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Poetry and Existence: The Kingfishers of Adam Zagajewski and Gerard Manley Hopkins¹

Abstract: The article presents an interpretation of Adam Zagajewski's poem "The Kingfisher" from the 2014 volume *Asymmetry* in the context of Gerard Manley Hopkins's ["As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame"], whose initial words, cited in English, were used as the motto. The article reviews the motif of the kingfisher in poetry and culture. The possible readings of the poem also relate to the symbolism of colours and fire, through which its ontological and metapoetic senses are revealed.

Keywords: the motif/theme of kingfisher in poetry, poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the symbol of fire, colour in poetry, poetry of Adam Zagajewski

Before I embarked upon interpreting Adam Zagajewski's "The Kingfisher", I wrote the author for one commentary that struck me as pivotal.² When it came to this poem I had to be sure if behind the poetic description of the kingfisher lay an actual experience, or if the image was strictly textual in origin. The author assured me he had had two opportunities to observe a kingfisher in real life – for the first time in his youth as a student, in Poland, on the Dunajec, and the second time not so long ago, vacationing in Greece, on the shore. Asking this question seemed vital to me because the literary tradition tied to this small, multi-colored bird is long and involved, both in Poland and abroad.³ At its origins we find the mythological tale of Alcyone, whose transformation into a kingfisher is found, for one, in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.⁴ In modern times, literary critics' turn

¹ This is a slightly altered version of an article whose Polish original was published in *Międzyliteratura jako przestrzeń dialogu. Studia dedykowane pamięci Profesor Anny Pilch* [Interliterature as a Space for Dialogue. Studies dedicated to the memory of Professor Anna Pilch], eds. A. Włodarczyk, S. Borowicz, K. Wąwec, Krakow 2022, pp. 141–153.

² This interpretation of "The Kingfisher" is my last piece on Adam Zagajewski's poetry which the author had a chance to read. He passed away on March 21, 2021.

³ Cf. J. Paszek, "Ów halcyjon", *Teksty* 1972, no. 3, pp. 91–107.

⁴ On some ornithological and cultural points of interest concerning the kingfisher, see: M. Pióro, *Plamka mazurka*, Warszawa 2019, pp. 379–384.

toward animals encourages us to delve into the poetic reflections of the diversity of real bird species.⁵ Yet when it comes to this bird, it would be a mistake to confine ourselves to literary ornithology. The author's earlier poems featured black-birds, swifts, and swallows, and even ordinary sparrows. This time, through his motto, Zagajewski inserted his work on the kingfisher into the legible context of a poetic tradition.

"That halcyon..."

Making reference to an extra-textual reality, to observation, to real experience, does not rule out symbolic meaning in the work. This sort of capacity for double interpretive contexts was indicated many years ago by Jerzy Paszek with regard to an avian motif in Przyboś; Paszek also saw the image of the kingfisher in the broader context of "signs of nature" in his poetry.⁶ The present poem contains a record of an earlier experience, and an *expressis verbis* allusion to the earlier poet. Przyboś wrote:

that halcyon... Słowacki's bird,
the kingfisher...
[...]
fluttered off, sudden and fiery⁷

Przyboś phrases the avian epiphany in one word, "Exist!"⁸, urging us to live and have an individual creative consciousness. Here Paszek finds not only a trace of a direct allusion to Juliusz Słowacki, but also to Stefan Żeromski. Słowacki introduced an image comparing the angel kingfisher to a winter episode he appended to *Pan Tadeusz*. The colors and golden shine of the "halcyon" are signposts in this description. The bright colors, symbolically tied to fire, would seem the most enduring facet of the kingfisher *topos* in the poetries of various epochs and languages.

⁵ At the conference *Birds in Culture, Literature, and Art* (Urszulim, April 2019), Beata Ob-sulewicz gave a talk titled "The Halcyon and Literature: Some Initial Observations". See also: *Któr-y tak śpiewa? Ptaki w kulturze*, eds. J. Kornhauser et al., Kraków 2023.

⁶ J. Paszek, "Ów halcyjon", op. cit., pp. 92–93.

⁷ J. Przyboś, "Ów halcyjon" [in:] idem, *Utwory poetyckie*, Warszawa 1971, p. 113. Quoted in: J. Paszek, "Ów halcyjon", op. cit., p. 94.

⁸ Ibidem.

