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Little Abysses: Adam Zagajewski’s “Evening, Stary Sącz”¹

Abstract: This essay considers Adam Zagajewski’s poem “Evening, Stary Sącz” and in particular, the line “Little abysses open between the stones.” This image invites us to reflect on the many startling gaps and voids in Zagajewski’s poems. At times, those abysses suggest historical and political dimensions particular to Polish (and European) experience in the 20th century; but more often, Zagajewski presents the abyss as moral and metaphysical. “Evening, Stary Sącz,” a poem that doesn’t on its surface appear very threatening, opens suddenly through its “little abysses” into sacrificial reality.

Keywords: Abyss, moral, metaphysical, Adam Zagajewski

How does “Poetry Talk with Philosophy” in Adam Zagajewski’s work? The key is in the “how,” since poetry and philosophy don’t share a common language. Poetry, even in all its wild variety, is not an art of systematic propositions, arguments, and proofs. We should pay attention, as well, to the verb “talks”: poetry *can* talk, but it also murmurs, exults, evades, suggests, hints, curses, chants, sobs, and prays. In his essays and poems, Adam Zagajewski wrestled for decades with the “how” of poetry’s talk with philosophy: it mattered to him. Because, as he wrote in an essay on Nietzsche in *A Defense of Ardor*, unlike philosophy, “Poetry is condemned to live with mystery.” And he thought poets *should* be talking with philosophers (and with historians and scientists and theologians...), because, as he declared in an essay aptly entitled “Against Poetry,” “It’s not the actual debate that’s at stake here – it’s truth.”²

I first encountered “Evening, Stary Sącz” in Clare Cavanagh’s English translation in the American journal *Poetry* in June 2006, and then two years later in the book *Eternal Enemies*. The last line has obsessed me for years: “Little abysses open between the stones.” Here is the poem:

¹ The text was originally published in *The Hopkins Review* 2023, vol. 16, no. 1 (Winter), pp. 109–113.

² A. Zagajewski, *A Defense of Ardor*, trans. C. Cavanagh, New York 2004, p. 135.

"Evening, Stary Sącz"

The sun sets behind the market square, and the nettle leaves reflect
 the small town's imperfections. Teapots whistle in the houses,
 like many trains departing simultaneously.
 Bonfires flame on meadows and their long sighs
 weave above the trees like drifting kites.
 The last pilgrims return from the church uncertainly.
 TV sets awaken, and instantly know all,
 like the demons of Alexandria with swindlers' swarthy faces.
 Knives descend on bread, on sausage, on wood, on offerings.
 The sky grows darker; angels used to hide there,
 but now it's just the police sergeant and his dear departed motorcycle.
 Rain falls, the cobbled streets grow black.
 Little abysses open between the stones.

Adam Zagajewski is no stranger to abysses. Many of his poems rip the fabric of the ordinary to reveal a startling gap or void or possibility. For instance, in "A Quick Poem" from *Mysticism for Beginners* (also translated by Clare Cavanagh): "I made my way toward the clouds, deep blue,/ heavy, dense,/ toward the future, toward the abyss." It's not always a Baudelairean *gouffre* or *néant* that's revealed. Sometimes Zagajewski opens up a realm of spiritual hope or joy – even ardor – out of all proportion to our stumbling daily lives, as at the end of the poem "From Memory" (also in *Mysticism for Beginners*): "At noon the clouds' eye gently/ opened, the eye of tears and light."

At times, Zagajewski invokes an abyss that seems historical and political. This is the case in his discussion of the Nazi occupation and the Warsaw uprisings in the chapter called "Writing in Polish" in *A Defense of Ardor*: "The nothingness that Warsaw, and with it all Poland, had endured, would color the imagination of Polish writers for years to come. Not just color it; this nothingness became one of its chief ingredients. The Polish literary imagination assimilated the abyss."³ But for Zagajewski, the historical and political slide quickly toward the moral and the metaphysical.

How then are we to read the abysses in "Evening, Stary Sącz"? The town itself sounds like a charming, indeed celebrated, tourist spot, if one judges by various online descriptions. One of the oldest towns in Poland, it dates to the 13th century and still has medieval buildings (including a famous convent) and cobblestone streets; it sits in a nature reserve and attracts hikers, swimmers, and fishermen. Zagajewski seems to have known the town pretty well. But it's not historical charm that his poems about it record. In an earlier poem entitled simply "Stary Sącz," he focused on homely details – "jars of borscht and pickles" – and

³ Idem, *A Defense of Ardor*, op. cit., p. 194.

the whimsical if slightly sinister fable of the innkeeper's daughter carried off, not by the wind, but by "other elements": "especially Nothingness and her rich suitor, Mr. Time."⁴

