

Hans Joas

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Theologische Fakultät
University of Chicago, Committee on Social Thought

The Cloud Over the Highway. On the Inescapability of Mystical Experience

Abstract: Adam Zagajewski's essays on poets and poetry are interpreted here in the context of scholarly debates about the specificities of mystical experience. From the four criteria the great American philosopher and psychologist William James developed in 1902, "transiency" and "passivity" can be brought together as indicators of what I call the inescapability of mystical experience, while the two other criteria, namely "ineffability" and "noetic quality", can be treated as what I call the "paradox of articulation". The essay demonstrates how profound the reflections of the Polish poet on these questions are, how they are related to his views about the possibilities of contemplation and art in view of the history of violence of the 20th century and what they mean for the future of religion. The highly influential narrative of a world-historical process of ongoing "disenchantment" (Max Weber) loses much of its persuasiveness if these reflections are true.

Keywords: aestheticism, articulation, disenchantment, mysticism, poetry, religion

Adam Zagajewski's portraits of other poets – and this is the topic I'll focus on here – his portraits of other poets, particularly those he admired, are always, to some extent, self-portraits and programmatic statements – statements about the art of poetry, the experiences articulated in it and the experiences made possible by it. When he wrote, for example, about Józef Czapski and Czesław Miłosz¹ and what they shared, it was, on the one hand, the fact that they had an intense knowledge and understanding of history, the historical events of the 20th century, particularly its history of violence. On the other hand, though, he also emphasized their ability not to lose a fundamentally non-historical or even, as he says, "anti-historical" attitude to reality, to the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, to the ways the extra-ordinary may suddenly appear in the ordinary. Again and again he refers to the ways such sudden experiences can transform our lives from one moment

¹ A. Zagajewski, "Granit und Regenbogen" [*Granite and Rainbow*] and "Fragte mich jemand" [*If someone had asked me*] [in:] idem, *Poesie für Anfänger: Essays*, München 2021 (originally published as *Poezja dla początkujących*, Warszawa 2017).

to the other, revealing something that had been there all the time, an eternal truth that is of the greatest existential relevance to us in the present but very difficult to articulate. One such case of this that he mentioned in a certain passage was the experience of being fascinated by the face of a woman in the Métro in Paris – a kind of modernized version obviously of Baudelaire’s “passante”, the sudden encounter with an anonymous person on a noisy street that leaves the feeling of having just perceived and missed the opportunity to find the love of one’s life. Another experience he draws our attention to is a cloud over the highway that seems to stop for the moment while we are driving – to stop as if it were looking back at the driver or the highway itself. This could be called the experience of a sudden decentering of the self when the ego switches from its natural egocentric attitude to the world, not only in the phenomenological sense Edmund Husserl had taught, but as one’s vision of being the object of another consciousness, the consciousness even of a non-human being. History in which one necessarily is involved, as an actor and a victim, remains in full force, but the non-historical attitude that is called “contemplative” in Adam Zagajewski’s writings remains there, too, and the two neither necessarily exclude nor eliminate each other. In an essay on Rilke,² Adam (in a Kierkegaardian way) spoke of two possible forms of betrayal one can commit – either when one retreats into a purely aesthetic existence or when one neglects one’s own inner life completely and lets it be totally controlled by the necessities of the day.

An image like the one of the cloud over the highway, looking back at us, and of reflection on the tensions between historical involvement and contemplation represent for me features of Adam Zagajewski’s personality, poetry, and thinking.

I remember Adam, of course, not only from the regular meetings of the Committee on Social Thought – the only meetings in the world, he wrote, that he did not feel to last too long – but above all and very vividly from other occasions like discussions with late Chicago Cardinal Francis George or a Thanksgiving party we spent together in the home of the great literary scholar David Wellbery who is also a member of our Chicago intellectual community. But we also met in Berlin, mostly through a mutual friend, whom Adam “adored”, as he once said to me, Sebastian Kleinschmidt, the long-time editor of the leading East German cultural magazine *Sinn und Form*, in which Adam published many of his poems, essays and interviews in German. And we met, of course, here in Kraków when Adam attended my Tischner Lecture in 2017 and when we discussed, on the following day, my critique of the extremely influential narrative of a world-historical process of ongoing disenchantment introduced by the great German sociologist Max Weber. Adam even referred to my critique in his essay “Inspiration

² A. Zagajewski, “Rereading Rilke” [in:] *The Poetry of Rilke*, Bilingual edition, trans. E. Snow, New York 2014.

and Obstacle”³ generously leaving the intricate questions of the history of religion to the “experts”, as he said.

