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Radiance and Wonder: Reflections on Adam Zagajewski

Abstract: In his poems and essays, Adam Zagajewski often described the work of poetry as discovering and giving expression to the "radiance" of the world. I argue that Zagajewski's conception of poetry has much in common with Plato's idea that philosophy begins in wondering. I further argue that in both cases, our confidence in the veridicality of wonder depends on our ability to share in wondering with another person, and I suggest that we can see this dynamic in several of Zagajewski's poems about listening to music.

Keywords: philosophical wonder, Plato, poetic experience, dialogue

Poetry searches for radiance,
poetry is the kingly road
that leads us farthest.
[...]

Let me see, I ask.
Let me persist, I say.
A cold rain falls at night.
In the streets and avenue of my city
quiet darkness is hard at work.
Poetry searches for radiance.

(from *Poetry Searches for Radiance*)[1]

[1] This poem and the others quoted in this essay are taken from: A. Zagajewski, *Eternal Enemies*, trans. C. Cavanagh, New York 2008.

1

Adam Zagajewski believed the poet's vocation to be a life of searching for and expressing the mystery of what he called 'inner reality'. It is a recurring topic in his poems and also in his prose writings. According to him, there is a certain fullness of life, a fullness that always gurgles beneath the surface of the ordinary, but whose richness and beauty are often ignored or covered in ugliness.[2] The poet works within the moment to search this beauty out. It is hard work. But when he finds and articulates that radiance, it offers a transcendent experience of wonder.

It is crucial to Adam's conception that poetic wonder is an encounter with the actual. To quote his marvelous phrase (in connection with Milosz), the poet's "mystical appetite...feeds on the yeast of reality."[3] The poet searches for and articulates an *inner* reality, but this is the activity of a subject who is attuned to a larger world and perceiving it correctly.

My own area of scholarly study is ancient Greek philosophy. So I can't help but notice that this idea – that wonder relates us to something actual – is an ancient one. The Greek verb translated as "wonder" – *thaumadzein* – is used by Homer as a verb of perception. And perception is veridical, by which I mean that it purports to be an encounter with something that is present to you, the spectator. If what you see isn't there, you haven't really had the experience of seeing at all. *Thaumadzein*, wondering, is like that in Homer. It is not simply a subjective experience of agitation. It is an activity of heightened perceptual attention, involving a relationship to reality – the person who *thaumadzei*-s sees something that blazes with uncanny radiance and *is* a wonder to behold.[4]

Of course, wondering is not just any ordinary kind of seeing. The people who wonder in Homer's epics are heroes – for example, Achilles, Priam. When they see a wonder, it is an actualization of their heroic potential. Even lesser characters who wonder – Anchises, Telemachus – are enlarged, because in wondering, they have been favored with a vision of the divine at work in the world. This is, I think, central to Adam's conception of poetic wonder, too: "close observation

[2] Arguing against Todorov's conception of the quotidian: "...the quotidian, too, is beautiful. But it is beautiful not least because we sense in it the quiet quivering of potential events, enigmatic, heroic, exceptional events. 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. (...) A notion of the quotidian that omits all possibility of heroism and saintliness – the shiver of a tragedy still distant – is flat and monotonous. Moreover, it is not true to life, and hence cannot form the ontological basis for a persuasive aesthetics." (A. Zagajewski, "The Shabby and the Sublime" [in:] idem, *A Defense of Ardor*, trans. C. Cavanagh, New York 2004, p. 32)

[3] A. Zagajewski, *Slight Exaggeration*, trans. C. Cavanagh, New York 2011, p. 8.

[4] See: R. Prier, *Thauma idesthai: The Phenomenology of Sight and Appearance in Archaic Greek*, Tallahassee 1989; C. Hunzinger, "La perception du merveilleux: θαυμάζω et θηέομαι" [in:] *Études sur la vision dans l'antiquité classique*, ed. L. Villard, Rouen 2005. For discussion of the fundamental importance of wonder as an aesthetic reaction, see: R. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, Chicago 2010.

of the things of this world with the imagination's eye" nourishes the spiritual life in ourselves.[5] When poetry finds and articulates the radiance it seeks, what it perceives transcends ordinary life and ennobles it.

