

THE POETRY OF UNCERTAINTY

Adam Zagajewski, *Unseen Hand*, translated by Clare Cavanagh. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011, paper edition, 2012. *A Defense of Ardor: Essays*, translated by Clare Cavanagh. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004.

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Both the poetry and prose of Adam Zagajewski are animated by the same overriding concern—to find, and defend, the liminal space between the spiritual and the mundane, the sublime and the ironic, the sole space where, Zagajewski thinks, art happens. In his attempts to find and defend this space—spiritual but not religious, sublime but self-conscious of the absurdity lurking behind the sublime—he gives us a sense of the forces that threaten it: the barbarism of much of twentieth century politics, the disengaged irony of much of the *soi-disant* avant-garde, consumerism, nihilism. In short, “the modern world, a world divorced from poetry and given over to the Internet and ads” or worse. Confronted with this world, however, Zagajewski’s response is not the regressive conservatism of moderns like Eliot or Pound or Heidegger, who are so “completely immersed in the element of twentieth-century history” that they “are blind to the phenomenal (and fragile) benefits we derive from liberal democracy.” He does not repudiate the Enlightenment because it lapsed into barbarism, but attempts to rescue it from those forces that threaten to eradicate what is truly valuable in it. Nor does he repudiate religious traditions for the sake of Enlightenment, but seeks to salvage what is of permanent human value in religious and mystical experience.

What this requires, and what Zagajewski exhibits in his poems and essays, is “calm contemplation of a brutal world,” as he writes in a miniature *ars poetica* “Writing Poems.” And Zagajewski as a thinker (and he is always a thinker) is pre-eminently calm and sober; he seeks always a golden mean between extremes, all the while knowing that the golden mean is an ever-receding horizon, an ideal that can only be approached asymptotically. In the title essay of the collection, “A Defense of Ardor,” Zagajewski takes up the Platonic term *metaxu*, which he says “defines the situation of the human, a being who is incurably ‘en route.’” The nomadic nature of human existence is productive, however. Rather than seeking stasis, whether through belief in religious dogma or through a total repudiation of the transcendent, Zagajewski seeks to occupy fully the dialectical motions, “the productive tension of *metaxu*”:

We're always "in between" and our constant motion always betrays the other side in some way. Immersed in the quotidian, in the commonplace routines of practical life, we forget about transcendence. While edging toward divinity, we neglect the ordinary, the concrete, the specific, we turn our backs on the pebble that is the subject of [Zbigniew] Herbert's splendid poem, his hymn to stony, serene, sovereign presence.

"*A Defense of Ardor*" opens with a wonderful anecdote in which Zagajewski attends a party of a very wealthy resident of Chianti in Tuscany, a party attended mostly by other very wealthy residents of Chianti (the wealthy like to keep a few poets and artists around for the same reason that they like to keep Ferraris and *Château d'Yquem* around). A chamber quartet begins playing Mozart; the "four young women played wonderfully, but the applause was relatively sparse." This is when Zagajewski decides that *a defense of ardor* is requisite.

The main antagonist of ardor is irony. Zagajewski, always true to his in-betweenness, doesn't repudiate irony; indeed, he makes excellent use of it in his own work. He knows that irony can be a powerful weapon against consumerism, religion, the bourgeoisie, the avant-garde, or whatever foe needs to be somewhat diminished. But he cautions against the dangers of irony, which often "conceals intellectual poverty. Since of course irony always comes in handy when we don't know what to do." In a subtle analysis, Zagajewski distinguishes between uncertainty, which "doesn't contradict ardor," doubt (the polar opposite of poetry, which means they constitute a productive tension, as he writes in "Poetry and Doubt"), and irony, which "undercuts uncertainty." He diagnoses "the real danger of our historical moment" as the ease with which people "freeze' into irony," which, when "it occupies the central place in someone's thought," paradoxically "becomes a rather perverse form of certainty." Ultimately, then, Zagajewski is a sort of Socratic gadfly in contemporary poetry, defending uncertainty against a multitude of certainty, negative capability against staid doctrines.

