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“Poetry alerting us to our propensity to repeat errors of the past”.

Michael Chapman and Phil van Schalkwyk in conversation with Karina Jarzyńska on Adam Zagajewski, Poland and South Africa¹

A conversation with two South African literary scholars who have engaged in comparative research on Polish and South African literature, addressing historical parallels between the two regions. The conversation was conducted through an email exchange.

Karina Jarzyńska: When did you first encounter the literary works by Adam Zagajewski?

Michael Chapman: I first encountered Adam Zagajewski’s poetry in 2000 at the Humanitas bookshop in Timișoara, Romania. I found his work in a larger anthology titled *Shifting Borders: East European Poetry of the Eighties*, which was compiled and edited by Walter Cummings (1993). There I discovered two poems by Zagajewski: “In May” and “Poems on Poland”.

Phil van Schalkwyk: I taught South African Studies in the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, from September 2001 till March 2006.

¹ Interview conducted as part of a research project “(Un)accidental Tourists: Polish Literature and Visual Culture in South Africa in the 20th and 21st Centuries” funded by National Science Centre, Poland (nr 2020/39/B/HS2/02083).

It was during this period that I first encountered the work of Zagajewski – in English translation.

I cannot recall details of the first introduction to his work, as I was introduced to numerous aspects of Polish arts and culture during those five years. I had seen poems of his in anthologies and online before I acquired his *Selected Poems* (Faber and Faber) when it was first published in 2004. I recall buying it in Poland.

KJ: What was the first piece by Adam Zagajewski that you read? What did you think of it and what kind of effect did it have on you?

MC: What I noted, as I indicated in my “Introduction” to the anthology *The New Century of South African Poetry* (2002; revised 2018), it was a poetry – like a great deal of poetry from South Africa – in which history presses upon the present while alerting us to our propensity to repeat errors of the past. This is a generalisation, of course.

PvS: I do remember poems that made a distinct impression when I first discovered the writing of Zagajewski (these indeed include some of his most famous poems): “A wanderer”, “In the Beauty Created by Others”, “In Strange Cities”, “Mysticism for Beginners”, “Fire”, “Good Friday in the Tunnels of the Métro”, and “Try to Praise the Mutilated World”.

As a stranger in Poland (and the greater Central Europe), I experienced many of his poems as instructive, even revelatory, in terms of what I did not know or had not experienced, but at the same time his work exuded a sense of the familiar, allowing me to discover that I was already in certain respects part of what I had deemed myself an outsider to. The theme of exile in his work resonated with me, as did his explorations of the nexus between reality and the spiritual/the imaginative.

KJ: How did you access Adam Zagajewski’s work? Were his poems easily accessible in South Africa?

MC: Adam Zagajewski’s poems are not easily accessible in South Africa. Even poetry by South Africans is not easily accessible. The country has never had a developed literary culture. Bookshops cater for a middle-reader of the best-selling novels from London and New York, and, more and more, self-help books, most of North American derivation.

PvS: In anthologies, on poetry websites, Zagajewski’s *Selected Poems*, and specific volumes of his poetry. His work in English translation was easily accessible in Poland (also in translation).

KJ: Which works by Zagajewski are of special interest to you and why?

PvS: The *Selected Poems* and his 1985 volume *Tremor* were of special interest to me. The *Selected Poems* served as a rich introduction, while *Tremor* not only contained specific poems that resonated with me, but also constituted the most immediate context within which to read the poem “Fire” which features prominently in my 2006 *Literator* article “*Country of my skull/Skull of my country: Krog and Zagajewski, South Africa and Poland.*”²

KJ: How would you rate the popularity of Adam Zagajewski’s poetry in South Africa? Who reads it and why?

MC: In South Africa, the only Polish poets that readers of poetry know are Zbigniew Herbert, Czesław Miłosz, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Wisława Szymborska.

PvS: My impression is that Zagajewski is not a well-known poet in South Africa. There is a dearth of scholarly and critical discussion of his work in this country.

KJ: Have you found any other Polish writers and/or artists worthy of interest and why?

MC: My interest in comparing South African and East European poetry³ came about because I am married to a Romanian and have frequently visited several former east European countries, but not, alas, Poland.

PvS: When I carried out my comparative study of Zagajewski and Krog, I took note of the Polish New Wave (Nowa Fala), which includes names such as Stanisław Barańczak, Ewa Lipska, Julian Kornhauser, and Ryszard Krynicki.

I have also read Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, and Wisława Szymborska. I often reread Szymborska, in both English and Dutch translation. To my mind, her poetry lends itself particularly well to the Dutch language (the Dutch translations read like poetry originally written in Dutch).

KJ: What might be the reasons for Adam Zagajewski’s poetry and other works by Polish writers being read and studied in South Africa? Would you consider it a consequence of the historical circumstances from which these works emerge, their philosophical content, the matter of style, etc.?