2

We live in an age that both longs for wonder and looks on every putative experience of awe with suspicion. This bothered Adam. He chides

> ...those writers
> who sometimes bother you:
> some so modest, minimal,
> and underread,
> that you want to call out—
> hey, friends, courage
> life is beautiful,
> the world is rich and full of history.
>
> (*Self-Portrait, Not Without Doubts*)

And yet he was not immune to doubting his own experiences of wonder:

> [W]e can't know if our enthusiasm actually corresponds to anything in reality, in the world's structure, even though in moments of exaltation we're absolutely convinced this is so, and even the next day we're still sure we're right. In a week or two, though, doubts may begin to appear.[6]

Our modern suspicion of wonder mirrors a shift in the semantic reference of the verb, *to wonder*. I said before that in Homer's usage, "to wonder" is a verb of perception. But nowadays, its reference has shifted to the subjective quality, the what-it-would-feel-like to see something wonderful. We no longer hear "wonder" as Homer did, as a verb that essentially refers to a form of "truthing" (to use Aristotle's term, *alētheuein*, e.g., *De Anima* III.3 4283–5, where he lists perception alongside *doxa*, *epistēmē*, and *nous* as a capacity by which "we truth."). Under these circumstances, professions of transformative wonder tend to come across as fake, wishful, reactionary, a strategy of evasion.

Is there anything we might do about this problem? Is it too late to increase our confidence in wonder as an aspiration for serious, truthful people?

[5] A. Zagajewski, "Against Poetry" [in:] idem, *A Defense of Ardor*, p. 137.
[6] Ibidem, p. 130.

This is an anxiety that hits close to home for me. I study ancient Greek philosophy, but in particular I am fascinated by the idea of the *kalon*: a term variously translated as 'beautiful,' 'noble,' 'fine,' or just plain 'good.' Aristotle said that the virtuous person loves the splendor of virtuous actions like a lover of music loves beautiful melodies (*Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9 1170a8–10).[7] Is this an idea that can have any real significance for us?

My interest in the viability of wonder extends beyond whether to accept any particular idea of Aristotle's as true, however. It implicates our conception of philosophy and the practice of the history of philosophy. For as Plato's Socrates first said and as Aristotle agreed, philosophizing begins in wondering (*Theaetetus* 155d; *Metaphysics* I.2 982b12–14). Poetic epiphany may at first seem to be a very different matter from the sort of wonder in which philosophy begins. Philosophical wonder, at least as Plato portrays it, is a response to being refuted. Some people get angry when they are refuted. But others – like Socrates and Theaetetus – become dizzy with wondering (*Theaetetus* 155 c–d). Wonder like this is a case of *not* knowing and of knowing that you don't know, a condition of *aporia*, puzzlement necessary for the desire to seek an answer.

It may appear as if philosophical wonder is as different as can be from the poet's revelation of beauty. And yet for all their differences – and I do think there are differences between poetic and philosophical wonder – I suspect that Plato and Adam would be equally impressed by their similarities. When Plato writes that philosophy begins in wondering, part of his point is that for a philosophically minded person, the experience of refutation can be an epiphany. In finding that what we think, that our entire way of framing a problem *cannot* be correct, our minds press up against the actuality of a world that exists independently of our particular experience of it. We "look at" (*blepōn*, *Theaetetus* 155c) our beliefs about some topic and see with amazement the *necessity* of their mutual incompatibility (*Symposium* 200b). That is to say, what makes a philosophical *aporia* wonderful for those capable of wondering in it, is precisely that it is a moment of intuition of a world that transcends oneself.[8] So according to Plato, at least, philosophical wondering occasioned by *aporia* is, like poetic wonder, an intuition of the sublime.

