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Zagajewski's Reflections on the Interior

Abstract: The text asks the question about Adam Zagajewski's understanding of the interior space of one's home. Guided by his post-memory, Zagajewski describes a coping mechanism based on withdrawal into one's place and its interiority that was construed by the Poles resettled from former Polish territories in the East as a cover protecting the traumatized selves and their memorabilia from the new, unacceptable reality. Such a protective etui created by the four walls of one's room was during communism a site of collecting and even hoarding broken things. Obsessive collecting lead to the destruction of even a modicum of comfort and the optic perspective in the over-crowded rooms. The consequence of these two processes of interiorization allows the author to refute the notion that Zagajewski was an aesthete.

Keywords: interior, things, objects, denial, withdrawal, perspective, optic ideology

Edgar Allan Poe's essay "The Philosophy of Furniture" is a treatise about interior decoration that offers a vision of a "small and not ostentatious chamber" in which "no fault can be found."[1] He construed this fantasy of a perfect room, whose elegant walls protected its slumbering inhabitant from an intrusive outside world, as a total artwork. The rarified aura of the place, where each item is exquisite, brings to mind the ultimate aestheticism embodied in the interiors described in *À Rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysmans. Such an interior readily assumes the status of an impossible object of desire, at least for Poe and his expensive sense of taste, since the dozing proprietor of this domestic sanctum that shields him is, for the moment, not conscious of his good fortune, and political threats such as an intrusion upon his space by the proletarian collective are kept at bay.

Poe's "The Philosophy of Furniture" serves as a contrasting foil to my ruminations on Adam Zagajewski's distrust of any artificial paradise, even the one Vermeer created in his painting, *View of Delft*. Zagajewski's historical awareness abolishes such aesthetic dreams, although some of his critics never felt persuaded by the argument and perceived him as an aesthete. The question that I would like to address is not how Zagajewski textualizes a domestic interior after Poe and

[1] E.A. Poe, "The Philosophy of Furniture" [in:] *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York 1903, vol. 5, p. 15.

other visionary aesthetes, but how he does it after the tumultuous experiences of WWII and, subsequently, during communism. In the Polish poet's essays such an interior appears as a representational enclave organically linked to its post-traumatic subject-dweller. This subject-dweller has one prominent characteristic: he or she is from Lwów, now the Ukrainian city of Lviv, and is a member of the species we see dispersed throughout Zagajewski's essayistic books, the "Lwowianie."[2] By the fact of his birth there, he counts as one of them.

These deeply disturbed people sought shelter, solace, and stability in the protected interiors of their homes. Everything outside belonged to the unfamiliar, unacceptable exterior. The succinct descriptions of Lwów citizens are generalized, like old group photographs. These verbal snapshots are a part of Zagajewski's reflection on the massive movement of Polish populations from the former eastern Polish territories to the former eastern German territories that occurred after WWII. These glimpses are interwoven with vignettes of people who are more familiar or even closely related to the author: his uncles, aunts, and parents, each of whom represented their respective generation's material culture, largely the prewar one. Suits, ties, hats, jewellery, all outdated and worn in silent determination; desks, tables, armchairs, mirrors, folk artifacts brought from Lwów to Gliwice, and discarded there, gradually turned into relics like their owners.

Zagajewski registered some of the relocated shreds of the Polish Atlantis in his nonlinear effort at partial recovery. As a post-memoirist, he is only re-collecting fragments of those displaced individuals who keep themselves busy with recollecting their lost love-object Lwów. His mediation conveys a distorted image of loss, purified of direct experience and grounded in distance. Praised by Ryszard Nycz for his self-awareness,[3] Zagajewski attempts to recover from oblivion the precious little he can, knowing nevertheless that intergenerational shift from memory to post-memory accidentally preserved layers of time within the original remembrance. If he employs the reflective type of melancholy, it is not from his perspective on the world of his parents and other Lwów denizens but his own.

The rooms that his relatives inhabit manifest the defamiliarizing effects of a catastrophic time. The things brought from comfortable Lwów homes he juxtaposes with those of contemporary times to show the fissures opening between their origins in the city's lost realm and the outer space of the built environment of German prewar architecture in Gleiwitz.[4] Zagajewski indicates how an involuntary, necessity-driven montage is assembled from everyday Polish and German objects, some as déclassé as their owners, some neutral. In terms of their scope,

[2] A. Zagajewski, *Two Cities: On Exile, History, and the Imagination*, trans. L. Vallee, New York 1995. Zagajewski's translator Lillian Vallee uses yet another form (Lvov), but it is hardly an indication of her predilection since Polish diacritics do not appear anywhere in the volume.