² See: P. van Schalkwyk, “*Country of my skull/Skull of my country: Krog and Zagajewski, South Africa and Poland*”, *Literator* 2006, vol. 27, no. 3 (December), pp. 109–134.

³ See: M. Chapman, “South African Poetry: A Perspective from the Other Europe”, *English Academy Review: Southern African Journal of English Studies* 2006, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 54–72.

PvS: As a Nobel Prize laureate, Szymborska enjoys significant international fame, and this indeed extends to South Africa, where she is read in English translation. The availability of excellent Dutch translations of Szymborska's poetry adds a dimension of interest and accessibility in the context of Afrikaans and Dutch Studies.

As far as Zagajewski is concerned, I can only speak for myself. Zagajewski's lucidity of thought and expression may contribute to the translatability of his work. In addition to this, his work contains both a welcoming universality and a very direct engagement with the particular, and therefore a reader may be profoundly moved when encountering certain poems of his.

My own article, which I started writing in Poland and completed after my return to South Africa in 2006, was informed by my observation of comparable historical circumstances, but more importantly by the remarkable comparability of the poetry of Zagajewski and that of South African author Antjie Krog. A specific realization on my part regarding this comparability pertained to the poem with which Krog's book *Country of My Skull* (1998) concludes (it also features as the 6th poem of the cycle "Country of Grief and Grace" and in its Afrikaans version "land van genade en verdriet" in, respectively, the volumes *Down to My Last Skin* and *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie*), and Zagajewski's poem "Fire" in the volume *Tremor*. My article grew from placing these two poems next to one another, which in turn activated certain historical and theoretical frameworks. In the eighth poem of the aforementioned cycle a compelling question is asked with regard to the new South African dispensation: "what does one do with the old/ which already robustly stinks with the new."⁴ This could also hold true for the new democratic Poland, I argued.⁵ As far as theory is concerned, the selected poems by Krog and Zagajewski directed me to the psychoanalytic thinking of Bracha Ettinger (who builds on Jacques Lacan).

As far as the relationship between the psychological and the political is concerned, I argued the following: "Inward-moving analysis is the hallmark of conventional psycho-analysis and, indeed, even of radical psychoanalytic theory, and therefore it cannot escape the charge of being apolitical."⁶ This paper started out fully within the public and political domain (which was obviously also intended to provide crucial background information), after which the discussion turned toward an exploration of the intricate (poetic) workings of the psyche [...] My aim has been to show how the public/political is connected to the personal/psychological, and vice versa, and how committed literary works like those of Krog and Zagajewski discussed here, can be clarified further from a psychoanalytical perspective."⁷

⁴ A. Krog, *Down to My Last Skin*, Johannesburg 2000, p. 99.

⁵ P. van Schalkwyk, "Country of my skull / Skull of my country...", op. cit., p. 109.

⁶ M. Billig, "Freud and Dora: Repressing an Oppressed Identity", *Theory, Culture & Society* 1997, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 29–55.

⁷ P. van Schalkwyk, "Country of my skull / Skull of my country...", op. cit., p. 131.

Elsewhere in the article I provided a theoretical rationale for undertaking a detailed text-based analysis informed by psychoanalysis: “Unlike Freudian psychoanalysis, which states that the subconscious only reveals itself in dreams, slips of tongue, et cetera, the Lacanian paradigm is built on the premise that every word and linguistic structure, spoken and written, is influenced, inadvertently, by the subconscious.”⁸

Although in terms of its germination the article took shape around the experimental juxtaposition of the two poems referred to above, the scholarly argument, for the sake of rhetorical expediency, commenced within the public and political domain of South Africa and Poland, after which the discussion, propelled perhaps by what had remained of youthful overconfidence on my part, turned toward an attentive reading of the selected poems with reference to Ettinger’s complex writing on “matrixial borderlinking”.

I briefly returned to Zagajewski (specifically his poem “Good Friday in the Tunnels of the Métro”) – as part of my reflection on my experience of teaching South African content in Poland – in my 2007 book chapter “The Africa They Knew: South African Poetry in International Context – The Case of Roy Campbell and William Plomer”, in *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature*.⁹

MC: The comparative interest is linked to the fact that South Africa, like Poland and other Eastern European countries, emerged from an oppressive past (apartheid, in South Africa) and continues to struggle towards the application of democratic ideals.

Lately, the African National Congress (ANC) government – having been in power now for almost 30 years – is backtracking on its Nelson Mandela example in claiming neutrality (when it does not mean this whatsoever) in the Russia/Ukraine conflict. Mandela would turn in his grave.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ed. H. Viljoen, C.N. Van der Merwe, New York et al. 2007.