If irony is the real danger of our historical moment, it is no wonder that Zagajewski finds much of contemporary poetry (in all of the several languages in which he can read it) to be compromised by it. In a delicious little polemic titled, ironically (or at least partially so), "Against Poetry," Zagajewski writes that "a kind of irony parched with sorrow is probably the most frequently used material in poetry." The real problem with this kind of *poesis* is that it is, in effect, an abdication of responsibility. For the "age's great intellectual labor," Zagajewski writes, "in which so many have taken part, is still chiefly the comprehension of the twentieth century's vast trag-

edies.” Zagajewski hopes that poetry can still take part in this intellectual labor; that poetry can take on even the greatest of intellectual labors.



A Defense of Ardor collects essays of varying length and ambition on a diverse range of subjects from roughly two decades. (Although it is hard to tell, because only three of the fourteen essays are dated—one wishes that there was *some* editorial apparatus appended to the book). It is Zagajewski’s fourth book of prose to appear in English translation. As a prose writer, Zagajewski is conversational, witty, erudite without being at all pedantic, intimate, poetic. He doesn’t hide behind an Oz-like screen of theoretical jargon. It is refreshing to read a book of intelligent and wide-ranging essays whose subject matter and points of reference never seem to have been drawn from the latest “Who’s Hot and Who’s Not” list of academia. Some of the most rebarbative flashes of wit in these essays have in their sites the cliquish fads of academic and poetic fashion (now virtually synonymous, at least in the US). He is not, for example, “put off by the hypothesis that certain extravagances of modern French thought might never have seen the light of day (or the light of library lamps)” if it were not for Nietzsche’s souring influence. Having lived in Paris for much of the 1980s and the 90s, Zagajewski has no time for undeserved and fawning francophilia, “that vulgar exoticism,” as Randall Jarrell memorably put it, “which disregards both what we have kept and what we are unique in possessing, which gives up *Moby Dick* for the Journals of André Gide.”¹ Or, as Zagajewski might turn it, gives up Czeslaw Milosz for the *Collège de France* lectures of Michel Foucault.

“Young Poets, Please Read Everything” Zagajewski implores in the title of a short but delightful essay, being careful to immediately qualify his title by saying that he is “a chaotic reader” with gaps in his education “more breathtaking than the Swiss Alps.” Despite this one comes away from these essays stunned by the breadth of knowledge and range of reference available to someone who has read and lived so nomadically. It is one of the many virtues of the book that the first essay begins by mapping Zagajewski’s nomadic movements: “From Lvov to Gliwice, from Gliwice to Krakow, from Krakow to Berlin (for two years); then to Paris, for a long while, and from there to Houston every year for four months; then back to Krakow.” His family was relocated to Gliwice in 1945, when Zagajewski was only four months old, after Lvov was made a part of Soviet Ukraine. His exile from

1. Randall Jarrell, “Reflections on Wallace Stevens,” in *Poetry and the Age*, (Gainesville, etc.: University Press of Florida, 2001), 134.

Poland was also a matter of politics: after clashes with the authorities as part of the Solidarity movement, culminating in the imposition of martial law, he left Poland for Paris. We can now add Chicago to the list, where Zagajewski teaches part of the year as a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. What this means is that Zagajewski is “like a passenger on a small submarine that has not one periscope but four.” It means that he is particularly qualified to pass judgment on contemporary Western poetry.