Now this is certainly not the place to repeat my argument. But I would like to connect the reasons why I don’t believe in such a world-historical process of disenchantment and, therefore, dispute that Weber was right with some of the crucial insights of Adam Zagajewski’s essayistic poetry and poetic essays. When we try to systematize these insights – something Adam himself consciously kept away from – the classical work from the psychology of religion can be of good use. I am referring to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the famous book published by the American pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James in 1902. This book is perhaps the most famous book ever published on religion in the English-speaking world and, if I may add that, a book of the greatest influence on my own intellectual and religious development. In chapters XVI/XVII of that book, the lecture on “mysticism” originally given in the framework of the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh, James claimed that “personal religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness”,⁴ but he also asked what this expression “mystical” really means. He is fully aware that “the words ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystical’ are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast and sentimental, and without a base in either facts or logic.”⁵ “Employed in this way”, he added, “the word has little value.”⁶ But he gave us four criteria to judge whether an experience can be rightly called mystical, and I would like to group these four criteria for a precise meaning of that concept under two headings. From the four criteria, “transiency” and “passivity” can be brought together as indicators of what I call the inescapability of mystical experience, while the two other criteria, namely “ineffability” and “noetic quality”, can be treated as what I will call the “paradox of articulation”. Let me explain these two ideas now in connection with Adam’s own profound reflections.

First on transiency and passivity. Adam’s reflections are full of references to both of them. He emphasizes again and again that he is referring to *moments* of ecstasy in our life, of *sudden* astonishment, of an attentiveness that is so overwhelming and *complete* that it is almost a prayer – as he puts it following Simone Weil. He is not ashamed to speak of “inspiration”, a concept considered obsolete or “kitschy” by other poets or artists, a superstition stemming from Ancient Greek and biblical sources, because he liked the connotation of passivity in it: the spirit comes to us in moments of inspiration and fills us. We cannot bring about these experiences intentionally; we can only prepare the ground for them, open

³ Idem, “Inspiration und Hindernis” [*Inspiration and Hindrance*] [in:] idem, *Poesie für Anfänger...*, op. cit.

⁴ W. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, e-book version, eBooks@Adelaide, The University of Adelaide Library 2009, p. 286.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

ourselves up to them, and allow them to happen on “quiet days without hurry” in “the sweet slowness of reading”. The transiency of these experiences is a consequence of the structures of everyday life. These experiences are not only difficult to achieve and to have but also to keep because practical necessities always set in thereafter, the fragmentary character of life that results from our manifold duties and the expectations of others, and the doubts that come from our rational attitudes. These are the “obstacles” he was referring to. In an interesting turn of his argument, Adam distanced himself from a purely romantic idealization of extra-ordinary experiences and praised self-discipline instead, routinization, going to work every day at the same hour whether one feels inspired or not. His favourite reference in this respect is to the great French sculptor Auguste Rodin and his habit of treating his art like an honest skilled trade, and to Rilke’s similar lifestyle, the poet who once had served as secretary to the sculptor. Like them, Adam was not a Bohemian figure. This seems to me to be a deeply Catholic argument: you should go to Church even though you cannot expect the religious services to be a source of extra-ordinary experience every time because if you do not go, it is certain that the experience of the Eucharist will not affect you. Adam Zagajewski takes care to make clear that his understanding of ecstatic experiences is neither tied to hedonistic self-enjoyment nor to a submissive attitude to any particular religious institution. In this sense, his discourse of “experience” is not without a moral dimension. This is even more the case when he refers to the feeling of revelation inherent in such experiences. He does use the word “revelation” here in aesthetic contexts and clearly sees Rilke’s famous “You must change your life” as representative of intense aesthetic experiences and their life-transforming character.

This leads me to the second group of characteristic features of mystical experience, “ineffability” and “noetic quality”. Ineffability refers, of course, to the difficulty of expressing our feelings, sensual impressions and pre-reflective reactions in language. It is not just extra-ordinary experience that is difficult to articulate. Just think of our ability to grasp the meaning of facial expressions and how difficult it is to find out what exactly in another face made the other person’s mood clear to us. Or think of the taste of wine and the rather awkward attempts on wine bottles in the U.S. to describe how a particular wine tastes (with a hint of grapefruit etc.). I do not simply speak of such difficulties but use the term “paradox of articulation”. What I call paradoxical is the fact that certain experiences are difficult to articulate but, at the same time, leave in us the impression that they are of the greatest relevance to our lives. While expressing the taste of wine in a satisfying manner usually is not a very serious matter – if we are not in the wine business – “mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge.” In the words of William James: “They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations,