A Poetic Motto

Zagajewski's "The Kingfisher" is furnished with a brief motto from Gerard Manley Hopkins: "As kingfishers catch fire."⁹ The nature and presumed aim of placing an English-language quote here inclines us to reflect upon the role of the motto in Zagajewski's poetry and, more broadly, the role of the poetic motto as such.¹⁰ Ewa Sadzińska, a scholar of this topic in Russian poetry, discusses one suggestion of dividing this sort of paratext according to the following guideline:

Owing to the ambivalent nature of the motto ("my text vs. someone else's"), Kuzmina distinguishes between autonomous (as a completed fragment of a text) and metonymic mottoes. According to this concept, the first group includes proverbs, sayings, formulae, and aphorisms; the second is made up of quotes, taken as part of another text, representing it. In these types of mottos a universal dialogue function enacts itself differently: in the autonomous one we have a dialogue between the motto and the main text, in the metonymic version there are more complex ties between the source text, the motto, and the text in question.¹¹

Mindful of this division, in the case of "The Kingfisher" we are dealing with a metonymic motto. The very brief excerpt from the English poem represents the entirety of the work here, and in certain readings may even allude to the whole of Hopkins' *oeuvre*. In a narrow sense, the words pertain to the titular image – the kingfisher, shimmering with fiery colors. In the broader sense, they require interpretation in the light of the auto-referential point of the Polish work.

Before we explore this in more depth with regard to Zagajewski's work as a whole, we should turn our attention to the motto and epigraphs from *Asymmetry* – I am making a distinction here between poetry mottoes and brief notes preceding a work. The former generally serve poetic functions, while the latter point to the genesis of the poem, explaining something, often with reference to reality. In a volume from 2014, we find an epigraph over *Mandelstam in Feodosia* with key information about the titular poet, a motto from Elizabeth Bishop's *At the Fisherhouses* translated by Barańczak above "Northern Sea", and an English

⁹ My article was written parallel to an interpretation by Łukasz Tischner, in which an important context is another one of Hopkins's poems, *Windhover*. Cf. Ł. Tischner, "Zimorodek – nieomal sonet, nie całkiem teologia" [in:] *Religia i literatura: antologia tekstów*, ed. A. Głąb, Warszawa 2022, pp. 144–156.

¹⁰ Cf. E. Sadzińska, "Kategoria motta we współczesnym literaturoznawstwie", *Folia Litteraria Rossica* 2011, no. 4, pp. 131–141; H. Markiewicz, "Notatki do historii motta w literaturze polskiej" [in:] idem, *O cytatach i przypisach*, Kraków 2004, pp. 41–57; A. Kowalczykowa, "Motto" [in:] *Słownik literatury polskiej XIX wieku*, eds. J. Bachórz, A. Kowalczykowa, Wrocław 2002, pp. 576–579.

¹¹ E. Sadzińska, *Motta w twórczości romantyków rosyjskich. Ich rola w dialogu idei i poetyk*, Łódź 2011, p. 22, <https://dspace.uni.lodz.pl/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11089/1520/SADZIN-SKAmotta.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed: 28.12.2020.

motto – a quote from a poem by John Burnside that had not been translated into Polish over the poem “Childhood”.¹² Over the poem “Shelf”, in turn, between the dedication (which I will not be examining here) and the epigraph, we find some laconic information: *Jerzy Hordyński (1919–1998)*, a reference to a deceased poet.

Owing to its brevity and choice of language, the motto that supplies the metatext for “The Kingfisher” is thus most akin to the quote preceding “Childhood”, and further from the words of Elizabeth Bishop found over “Northern Sea”. Without drawing out our list of examples, we should bear in mind that mottoes and epigraphs appear only in the mature phase of Zagajewski’s poetry and basically operate in two ways – poetic mottoes, as in the present case, introduce a literary context vital to the author, ushering in an intertextual game with the source, while the epigraphs aim to bring in information from outside the poem that is vital to its understanding.

We should mention how Zagajewski uses the motto in poetry in terms of his concept of “another beauty,” and give thought to the conviction found in his work that poems are born of other poems. Here Hopkins joins the coterie of the poet’s “favorite poets.” Others have included: André Frenaud (quoted in Polish before “Three Kings”), Conrad Aiken, quoted in the original in the metatext for “Music Heard with You” from the *Antenna* volume, and Friedrich Hölderlin (the German quote is only marked F.H. above the poem in *The Invisible Hand*, with the musical refrain of “beautiful Garonna”).