And that is, thankfully, exactly what he does. Young American poets “do little else in their flawed poems” than reveal their own failings in soft, self-centered confessional verse. French poets “for several decades” have written only “a methodological monologue, an endless meditation on the question of whether poems are possible at all.” With the authoritative index finger of Adorno, perhaps, wagging endlessly in their minds, they are like “some introspective tailor” who has “stopped making clothes, ceaselessly pondering instead the marvelous Arabian proverb ‘The needle that clothes so many people stays naked itself.’” Such judgments are stern and sweeping, no doubt passing over several good American and French poets who do not exhibit these flaws—but this is the price one pays if one wants to judge the art of their age *toto caelo*, which is a necessary task. Alongside his sweeping dismissals, however, must be placed his acute and particular appreciations of writers and artists that he loves or admires—the book includes essays devoted to Nietzsche, Josef Czapski, Zbigniew Herbert, Czeslaw Milosz, and Emil Cioran. Couched within the essays are also illuminating comments about a score of others—Tadeusz Rozewicz, W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, Aleksander Wat, and Simone Weil, *inter alia*.

It is in the essays on Czapski and Herbert in particular, both of whom Zagajewski knew well, that his prose is at its best. These essays are part memoir, part memorial, part critical assessment, and all woven into a beautiful fabric of thought and emotion. Czapski and Herbert are so close to Zagajewski, not just in terms of friendship, but in terms of thought and art, that the essays become a form of self-revelation as well.

Czapski’s ruthless honesty also gave him grief: he was constantly testing to see if his experiences were real, if those great moments of illumination weren’t simply a diversionary ploy undertaken by his glands and hormones. And he was never triumphantly certain of either his painting or his prose. For all this, though, the prevailing mood of Czapski’s diaries is very different from what we find in the famed quest for authenticity conducted by the caustic existentialists. The tone of his passionate hunt for truth is almost naive—“almost” but never completely. Czapski’s allegiance to the tradition of oil painting was likewise “almost” naive.

He rejected those thousands of ultramodern innovations that have in our times very nearly displaced canvas, brush, and oil paint, that extraordinary, protean substance, amorphous, flaking from the surfaces of so many great paintings, oil paint, the world's backbone. An almost naive allegiance, an almost naive quest—never, though, descending into the tawdry, commonplace naïveté displayed by those traditionalists devoid of inner discipline. For Czapski, this near-naïveté was a path leading him unerringly past both the shifting fashions and fads of avant-garde art and the skepticism and suspicion of modern European thought.

Zagajewski is not afraid to flout the “theoretical apparatus provided by contemporary philosophy” and claim that Czapski “was a genuinely great person.” This is of a piece with the central concern of Zagajewski's work: a thoroughly skeptical irony leaves no place for greatness, every epic quality and value abolished by sneering laughter. In the “age of massacre,”² when individuals were slaughtered by the millions, reduced to populations and statistics to be manipulated *en masse*, retaining the courage to assert the greatness of an individual is a necessary act, an ethical and political act of great importance. Along these same lines, as his essay on Herbert shows, Zagajewski thinks that the affirmation of the beautiful becomes all the more important in the face of great evil:

Like several other great poets in this historical moment, Herbert stood before Evil and Beauty—the demon and the divinity, two riddles linked by nothing, that create no order when taken together, but likewise provide no illumination when considered separately. Some force, though, commands us to set them together—not for comparison, not for our own amusement, not even for purposes of classification. We put them together in order to discover once more how different they are, and how paradoxically they place the magnetic poles of our age. And yet, standing face to face with this malicious sphinx, Herbert spoke in a pure, clear voice, clear as the glance of the stone in one of his most famous poems.

I offer these long excerpts as exemplary of Zagajewski's thought, the sources of his admiration for his contemporaries, but also as exemplary of his prose at its best, the art of which should not be passed over. Zagajewski is a master, both in poetry and prose, of that so innocently poetic (but now so suspect) creature—the simile. His talent is truly synthetic in the sense in which Shelley uses it in the *Defence of Poetry*. Their profusion in his work entails an occasional clunker (“the ‘mystery’ present in great artworks, hidden within them like an apple's core”), but more often we are amazed at an intelligence

2. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 24.

that discerns hidden correspondences and makes the *discordia* of experience reveal strange and beautiful harmonies. The result is often startling, strange, compelling imagery. A highlight reel: irony is “like the windows and doors without which our buildings would be solid monuments, not habitable spaces”; the “realm of general propositions” is “like the chaos of a barracks abandoned an hour earlier by a regiment out for spring training”; the “quotidian is like the surface of a peaceful, low-lying river, where delicate currents and eddies are etched, auguring rushes and floods that may or may not come to pass”; Jozef Czapski sitting on his couch is “bent like a penknife with his Gothic knees aloft”; “at night” the Garonne “turns gray like the eyes of vagrants”; Zbigniew Herbert’s “poems are like a suitcase upholstered in soft satin; but the suitcase holds instruments of torture.”