To say that the philosopher's wonder is an intuition of the sublime is not to imply that he understands what he sees. Wondering may be a veridical experience even if its object is not clearly or fully in view. Indeed, it is precisely because Plato's and Aristotle's philosopher does not know, and now realizes that he does not

[7] Note that in this passage Aristotle argues that the virtuous person's pleasure in virtuous action is enhanced by "perceiving-with" a friend, something which arises "in living together and sharing discussion (*logōn*) and thought" (1170b10–12). This idea that the aesthetic experience is shared is one to which we will return.

[8] And precisely because we do experience the resistance of reality, precisely because we perceive that the space of possibilities differs from our subjective thoughts about it, we take courage and hope that we can change our thoughts so as to find a way out of our ignorance and into to understanding.

know, that wondering prompts further investigation and therefore serves as a philosophical beginning. I suspect that Adam felt a kinship with the not-knowing of philosophical wonder. Poetic wonder is a matter of vision, but it does not master its subject, simply because its subject is the transcendent vastness of life itself and we are finite. Adam writes of the artist, Jozef Czapski, "He was the master of my not-knowing. And what is not-knowing but thought?"[9] Still, even though philosophical wonder is occasioned by perplexity and so involves ignorance, it nevertheless contains resources within itself for taking the next step. The intimation of the structure of reality orients his search; and because it is a real structure, it is important. The philosophical wonderer is hopeful that he will learn (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1371a31–33) and that what he learns will be worth knowing.

Anxiety about the truthfulness of transformative wonder strikes the heart of this conception of philosophy. By extension, it strikes at the heart of a certain conception of the history of philosophy. With great effort we try to participate in a train of thought articulated in the distant past and, sometimes, it seems that the world we were all along thinking about suddenly comes into focus, as if we have been given a new pair of glasses. For the person who is skeptical about wonder, however, the feeling of elation is soon followed by the gnawing doubt: perhaps this sense of illumination is all an illusion?

3

Often, especially in his essays, Adam describes poetic wonder as a solitary experience. Even when the poet is in public, sitting on a bus for example, the vision his poem expresses is unique to him. Likewise, Adam frequently associates poetry with "the inner life" and warns that "it must be concealed, it can't be flaunted in public" lest it become "a narcissistic clown."[10] Solitude befits the heroic (or saintly) conception of wondering. It occurs to me, though, that the solitariness of this ideal is part of the problem. How can we trust the solitary wonderer? Kant teaches us that objective experience – the sort of experience that is of genuine objects – has universal validity. One sure sign that what you are seeing is real, therefore, is that other people can see it too. So if poetic wonder is essentially a solitary affair, an experience that singles out and elevates a person above others, it seems to me unavoidable that it will be doubted, at least in our modern skeptical age.

I am struck, though, that Adam's own poems sometimes put on display a different, more convivial picture of wonder. The poems I have in mind are all about listening to music. Here is one:

[9] A. Zagajewski, "Toil and Flame" [in:] idem, *A Defense of Ardor*, op. cit., p. 97.
[10] Idem, "Against Poetry" [in:] idem, *A Defense of Ardor*, op. cit., p. 138.

"Music Heard"

Music heard with you
was more than music
and the blood that flowed through our arteries
was more than blood
and the joy we felt
was genuine
and if there is anyone to thank,
I thank him now,
before it grows too late
[...]

Here, the poet is enveloped in the beauty of music *with* another person. That is to say, two people observe a third beautiful event.[11] And the fact that this experience is shared seems to be precisely what makes it possible for them to achieve such heights of awe: the music the poet hears with "you" – I will call this other person "her" – this music is *more* than music; she and the poet become somehow more than themselves – "the blood that flowed through [their] arteries was more than blood"; and – most important – their shared joy is "genuine."