[3] R. Nycz, "'Every One of Us Is a Stranger': Patterns of Identity in Twentieth Century Polish Literature" [in:] *Framing the Polish Home: Postwar Cultural Constructions of Hearth, Nation, and Self*, ed. B. Shallcross, Athens 2002, p. 22.

[4] A town now part of Poland and called Gliwice.

he narrows them to the principle of metonymy that deindividualizes the objectual portrayals. He engages a reflective type of melancholy not from his family's perspective but his own.

In one close-up, one of the author's aunts, whom he singled out for a more elaborate snapshot, has a whole collection of such things at her disposal – a constellation composed of a fragmented, materially conveyed past. She lives in that past, reluctant to leave her room, exemplifying an alienation framed by the walls of the room that is, despite it all, her own. Zagajewski in this case acts like the curator of sorts of his old aunt's modest possessions.

> [...] she occupied herself by endlessly examining her maidenly treasures, brought from Lwów, of course. Among them were patterned fans, delicate women's penknives inlaid with mother-of-pearl, postcards from Karlsbad and Abazzia, [...] pocket watches which had stopped their march half a century ago, stale perfumes in cut-glass bottles, slender metal pencils that no longer wrote and fine notepads without the pads.[5]

Alone in her small bedroom, she is immersed in a post-traumatic trance of reminiscing, her half-contemplative and half-absent stare tenderly taking in her voided keepsakes as she gradually becomes like them. Her souvenirs and other symbolic vestiges narrate the ruptured past; they speak of impermanence, but they also induce a melancholy bond that diminishes Aunt Wisia's sensitivity to loss and pain. This approach reminds the reader of Balzac's novels, where his archaeology of furniture evokes turbulent French history through impoverished interiors – worn out upholstery or outmoded wallpaper. Through Zagajewski's writing, ossified particles of material past undergo further transformation, which distances them from their provenance and renders them as defunct and fractured vestiges, represented in the midpoint of their journey from usefulness to a total deterioration that denies them any possibility of return.

A total withdrawal from reality into one's interiority is often paralleled by a withdrawal into one's apartment; both gestures of radical disavowal are practiced by several of Zagajewski's subjects: "One neighbor who lived on the floor below hated the communists so much that he did not leave his dwelling at all. Sometimes he appeared in the court in blue pajamas. He also had come from Lwów. He belonged to the radical wing of transplants and refused all contact with the new world."[6] His was a particularly acute denial of reality, extended into a permanent wish to live in his pajamas; behind this wish seems to lurk a subconscious desire not to be awakened and to sleep forever in the pajamas of soothing color. In a similar fashion, Zagajewski's aristocratic landlady during his college years in Kraków, Mrs. C., had a policy "not to appear, to leave the parlor that was also her bedroom

[5] A. Zagajewski, *Two Cities...*, op. cit., p. 49.
[6] Ibidem, p. 25.

as seldom as possible."[7] Both individuals seem to reveal a brutally disrupted unconscious that they attempted to suture through the eccentric therapeutic measure of staying within the most private of their surroundings. Withdrawal into the interior of one's bedroom was the means of survival, yet the closeness with objects did not open the former denizens of Lwów to their hidden lives. "They did not realize that human life and objects and trees vibrate with mysterious meaning which can be deciphered like cuneiform writing."[8] Oblivious to the mystery of things, they slowly slipped into passive unawareness and inactive slumber.

The price of historical awakening through extreme dispossession, which was paid not only by displaced Poles during and after the war, was higher than Benjamin could have ever envisioned in his *Arcades* project. Yet what woke them, only to goad them to seek a second slumber, was not exactly the kind of proletarian revolution that Benjamin hoped would occur but military operations that succeeded in opening space for the communist regime's convoluted bureaucratic decisions, all executed under Western eyes.

Beyond the exilic discourse, but overlapping with some of its tropes, Zagajewski construes a series of small rooms in the apartments that the Polish People's Republic assigned to its citizens. Such impossibly crowded rooms had their national versions and names across the USSR and its other satellite countries. Zagajewski first included them within his scopic horizon in his autobiographical works. He recalled relatives' apartments filled to the ceiling with junk as well as their multifunctional furniture that defied, to put it somewhat ironically, perspectivalism.