There are not Zagajewski the Prose Writer and Zagejewski the Poet—there is only Zagajewski. These essays are notable, as are his poems, for their personal, intimate tone; they are, finally, pre-eminently *human, alive*. One may disagree with certain of his judgments—that Nietzscheanism is “horrific in practical application” (what practical application is that?) and Christianity is preferable, for example—but such disagreements are minor and seem somewhat impertinent given Zagajewski’s general grace and good humor. In sum, these essays, like Montaigne’s or Emerson’s, are best read not for perfectly plotted arguments to be analyzed but for pearls of insight (thrown with abandon, unchary of swine) and for the portrait they offer of a particularly thoughtful person who has tried to live a good life in a dark century.



Zagajewski writes in his essay on Czeslaw Milosz that “as he enters the late stages of life he grows more and more obedient to the demands of memory, both personal and suprapersonal.” The same can be said of Zagajewski’s new book of poems *Unseen Hand*, his sixth book in English, translated from the Polish, as was *A Defense of Ardor*, by Clare Cavanagh. (Zagajewski and his English readers are lucky to have in Cavanagh a long devoted and, by all accounts, skilled translator.) The book is haunted, from the very first poem “New Hotel: Krakow,” by people and places that have been lost:

In February the poplars are even slimmer
than in summer, frozen through. My family
spread across the earth, beneath the earth,
in different countries, poems, paintings.

Many of these poems are about childhood and family—a piano lesson when he was eight; the home he grew up in; his father’s gradual loss of memory; his mother’s funeral. But even in the most intensely personal of these poems, Zagajewski keeps the demands of the suprapersonal in sight. He returns to the apartment where he used to visit his aunt and uncle, but “Now someone else lives in that apartment, / strange people, the scent of a strange life.” In his essay “Intellectual Krakow,” Zagajewski recounts being “outraged” by Edward Hirsch’s description of Krakow, in an interview with Wislawa Szymborska in *The New York Times Magazine*, as “proletarian and nondescript.” He goes on, with characteristic acumen, to analyze his response, realizing that Hirsch “had seen only what really existed,” whereas he, who knew the history, the people, the geography of Krakow so well, saw “the possibilities, the potentialities, the unfulfilled entelechies of this district.” This illuminates his description of the new hotel at the end of the poem:

A new hotel was built nearby,
 bright rooms, breakfasts doubtless comme il faut,
 juices, coffee, toast, glass, concrete,
 amnesia—and suddenly, I don’t know why,
 a moment of penetrating joy.

The movement from the bright rooms and the juices to the glass and the concrete, finally arriving, after a dramatic enjambment, at amnesia, followed immediately by an unsuspected moment of joy, is characteristic of Zagajewski’s method. Descriptions of the outer world, natural and social, are juxtaposed with the inner world of memory, of loss and pain or joy and pleasure, charging them with history and affect. The amnesia here is not located in the viewer of the hotel, but rather in the hotel itself, as deeply a part of its structure as the glass and concrete. It would be wrong to read the moment of penetrating joy as somehow causally related to the new hotel, an effect of amnesia induced by brightness and luxury. Zagajewski works not through causal relations, but primarily through juxtaposition and contiguity. Despite the agency often granted to the natural world through figural expression, the descriptions of nature somehow leave the impression of a separate world of time and relentless growth, change that will not stop for human contemplation or memory. The conclusion of “3 Arkonska Street: In Gliwice” is exemplary:

Chestnuts fell from the trees, shining and pure.
 Beyond the window, in the grass, in the microscopic garden,
 quizzical starlings hopped.