"Evening, Stary Sącz" has a different tone. It starts unassumingly in an unromantic, not to say utilitarian, scene of the market square and nettles, an unpleasant, stinging plant whose leaves, we are told, "reflect/ the small town's imperfections." The first two lines narrow the focus from sunset (vast celestial event) to the public urban space of the market square to the hyper-realist detail of nettle leaves, to domestic enclosures where teapots whistle. But the simile in line 3 widens the aperture again: the teapots whistle "like many trains departing simultaneously." The effect is pure Zagajewski: a figure of speech, like Archimedes's lever, hoists the literal off its ground. Those trains: yes, we hear them whistling. But this is Poland, and Zagajewski, thus steeped in memory – we remember (however fleetingly) grim 20th-century trains carrying prisoners and displaced people. And then we meet the bonfires in line 4: "Bonfires flame on meadows and their long sighs/ weave above the trees like drifting kites." At first glance, these are innocent agricultural fires, a seasonal ritual for clearing fields. But their metaphorical sighs suggest human sorrow, and in a second simile – the sighs float off like drifting kites – we are not directed to think about crematoria or funeral rites, but the possibility hovers, a bitter whiff in the air.

The poem then flings its filaments of religious imagery – pilgrims, church, demons, offerings, angels – over a secular, down-to-earth world of TV sets, bread, sausages, the police sergeant and his motorcycle. Where is the soul in our visible, tangible, material reality, the poem seems to be asking. Asking, not arguing. And offering no dogmatic conclusion. Zagajewski's quiet wit prevents any arrogant claim to certainty, for or against a theological scheme. The pilgrims – a humorously exalted word for the perhaps weary and unilluminated faithful – return from the church *uncertainly*, and it's only the debased, commercial, and technological icons of TV sets that "instantly know all" – a clear tip-off to a swindle.

With the knives, the poem enters the realm of sacrifice: "Knives descend on bread, on sausage, on wood, on offerings." I admire this line intensely for its tact, its quiet moral reach. We participate simultaneously in a modest provincial dinner of bread and sausage, and, just possibly, in Abraham's almost sacrifice of his son Isaac, or some other human sacrifice: the wood, the offerings. An ultimate, sublime, horrific test of faith, and formation of covenant. It isn't stated or asserted; it's simply made imaginable.

As if in commentary on the offerings, in the next line, "The sky grows darker," and the poem has indeed grown darker. But also lighter, in the sense of fanciful: "angels used to hide there,/ but now it's just the police sergeant and his dear departed motorcycle." Don't worry, the poem seems to advise: we no longer live

⁴ Idem, *Without End: New and Selected Poems*, trans. C. Cavanagh, R. Gorczyńska, B. Ivry, C.K. Williams, New York 2002, p. 14.

in a world of Biblical mysteries. The angels are gone, so are the sacrifices, and the only funeral convention being celebrated appears to honor not a person, but a "dear departed motorcycle".

Just when the danger of – what shall we call it? Spiritual seriousness? – seems to have passed, the poem springs those abysses on us. Little abysses, but abysses all the same. "Rain falls, the cobbled streets grow black". A 13th-century town would have cobblestone streets. They do darken when wet, and yes, there are small fissures around each stone. There's a firm empirical foundation to what's observed here. But: "Little abysses open between the stones". How are we to read those abysses, I have asked. First, I suggest, we should simply allow ourselves to be surprised. If we've been picking our way through the poem in the spirit of Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, the last line should come as a shock, a crisis of wildly divergent scale: cobblestones, abysses. And in those abysses which have suddenly opened up, the poem prompts us to imagine 20th-century horrors, those trains and bonfires, but also a vastly longer perspective of human struggles and of religious stories explaining those struggles: a god or gods; demons; angels; sacrifice.

The commonplace, material world we think we live in every day and take for granted, a world containing market squares and teapots, conceals much more than we usually allow ourselves to know. A poem is not a philosophical treatise. But this poem, and most of Zagajewski's poems, can inspire us to ask philosophical questions. At one level, epistemological questions. How do we know? (About trains and bonfires, for instance.) What does "knowing" mean in a poem? And what, to quote the title of that famous book by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, is *The Meaning of Meaning*? Because I can read "Evening, Stary Sącz" only in translation, I miss a rich portion of its meaning-making. I miss its cadences, its phonetic embodiment, its etymological play, and no doubt many subtle allusions. But in Clare Cavanagh's translation it still survives as a powerful poem in English. It makes its meanings through a sequence of fairly simple descriptive statements, but most of all, though the juxtaposition and strategic incongruity of its images: market square, nettles, teapots, trains, bonfires, pilgrims, swindlers, angels, abysses. Whatever "meanings" it makes are qualified by tone: quizzical, faintly witty, modest. Any knowledge we derive from the poem will come through dreamwork. What are the offerings? Where have the angels gone? Epistemological problems shift toward ethical and spiritual malaise.

Poems, generally, can't give answers, unless they are deliberately and generically didactic, like Lucretius's *De Rerum natura* (and even there, the poetry presents a lot of qualifications and crosscurrents). No, most poems don't give answers. But they invite us to experience. And in the experience so carefully staged and paced in "Evening, Stary Sącz," we are granted what Zagajewski promised in his essay, "Against Poetry": "only in the inner life, as in a broken mirror, do we occasionally catch glimpses of eternity's small, mobile flame."⁵

⁵ Idem, *A Defense of Ardor*, op. cit., p. 138.

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