Pierre Francastel convincingly argues that a connection exists between the invention of perspective and the rise of early capitalism in the 16th century. One could extend his reasoning to argue that abolition of perspectival visuality in domestic spaces was a peculiar achievement of Poland's communist regime:

> There was no room for perspective. Objects bulged, bumped, overflowed as in *trecento* paintings. Chairs could be budged by an inch or two, just barely. The table held a flowered tablecloth, the tablecloth held glasses or cups brimming with straw-colored tea.[9]

The Polish inhabitants, though, did not appreciate their flats' disordered perceptual field, enforced from above and practiced by those below. The new class system was not aligned with the new design ideas discussed in the periodical entitled *Project*.

In one instance, as if gazing back at this familial past, Zagajewski delineated groups of objects whose commonality was a dysfunctional performance, which instead of enhancing his recollections' realism, allowed him to allegorize the objectual world of communist Poland. He conceived of it as a monumental installation

[7] A. Zagajewski, *Another Beauty*, trans. C. Cavanagh, New York 2000, p. 5.
[8] Idem, *Two Cities...*, op. cit., p. 61.
[9] Idem, *Another Beauty*, op. cit., pp. 60–61.

made of a series of things, if we follow Heidegger's understanding of "things" as damaged objects: "Rusty bikes, ruptured typewriters, broken sewing machines, parched fountain pens, coffee grinders with missing cranks."[10] This cemetery of dead things, which one could find in attics, flea-markets, and damp sites, evinced the conditions of utter scarcity in material culture during the communist era. More important than the ideological critique in Zagajewski's imagined monument of things is its anthropological logic, which, if we follow Zagajewski, turned nearly every human subject into a dehumanized packrat without any perspective.

> Nothing got thrown out. [...] Those who survived Siberia or the German camps were especially tenacious: They clung to everything, bread crusts, empty jam jars, every scrap of packaging, string, everything. But it wasn't just camp veterans who hoarded useless things: it was an unspoken rule. [...] So all these old objects stayed huddled on balconies, in hallways and pantries, as if they held the hidden possibility that life might someday start moving backward, not forward according to time's inexorable laws.[11]

Accumulation of such a plethora of dysfunctional things decreased further the limited space available in those small homes on the other side of the Iron Curtain. It implied a meta-commentary related to the ongoing "circus-in-construction", to use Jacek Fedorowicz's phrase.

What is so special about the interiority of a small interior? For sure, it functions like an etui, like a small container protecting the self as it was in the case of the Lwowianie. Another customary comparison of a small space to the womb does not take us far. Leonardo da Vinci expressed his appreciation of small rooms from the creative and philosophical point of view, writing about their power in focusing the mind. Should one believe Leonardo's axiom, smallness and minimal furnishing concentrate intellectual energy. Despite this claim I cannot defend the communist variation of such spaces. The Russian installationists Ilya and Emilya Kabakov had, with great distance and irony, already in the eighties played with the degrading effects of small and abject spaces. Zagajewski, however, tried to reach the impossible opposite as he tenderly (and somewhat ironically) restored the interiority of the traumatized psyche and brought some dignity to impoverished spheres of privacy. Omnipresent grayness and shabbiness, impossibly confined living quarters, general scarcity of everything and similar commonplaces discreetly extend his philosophy of interiority into a sphere of material and scopic ideology. The discourse of the ideological *camera obscura* returns in Zagajewski's writings in the form of apparent trifles and details, in the language that collects the usually overlooked everyday. Recording the process of replacing the diminishing point of a geometrized perspectival space by the diminishing privacy and

[10] Ibidem, pp. 61–62.
[11] Ibidem, p. 61.

private space of communist subjects-dwellers is a small but meaningful part of Zagajewski's essayistic legacy.

Each war produces a different form of exile and exilic culture. After he moved back to Kraków, Zagajewski was enthusiastic about revisiting Lviv, where he became acquainted with a Ukrainian doctor who lived in his parents' former apartment. Zagajewski had empathy both for those who gained and for those who lost. Were he alive today, he would join in the international support for Ukraine and warn us about the dangers of any form of bias.

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