In the church tower, and the town hall tower, on the walls
of our apartments, in flat wristwatches,
time worked relentlessly;
it was ubiquitous—the secret police
were no match for it,
even thought couldn't keep up.

The natural in these poems sits starkly by, in sovereign unconcern, while human life struggles on and attempts to memorialize past struggles. Despite this unconcern, however—or perhaps because of it—the poems take on vaster attitudes.

Zagajewski is an ambitious poet; in an age when so many have abandoned the transcendent, or numinous, he seeks it constantly and tries to capture it in poems. This is what makes him something of a modern mystic (his 1997 volume of poetry was titled *Mysticism for Beginners*), but a mystic more in Bataille's sense of *l'expérience intérieure* than various religious mystical traditions. Mysticism is never programmatic, or even teleological, for Zagajewski—we are all always beginners, starting from scratch at every moment, waiting, hoping. Zagajewski is a sort of *bricoleur* of inner experience, using what is ready to hand in whatever ways seem necessary. He has acquired an impressive set of techniques for conveying this in his poems. One such technique, with deep roots in his poetry, might be called, to riff on Wallace Stevens, the catalogue that cannot be made commodious:

The black-and-white cat was called M.
Spain's stars spoke feverishly, but no one listened.
You're in an airplane, trapped in your seat, but with eyes open.
The continent shifts slowly, like a fan.
Perhaps Plotinus is among the passengers, a timid clerk.
I'll never see you again.
On the beach: a lazy ocean greets the earth and leaves at once.

These lines, from “Music of the Lower Spheres: I'm Walking Down Karmelicka Street,” sit uncomfortably next to one another, like people trapped in seats on an airplane, the dissonances deepened by the double-spacing. But the void between these lines, things, events, suggests something outside them, some medium—if only the void itself—in which they all partake and in which they are unified. It is this outside, this alterity, this transcendent condition-for-the-possibility-of, that is consistently felt in the poems—the unseen hand guiding them. It is the truth of inner experience. “Strawberry ice cream melts on the asphalt. // If I could only open my heart.” Logically there is an unbridgeable gulf between these two sentences that conclude

“Music of the Lower Spheres,” but the power of the poem is to make us *feel* not only that the gulf can be bridged, but that it *must be*.

Key to his technique as well is an impressive command, apparent even in translation, over prosodic tools like rhythm and refrain. Zagajewski recalls in *Two Cities* his enthusiasm for jazz improvisation, the “lyrical exaltation of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and even John Coltrane.” Many of his poems retain the sense of spontaneity felt in improvisation, the rhythms reflecting the moment’s flow of ecstatic emotion. In “I Look at a Photograph,” a poem about Lvov, Zagajewski’s Eden from which he has fallen and thus returns to again and again in thought and art, the rhythm and syntax capture the growing surge of feeling. It begins calmly, with description of the landscape and churches; but then memory raises the dead:

I gaze at the photograph, I can't tear my eyes away,
and suddenly I imagine that they're all still alive
as if nothing had happened, they still scurry to lectures,
wait for trains, take sky-blue trams,
check calendars with alarm, step on scales,
listen to Verdi's arias and their favorite operetta,
read newspapers that are still white,
live in haste, in fear, are always late,
are a bit immortal, but don't know it,
one's behind with the rent, another fears consumption,
a third can't finish his thesis on Kant,
doesn't understand what things are in themselves,
my grandmother still goes to Brzuchowice carrying
a cake on her outstretched arms and they don't droop,
in the pharmacy a shy boy requests a cure for shyness,
a girl examines her small breasts in a mirror,
my cousin goes to the park straight from his bath
and doesn't guess that soon he'll catch pneumonia,
enthusiasm erupts at times, in winter yellow lamps
create cozy circles, in July flies loudly celebrated
the summer's great light and hum twilit hymns,
pogroms occur, uprisings, deportations,
the cruel Wehrmacht in becoming uniforms,
the foul NKVD invades, red stars
promise friendship but signify betrayal,
but they don't see it, they almost don't see it,
they have so much to do, they need
to lay up coal for winter, find a good doctor,
the unanswered letters grow, the brown ink fades,
a radio plays in the room, their latest buy, but they're
still wearied by ordinary life and death,
they don't have time, they apologize,

they write long letters and laconic postcards,
 they're always late, hopelessly late,
 the same as us, exactly like us, like me.

