewski to read for us his best known poem, the one that was proposed to readers of *The New Yorker* as a reaction to the events of September 11, 2001.

**Adam Zagajewski: *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)