full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.”⁷

We find all these terms in Zagajewski’s writings as well: illumination, revelation, and sudden insight. In my own theory of the emergence of value commitments presented in my book *The Genesis of Values*⁸ (even translated into Polish as *Powstawanie wartości* in 2009), I use the term “subjective self-evidence” for that purpose. Something looks to us to be self-evidently good or evil, but we know that it does not look the same to everybody and that we should not simply call those who do not share our feeling of certainty “blind”. In his essays, Adam Zagajewski tried to balance between these levels of extra-ordinary experiences and discursive validity claims. Following the Italian Jesuit Tommaso Ceva (quoted by poet Eugenio Montale), he speaks of “dreams being dreamt in the presence of reason.”⁹ Poetry, therefore, can be called and is called by Adam “mysticism for beginners”. There is a passage where he asks what advanced mysticism could then mean. The answer he gives is: silence, silence in the encounter with the transcendent. Being fully aware, however, that silence cannot be the recipe for good poetry, he writes, that poetry can always only be a compromise between two worlds, it can be reduced and laconic, but it must remain in the sphere of language. “Music” and the role of music in Adam’s thinking have to be thought of in this connection.

At this point, he switches to another terminology, speaking of “imagination” instead of “mysticism”. While his tone remains extremely modest and tentative, it becomes clear that he had a strong aversion against what he called the “arrogant antipathy toward religion” in the circles of intellectuals and avant-garde artists. And he very explicitly repudiated the dictum that after Auschwitz, after the history of violence of the 20th century, poetry has lost its innocence or even legitimacy. “Imagination” remains, the perception of the beauty of the world remains even under the shadow of that history, of the memory of Jewish children led to their death. How else should we keep our ideals alive? How should we “hold in a single thought reality and justice” (W.B. Yeats)?¹⁰

Adam Zagajewski was neither a pure follower of Enlightenment ideals nor a pure Romantic. He shared with the great Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor the conviction that we have to be both, to follow both, to balance the two orientations, to support progress in some respects, but also allow ourselves feelings of loss and mourning due to that same progress. What does that mean for our understanding of disenchantment? I think it means that we should be highly sensitive to all processes of demagification, desacralization, detranscendentalization, and secularization. But we should also be aware that there have always

⁷ W. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience...*, op. cit., p. 287.

⁸ H. Joas, *The Genesis of Values*, Chicago 2000.

⁹ A. Zagajewski, “Fragte mich jemand” [*If someone had asked me*], op. cit.

¹⁰ Idem, “Melancholisch und Konkret” [*Melancholic and Concrete*] [in:] idem, *Poesie für Anfänger...*, op. cit.

been processes of new magification or remagification, new ways to grasp the transcendent, and religious revitalizations. If this is the case, Max Weber's narrative is misleading not necessarily in its components but in the way it presents one destructive process leading to the next: from the struggle of the Old Testament prophets against magic after an alleged regression in the Middle Ages to the renewal of that struggle in the Reformation to the scientific revolution in the early modern age and from there to an Enlightenment view of causal determinism, a world without inherent meaning, to the crisis of meaning in the European fin de siècle and on the eve of the First World War. This deeply melancholic view leaves no space for an intellectually defensible religious faith in our time; it is also an arrogant Eurocentric view because all the religious people in and outside Europe must then look like mere remnants of the past. To counter this narrative, it is important, but not sufficient, to demonstrate its empirical deficiencies. We also need an alternative story that allows us to understand all forms of secularization, but in the framework of an adequate understanding of human experience, its dynamics, the dynamics of articulation and the connections between such experiences and the questions of norms, values, and ideals. I see Adam Zagajewski's essays and, of course, above all, his poetry itself as one of the great eye-opening contributions of the late 20th and early 21st centuries regarding the inescapability of mystical experience in human history.

Bibliography

- James W., *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, e-book version, eBooks@Adelaide, The University of Adelaide Library 2009.
- Joas H., *The Genesis of Values*, trans. G. Moore, Chicago 2000.
- Joas H., *The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment*, trans. A. Sinner, New York 2021.
- Zagajewski A., *Poesie für Anfänger: Essays*, München 2021.
- Zagajewski A., "Rereading Rilke" [in:] *The Poetry of Rilke*, Bilingual edition, trans. E. Snow, New York 2014.