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Adam Zagajewski. Poetry Talks to Philosophy – Initial Remarks

It is hard to believe that two years have already passed since Adam Zagajewski's death. We have become accustomed to the remarkable regularity with which he published his volumes of poetry and essays. In Kraków, he still took part in literary and artistic events – and not always as their protagonist, very often as a listener, who was fascinated by all manifestations of a “spiritual life,” to use a term, admittedly unfashionable, and yet so dear to him. The war in Ukraine, the outbreak of which he did not survive, the growing refugee crisis and other dramatic events of recent years have shown how much we need his wise attempts to “praise the mutilated world”. The phrases from his poem “Refugees”: “and always that special slouch/ as if leaning toward another, better planet,/ with less ambitious generals,/ less snow, less wind, fewer cannons,/ less History...” (trans. Clare Cavanagh) or the famous last line of the poem “To Go to Lvov”: “It [Lvov] is everywhere” (trans. R. Górczyńska) seem surprisingly up-to-date in describing reality in 2023.

We think of Zagajewski as a poet, but we must not forget that he graduated from Jagiellonian University with a degree in philosophy and wrote his second master's degree (in psychology) under the guidance of Roman Ingarden's student Danuta Gierulanka. His relationship with philosophy is, of course, not limited to his education. In his work, he engages in dialogues with specific philosophers, returns to basic philosophical questions, and challenges certainties that we accept unreflectively.

This issue of *Konteksty Kultury* is the result of a collaboration between scholars from Jagiellonian University and the University of Chicago, thus bringing together the academic communities of his Alma Mater and the American university where he taught from 2007 for around ten years. It is worth mentioning that at the University of Chicago, he was a member of the prestigious Committee on Social Thought, staffed primarily by philosophers, sociologists, historians,

theologians and philologists. It can be said, therefore, that for him, Chicago became a natural meeting place for poetry and philosophy.

We begin with an illuminating article by sociologist of religion Hans Joas (“The Cloud Over the Highway. On the Inescapability of Mystical Experience”), who interprets Adam Zagajewski’s essays on poets and poetry in the context of philosophical reflection on the specificity of mystical experience. The author refers to William James’ classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, to conclude that the Polish poet’s work illustrates an inescapability of mystical experience and challenges the influential narrative of a world-historical process of ongoing “disenchantment” (Max Weber). A similar topic is addressed in the remarkable essay by Gabriel Lear (“Radiance and Wonder: Reflections on Adam Zagajewski”), who argues that Zagajewski’s conception of poetry has much in common with Plato’s idea that philosophy begins in wondering. She further argues that in both cases, our confidence in the veridicality of wonder depends on our ability to share in wondering with another person. The essay refers to several of Zagajewski’s poems about listening to music.

Bożena Shallcross (“Zagajewski’s Reflections on the Interior”) notes the special role of the home in Zagajewski’s work – the private space is marked by post-memory. As she argues, 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 an *etui*, a cover protecting the traumatized selves and their memorabilia from the unacceptable reality. The eye-opening analysis serves as proof that Zagajewski was not an aesthete. The topic of post-memory is indirectly addressed by Rosanna Warren (“Little Abysses: Adam Zagajewski’s ‘Evening, Stry Sącz’”). The puzzling image of “little abysses” inspires her to reflect on the many startling gaps in Zagajewski’s poems. The interpretation leads to the conclusion, that those abysses suggest historical and political dimensions particular to European experience in the 20th century, but also moral and metaphysical aspects of everyday life. Anna Czabanowska-Wróbel (“Poetry and Existence: The Kingfishers of Adam Zagajewski and Gerard Manley Hopkins”) also focuses on one poem by Adam Zagajewski – “The Kingfisher”, but the subject of her analysis is the Polish poet’s dialogue with Gerard Manley Hopkins, and specifically “As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame”, whose initial words, cited in English, were used as the motto. Her main concern is the symbolism of colours and fire, through which some ontological and meta-poetic meanings are revealed. Another, this time philosophical dialogue, is described by Łukasz Tischner (“The Poet Discovers Sources (of the Self). Adam Zagajewski and Charles Taylor”), who shows Adam Zagajewski’s relationship with Charles Taylor’s thought. The author suggests that Zagajewski not only quotes and comments on some paragraphs from the Canadian philosopher, but also alludes to Taylor’s diagnoses in the poems, in which the motifs of spiritual lobotomy and the epiphanic power of poetry appear.

The essays on Adam Zagajewski are supplemented by Karina Jarzyńska's conversation with Michael Chapman and Phil van Schalkwyk ("Poetry alerting us to our propensity to repeat errors of the past"), who conduct comparative research on Polish and South African literature. The interview, among other issues, points to a remarkable parallel between the poetry of Zagajewski and that of South African author Antjie Krog.

In this English language issue of *Konteksty Kultury*, there is one exception in Polish, namely a review by Katarzyna Kucia-Kuśmierska of the excellent monograph by Aleksandra Kremer *The Sound of Modern Polish Poetry: Performance and Recording after World War I* (published in English). The book doesn't refer to Zagajewski, but sheds light on the development of Polish poetry, as well as on the historical and cultural changes that affected the writers' self-awareness and the reception of their recordings. Kucia-Kuśmierska recapitulates her considerations as follows: "The book brilliantly depicts the sound laboratory of 20th-century literature, kindly introducing the reader to the hitherto unknown space of authorial struggles with the voice, which directly [...] influence the status of the poetic self and its relation to poetry in general".

On behalf of the lead editors
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