It is not easy to articulate what is involved in sharing an experience. It is not simply a matter of both people being in the same place, each person awestruck side by side. Even if we stipulate that I notice that you are enthralled by the music and that you notice that I am enthralled and that each of us notices that the other notices...none of this will quite make it the case that *we* hear the music *together*. You can see Adam register this point in the shift of pronouns: when he talks about listening to music, it is the first person plural – *our* arteries, the joy *we* felt – but then he shifts to the first person singular to express his gratitude – "if there is anyone to thank,/ *I* thank him now". She, the other person, may be expressing gratitude too, but that doesn't make it the case that they offer thanks together.

This is a good place to observe that *shared* wonder is not the same as *collective* wonder. This is important, I think, because if there is anything more dubious than the ecstasies of the solitary, wondering hero it is the euphoria of the crowd. The crowd is not really a "we": it pretends to be an 'I' writ large – the sense of power and the intensity of the gratification that derive from being part of it depend on the thought that it is quantitatively larger than an individual person, but similarly single-minded in its focus. And so the crowd's form of unity depends on suppressing the differentiation necessary for genuine plurality. The existence

[11] Of course, the "beautiful event" in question here is itself the action of a human being, or group of human beings. The question of whether the performer is also party to the wondering-together which I focus on here is difficult and one I will leave aside for now. I will also leave aside the third person invoked by the poet, the possible recipient of his thanks.

within the group of a different point of view on the present or memory of the past are a threat to the simplicity of its sheer size. Joining the crowd therefore requires a willing suspension of individual responsibility for determining what precisely is true and how exactly to articulate it. Of course, there is no one else taking responsibility either; the crowd merely *pretends* to be a subject capable of thinking, demanding, and loving. By contrast, partners in shared wonder maintain their individuality. Adam shows this too, in another poem:

"Music Heard with You"

Music heard with you
will stay with us always.

Grave Brahms and elegiac Schubert,
a few songs, Chopin's fourth ballad,

a few quartets with heart-
breaking chords (Beethoven, adagia),

the sadness of Shostakovich, who
didn't want to die.

The great choruses of Bach's Passions,
as if someone had summoned us,

demanding joy,
pure and impartial,

joy in which faith
is self-evident.

[...]

A black woman singing blues
ran through us like shining steel,

though it reached us on the street
of an ugly, dirty town.

Mahler's endless marches,
the trumpet's voice that opens the Fifth Symphony

and the first part of the Ninth
(you sometimes called him "malheur!").

Mozart's despair in the Requiem,
his buoyant piano concertos—

you hummed them better than I did,
but we both know that.

Music heard with you
will grow still with us.

Notice that the first-person plural pronoun is everywhere – the effects of the music are effects it has on the poet and her together. And yet, he and she contribute differently to this shared experience. "You hummed [the piano concertos] better than I did,/ but we both know that." And she is the one who puns on Mahler's name: Mahler/malheur. They hear the music together, but participate in it differently, as the distinct people they are.

This unity of subjects who maintain their differentiated individuality is present also in a conversation. And so it strikes me that in this poem we hear echoes of all the talking the poet and she have done: the catalogue of favorite composers each qualified, they agree, by a certain mood; the blues song forever evoking the memory of standing together in the street of an ugly, dirty town; the pun. The poet speaks for himself, but the short, definitive phrases with which he addresses "you" suggest that he expects her agreement because he is reminding her of things they have said before. I have said that in Adam's poems we see a model of wondering in the beauty of the world that is shared with another person. What I am now suggesting is that conversation is what makes shared perception and wonder possible. This is true for philosophical wondering, too. However, philosophical dialectic aims ultimately at joint assertion. The conversations involved in shared poetic wondering seem to function differently.