Many of the epigraphs are worth contemplating individually – they are hints for the reader, pointing to historical events, the circumstances under which the poem was written, the people appearing in it; like these words from the poet’s private life: “*I ask my father: how do you spend all your days? Remembering*” in “In a Small Apartment” from the *Antenna* collection.

The King’s Fisher

Hopkins’s near-untranslatable poem, which begins “As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame...”¹³ was rendered by Barańczak as: “I ważek wartkie wrzenia, zimorodków zimne/ Ogień.”¹⁴ The Polish translation is here not quite faithful to the original poetic image, which, I believe, led Zagajewski to quote the English. Yet he quotes only the first phrase of Hopkins’s opening line, the part about kingfishers; the second part about dragonflies is unnecessary here. Nonetheless, we might dwell a moment on the first line of the poem as a whole. The motto gives Zagajewski’s “The Kingfisher” added meaning and a metapoetic dimension.

¹² Burnside’s piece was translated by Magdalena Wójcik during the course of my interpreting Zagajewski’s work, and was published in *Zeszyty Literackie* 2016, no. 4.

¹³ G.M. Hopkins, *Wybór poezji*, trans. S. Barańczak, Kraków 1981, p. 78.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

Gerard Manley Hopkins used the image of the kingfishers to tie into literary tradition, as other English-language poets did after him, including T.S. Eliot. Although this is a sonnet, the first stanza is not merely descriptive; kingfishers and dragonflies are parts of a general statement of a philosophical nature, which in turn leads to a theological reflection in the second stanza.

Zagajewski begins with a first-person past tense verb to confess an experience. This is confirmed by a personal recollection of a real visual experience of his, the spotting of a kingfisher (he says “I saw” and not “I watched”):

I saw how the kingfisher in flight just above the sea's surface,
[...]
exploded suddenly into every color, I saw how the world's wild light
seized its wings,¹⁵

As we already know, this poetic image was taken both from real experience and the words of another poet, from “another beauty” found in a poem of decades past.

The work's color scheme is closely tied to flashes of light – there is talk here of a “colorful explosion” created by the light. The “world's wild light” of Zagajewski's poem, especially if it is read through the poetry of Hopkins, turns out to be a “Heraclitean fire,”¹⁶ as in the title of his English predecessor's work.

A flame, so it seems, may also be
a shelter, a dwelling, in which
thoughts ignite but are not destroyed

These words were written by the author of such poems as the previous “Fire”, or the later (significantly doubled) “Fire, Fire”, with its reference to the image of fire in the mystic tradition of Christianity and the hermetic tradition:¹⁷ “the fire that burns less destroying/ than creating.”¹⁸

Dorothea Forstner reminds us: “Fire is the most vital element, the purest and most delicate.”¹⁹ When this fire symbolism is joined with the other elements, with water, earth, and air, quite naturally suggested in the poem through the image

¹⁵ A. Zagajewski, *Asymmetry*, trans. C. Cavanagh, New York 2018, p. 14. All quotes are taken from this edition.

¹⁶ G.M. Hopkins, *Wybór poezji*, op. cit., p. 95.

¹⁷ The “Ogień” entry in J.E. Cirlot, *Słownik symboli*, trans. I. Kania, Kraków 2000, p. 282. “Feu” [in:] J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, Paris 1982, p. 437.

¹⁸ A. Zagajewski, *Jechać do Lwowa i inne wiersze*, London 1985, p. 5.

¹⁹ D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, trans. W. Zakrzewska, P. Pachciarek, R. Turzyński, Warszawa 1990, p. 72.

of the “sea’s surface,” the kingfisher’s flight, the “rocky shore” and the nest in the earth, we have the full range of symbols.²⁰

Zagajewski defined poetry as “the search for radiance,” and not only in a one-time, metaphorical sense. Its contemplation takes its place in the old traditions of meditating on the meaning of the light and the flame. Pico della Mirandola’s words, quoted by Walter Pater, “The elementary *fire* burns, the celestial vivifies, the super-celestial loves,”²¹ help us understand that a hierarchy of sorts and vertical sequence of images existed in the past: the “low,” material (and in the case of humankind, corporeal) earthly fire was contrasted to the sublime spiritual fire. While this hierarchy can be found in the poetry of Hopkins, a Catholic convert and Jesuit from the late nineteenth century, we may doubt that it is present in the work of Zagajewski, one hundred years his junior.