A virtuosic out-pouring of language worthy of the Yardbird, exploding the parameters of the sentence, such lines are a welcome antidote to the stuttering and anti-anastrophic, compulsive parataxis of much contemporary poetry (and advertising).

If Zagajewski's method at times results in poems that seem a touch too formulaic, leaving the impression that they were produced out of habit rather than feeling, we forgive him because the successes are such resounding successes. One such success, in my view, is "Unwritten Elegy for Krakow's Jews," which I offer *in toto*.

But Joseph Street is the saddest, spare as a new moon,
 not a single tree though not without charm,
 the dark charm of a province, of parting, a quiet burial;
 in the evening shadows gather here from every neighborhood,
 and even some brought by trains from nearby towns.
 Joseph was the Lord's favorite, but his street knew no happiness,
 no pharaoh distinguished it, its dreams were sorrowful, its years were lean.

In the Church of Corpus Christi I lit candles for my dead,
 who live far off—I don't know where
 —and I sense they warm themselves in the red flame too,
 like the homeless by a fire when the first snow falls.
 I walk the paths of Kazimierz and think of those who are missing.
 I know that the eyes of the missing are like water and can't
 be seen—you can only drown in them.

To hear footsteps in the evening—and see no one.
 They walk on, although there's no one here, the tread of women in boots
 shod with iron, beside the hangman's quiet, almost tender steps.
 What is it? As if black memory moves
 above the city, like a comet withdrawing from the stratosphere.

I wish I had the space to fully discuss the skill, charm, and ethical power of this poem—the surgeon-precise dialectic of the opening lines, the dark strangeness of the metaphors and similes, the adroit formal and prosodic sensibility at work. "What sings is what stays silent," concludes an excellent poem called "Where the Breath Is" from *Without End*. When Zagajewski is at his best one is left with the conviction that the poems have been wrenched, with the utmost concentration and a great deal of pain, out of

a silence that seems their only proper abode. And even then they are but “the whisper of great poetry,” which is all there is of great poetry amidst the endless glossolalia and polyrhythmic noise of the modern world. The elegy is unwritten because no elegy can be written that would be sufficient. Such horror as that of the Holocaust would seem to condemn us to silence and impotence. “No one knew what to do, what to think” Zagajewski writes in “Next Spring.” Not content with amnesia, unwilling to wander the Asphodel fields of consumerist oblivion, unwilling either to succumb to the comfortable distance afforded by cynical irony, Zagajewski plunges himself into the abyss between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ left by the vast tragedies of the twentieth century, from which abyss he visits song upon us—song that makes us think, and think about what we should do.

Caveat lector: do not be fooled by Zagajewski’s studied and elegant simplicity. The poems can seem transparent at first, but reveal themselves to be as pleochroic as crystals upon rereading, revealing new insights and pleasures, surfaces that are, in fact, all depth. There are, in my opinion, only a few poems in *Unseen Hand* that rise to the level of greatness (I won’t shy away from the word) that Zagajewski has achieved in his best work—*Tremor* (1985) and *Canvas* (1991). This is not a criticism, but a commendation, for it is remarkable that he could continue to rise to that level at all. Zagajewski’s capaciousness, his omnivorousness for experience as well as art—apparent in his poems and his essays—makes both the products and the concerns of so many of his contemporaries, wizened by ideological or academic influences, seem provincial. A quiet voice in the overgrown wilderness of contemporary poetry, Zagajewski’s is one of the few indispensable voices of our time.