For example, I am struck by this pun: Mahler/malheur. Awe does not usually lend itself to humor. The joke interrupts the radiance. But – amazingly – this need not be the case when we share wonder with another person. This is important. Adam often points out in his essays that we ordinary people who long for the vision of beauty and sometimes achieve it, we are imperfect; we cannot manage for long to see that radiance before we get hungry or sleepy. It is an absurd condition and might well lead to self-loathing. What I love about this pun is that in making a little joke – about heart-wrenching pathos no less – the "you" in this poem is able to expose her distance from the intense passion of the music *without destroying the moment*. On the contrary, it is remembered by the poet as part of the sublime experience. This freedom of playfulness is precious. It is the opportunity to be elevated by awe while at the same time acknowledging the totality of oneself, including the parts that are not fully absorbed in the beautiful and the good. I do not think this would be possible without the presence of the other

person. While she puns on Mahler's name, he safeguards the knowledge that she *does* hear the music, that she *is* made beautiful by its beauty.

I would like to speak of another dimension of shared wonder, also revealed in Adam's poems about music. I said before that nowadays it is difficult to have faith in the experience of wonder. I think this is in part because, whatever the ultimate truth, the world presses in on us with its own insistent fantasy of emptiness. There is nothing wonderful about it. If there is a dichotomy between our daily lives and the object of wonder, this will tend to undermine faith in the veridicality of wonder. What I would like to observe, however, is that in Adam's poems listening to music with her infuses it into everyday reality so that it takes on some of its tangibility, so to speak. Consider for example the following:

"Music in the Car"

Music heard with you
at home or in the car
or even while strolling,
didn't always sound as pristine
as piano tuners might wish—
it was sometimes mixed with voices
full of fear and pain,
[...]
was more than music,
it was our living
and our dying.

Once again the poet refers to an experience of music that is shared with "you." At first, it seems that the material circumstances required for an experience to be shared (that they be in some prosaic, even ugly place like the car) diminishes its beauty. Ideal music as imagined by the piano tuners is somehow opposed to the ordinary world of driving to the grocery store or walking down the street, a resplendent harmony in a Platonic heaven that cannot be fully embodied and so which we are not sure we can believe in, even if in imagination we sometimes think we can hear it. By the end of the poem, however, it is the ordinary which gives vitality to music. When music is heard in the concrete circumstances of our lives – when it is hummed, commented upon, associated in memory with specific events and people – it becomes "mixed with voices/ full of fear and pain." This is not a diminishment, though. Precisely because it is manifested in our finite lives with others, this music now gives voice to the marvelous "inner reality" of particular, real people.

In his essays Adam tended to juxtapose solitary inspiration and public proclamation. But in his poems about music he shows us that there is another possibility: we can read a poem together with a small group of friends, allow it to hover

in the air between us; then we can begin to speak of what we see and hear in it, playing with its images and finding more together than we would have on our own. The voices of our friends, their faces, thereby are woven into our wondering experience, helping us to hold it and them in memory thereafter.

I was fortunate to be taught this truth by Adam not only in the poems he wrote, but in his reading of poems with my husband and me and another friend, in the years he was visiting Chicago and the Committee on Social Thought. We would invite him for dinner and he would bring one of his favorite poems. He would read the poem in his slow, quietly ardent voice, reading it in Polish or French first if necessary and then in translation. He would tell us a bit about the poet's life. Then the rest of us, sometimes hesitant at first, would begin to talk about the poem and what it seemed to us to be saying and doing. Adam rarely ventured an opinion verbally, but the subtle expressions on his face communicated volumes: a skeptically-raised eyebrow; a lively look; a smile. For me, those evenings were magical and the poems we read together now conjure for me the memory of his – perhaps not quite hopeful, but *watchful* – presence. It seems to me that when wonder is like this, it is less susceptible to doubt.

4

I mentioned before that in Homer the person who wonders is a hero and that often his wondering sets him apart, alone. In closing, I will point out that there are other heroic ideals. In the *Iliad* there is a moment when Agamemnon and Nestor try to goad one of the Greek heroes into volunteering to spy on the Trojans. Diomedes is keen and immediately volunteers. We might expect him to set off on his own. He is willing to go on his own, it is clear. But instead he turns to Odysseus and asks him to come with him, saying "when two go together, one sees before the other." It is a line that Socrates loved to quote. And then Diomedes and Odysseus run off into the darkness, together. The hero of wonder does not need to go it alone.

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