Tomasz Bilczewski juxtaposes the work of Hopkins with the poetry of Norwid, who was his contemporary.²² The depth and gravity of the two 19th-century poets’ religious stances, their theological insight and aesthetics born of theology could not be recreated in the 20th century, nor especially in the 21st. The parallel Bilczewski suggests is between Hopkins’s “God’s Grandeur” and Norwid’s “Beauty” (“Piękno”), which is part of the *In Memory of Veitt Stoss Seven Aesthetic Sketches* cycle. Yet behind it lies something else: the ways in which Norwid and Hopkins contrast the low and high and then cull out the highest and purest virtues from what is discarded and seemingly degraded. The “starry diamond” hidden “beneath ashes” in the famous line from the drama *In the Wings* (*Za kulisami*) makes for astonishing comparison to Hopkins’s “immortal diamond” which, at a vital point in the important poem “That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire...,” turns out to be a man wrongly seen as “mortal trash.”²³ The logic of this sort of image in either poet flows straight from the same way of understanding the essence of Christian anthropology; in addition, a thought taken directly from the Gospels was contrasted in either author by their reflections on the prosaic and secularized epoch in which it was theirs to live.

The shine reflected by the colorful wings of the kingfisher in the Polish work and the flame of the same bird in the English poem have a great deal in common, but the most important thing is the differences in the poetic virtue of the words in either language. The symbol of the kingfisher in Hopkins must also be examined against the backdrop of the wealth of avian motifs in his poetry.²⁴

²⁰ M. Popczyk, “Ogień” [in:] *Estetyka czterech żywiołów*, ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Kraków 2002.

²¹ W. Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Berkeley 1980.

²² T. Bilczewski, *Porównanie i przekład. Komparatystyka między tablicą anatoma a laboratorium cyfrowym*, Kraków 2016.

²³ Ibidem, p. 267.

²⁴ L.E. Cohen, *The Kingfisher as a Symbol for Hopkins and Later Poets – Thomas Stearns Eliot, Charles Olson and Amy Clampitt*, 2009, http://www.gerardmanleyhopkins.org/lectures_2009/kingfisher_as_symbol.html, accessed: 28.12.2020.

According to etymological dictionaries, the English kingfisher is a “king’s fisher,”²⁵ while the Polish *zamorodek* evokes winter (*zima*) and (erroneously) the earth (*ziemia*), being born (*rodzi się*) in the winter and making its nest in the earth. The motto quoted in English links the piece’s avian protagonist with fire and fishing. Barańczak’s translation, seeking to salvage the alliteration of the original, sacrifices much, which is why the fire of the kingfishers is cold in Polish. This is not the case in Zagajewski’s “The Kingfisher”.

The King’s fisher for the King, who for Hopkins is Christ Himself, is not the same as the Fisher King from the Grail legend, yet the aura of the word, read metaphorically, ties in with the legible meanings of “fisher of souls,” the task of the apostles. It is worth mentioning that ties to Celtic mythology and fish imagery (salmon, to be precise) are possible here, as a symbol of wisdom. According to Irish legend, eating even small part of the “salmon of wisdom” could bestow the gift of poetry.

Dragonflies, in turn, have a connection with scales and levels in many European languages, including French and Polish (the Latin name, *Libellulae*, was introduced by Linnaeus). The reference is not to a true scale, obviously, but to a horizontal sort of flight and the ability to “weigh itself,” to hang in the air at a certain height. The English term, dragonfly, might sooner evoke fairy tales with flying dragons, as etymological legend insists.

A temptation emerges to conclude that both of Hopkins’s choices from the animal kingdom were made not only for their real environment, over the surface of water, a river or a lake, or for the significance of their colors – the bright and luminous kingfishers, the transparent and iridescent dragonflies – but also because of their names. When poetry restores the metaphorical potential of ordinary words, the avian protagonist emerges as a messenger and the King’s fisher, while the dragonflies, given their widely acknowledged symbolism, have certain demonic connotations. Another issue is the kind of flight. Its path is different every time – the vertical dive of the hunting kingfisher and the horizontal trajectories of the dragonflies. This is an analogy of sorts to the two kinds of movement in the subsequent poetic images – the vertical direction of the stone falling into the well and the pendulum motion of a bell, corresponding to the vectors of birds and dragonflies. In either case, the horizontal and vertical reach their point of intersection mid-poem. As such, we might adhere to a highly tempting interpretation that this is the image of a cross drawn in space, which in Hopkins, as in Norwid, “stands at the gate,” opening the poetic horizon and allowing a metaphysical perspective to emerge.

The opposition between the two sorts of flying creatures is not developed further in Hopkins’s piece; the same words are juggled in a poetic game of meanings. The difference between the short words that abound in the poem and the

²⁵ “Originally *king’s fisher*, for obscure reasons.” <https://www.etymonline.com/word/kingfisher>, accessed: 28.12.2020.

two nouns singled out in the first stanza, which draw our attention, is an added source of lyrical power.

Pied Beauty

The title of another poem by Hopkins, “Pied Beauty”, would seem to make it suitable fodder for our interpretation of “The Kingfisher”. This piece extols the diversity of the world. The bright colors of fire are vital here, but above all, meanings connected to the wealth of colors that signifies the diversity of what we see. In Hopkins, elements on display in “Pied Beauty” are a kind of affirmation of the colorful diversity of creation. The first line reads: “Glory be to God for dappled things –.”²⁶ We read:

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.²⁷

This inspiration is also to be found in Zagajewski’s “The Kingfisher”; while Hopkins places unequivocal stress on the divine source of earthly beauty, the concept of beauty of the later poet more belongs to the realm of aesthetics than theology. This important difference notwithstanding, the praise of “excessive” beauty, of perfection of colors and precision of flight concentrated in the tiny kingfisher also has its metaphysical dimension in Zagajewski’s poem.

Hopkins’s poem evoked in the motto closes with a theological conclusion, for which the examples from the first stanzas were poetic arguments of sorts. The first strophe of the sonnet ended with a statement pertaining to the hidden meaning of reality:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*²⁸

These words lead further, to a Christian interpretation of the existence contained in the second stanza. The light of Christ pierces all of creation and above all, emanates from “human faces”:

²⁶ G.M. Hopkins, *Wybór poezji*, op. cit., p. 58.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

[...] For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his

Heraclitean Fire: Poetry and Fullness

A while back, in a work called “Lava”, Adam Zagajewski pondered the possibility of reconciling Heraclitus and Parmenides, but in “The Kingfisher” he has clearly chosen Heraclitus. In the visible world, Hopkins saw the greatness and splendor of God. Studying the Presocratics, Hopkins considered the ideas of Parmenides,²⁹ while in one of his famous poems he states that “nature is a Heraclitean fire.”

The analogy between the beauty of the kingfisher and the perfection of the sonnet makes us recall Hopkins once again, and the leap performed between the first and second stanza. Through its bipartite composition, Zagajewski’s poem alludes to the sonnet structure, but is not a sonnet itself. Its conclusion states that aforementioned fire could be:

a mighty oxymoron,
sometimes a poem too,
almost a sonnet.

The element prevailing in the poem – fire – is the Heraclitean principle of existence here. A visible sign of this sort of fire, one which burns but does not destroy, is the kingfisher. This bird is a living oxymoron, the incarnation of contradictions, among them constancy and change. At the same time, through its connections with the other elements, earth, water, and air, the bird naturally becomes a symbol of fullness. The four elements find their reflection in the poem. Earth, for instance, is represented by:

[...] this iridescent bullet safely strikes
the rocky shore, the nest that’s hidden there;

In another poem from the *Asymmetry* volume, the author suggests that “poets are Pre-socratics,”³⁰ giving us to understand that poetry may be closer to archaic thought and meditation than contemporary philosophy.

Zagajewski’s poetic epiphany has a deeper layer in the author’s experience, real and textual, connected to his reading experience which he shares with his

²⁹ T. Mizuno, *The Unity of the One and the Many: Tracing the Genealogy of the Dappledness in Hopkins*, <http://www.aogaku-daku.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Mizuno2015.pdf>, accessed: 28.12.2020.

³⁰ Cf. A. Zagajewski, *Asymetria*, Kraków 2014, p. 11.

reader. His poem speaks of the intensity of real moments, but mainly concerns what poetry and art can do with them. As such, “The Kingfisher” works as Zagajewski’s metapoetic reflection.

“The Kingfisher” is a poem that speaks both about the reality that surrounds us and, owing to the epigraph from Gerard Manley Hopkins, about poetry and its essence. One thing is certain – regardless of the significance the motto brings in, the interpretation of this work cannot be closed. It is only when it is juxtaposed with the English poem of the 19th century, in its entirety, not only the words cited directly, that we note and appreciate the meaning of this intertextual game. The stakes in this game are poetry itself.

Hopkins’s sonnet is a confession of faith, or, as in Newman, a “conviction of faith” in the purpose and meaning of the world. Zagajewski’s poem declares that it is poetry that makes the things we have seen, as well as those we do not know at all, attain a fullness of existence.

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