

# Between the Quotidian and the Transcendent

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*Too long a stay in the world of irony and doubt awakens in us a yearning for different, more nutritious fare.*

—Adam Zagajewski, “A Defense of Ardor”

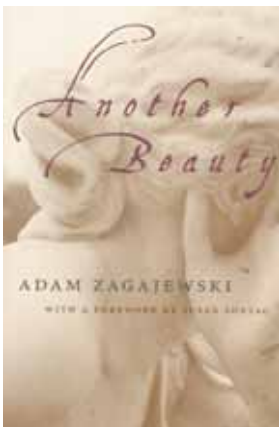


Courtesy: Adam Zagajewski

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI WRITES SERIOUS POEMS in an age of irony and doubt. The severely skeptical attitude of the era has come to expect a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, and as a result “our epoch,” according to the poet, “worships perversity.” Zagajewski arrives at gravitas not through lament over this modern fate of disillusionment and skepticism in the face of fallen ideals of all sorts (romantic, Enlightenment, religious). Nor does he achieve seriousness by dismissal of the currency of the day: irony has won intellectual and literal freedoms by undercutting many barbarous monoliths of authority, including the totalitarian state. Nevertheless, as excessive doubt prevails today, its polemic arches over beauty to cut down the possibility of revelation and threatens to render poetry itself impossible. Against this prospect Zagajewski presents *A Defense of Ardor*, his recent volume of essays. Here he affirms a life of seriousness that dares to open itself to pathos and beauty and their potentially uncontrollable, irrational illuminations. And while he acknowledges that we shall never rest in the highlands of the beautiful, he finds life most meaningful when it moves “in between” materiality and mystery. This vital human situation arrives via poetry—poetry that reaches beyond leveling irony.

Elsewhere in *A Defense of Ardor*, Zagajewski claims that he “won’t propose a diagnosis” but will instead offer a meditation on the culture of doubt that has left much contemporary writing “meager, gray, anemic.” Appropriately, his poems surpass meditation. Zagajewski’s recent full selection of poems, *Without End*, chronicles a poetry that diagnoses the world and then becomes its vaccine, its cure. Here Zagajewski risks casting off doubt while maintaining irresolution; his lyrics move adroitly between confidence and uncertainty. With the lyric, he will leverage the pieces of the world in front of him into a responsible understanding of both the everyday and the sacred. Zagajewski simultaneously lowers his sights and raises them—he sees the heavens while staring at the floor.

In his emblematic poem “Transformation,” Zagajewski faces what he calls in an essay a “very ironic and skeptical landscape” and relies on the transformative potential of poetry, the “one thing” that guides him. Failing to write “a single poem in months,” he “humbly” stares at the mundanities of the world—its newspapers, birds, sunsets, and windowsills—but finds only their “riddles” and “muteness” rather than any lever of transcendence. Remarkably, instead of retreating



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from an unyielding world, he remains steadfast in his pursuit of poetry's ancient grail—a light of understanding to be glimpsed, like a spark in the heavens, beyond this world: "I've taken long walks / craving one thing only: lightning, / transformation, / you." Driving him is the sustained belief that there is a realm beyond the immediate and that one can, through poetry, gain sight of the sacred and be transformed. We expect this metaphysical pose of a John Donne or a George Herbert, or even of a Zbigniew Herbert who, in his poem "Why the Classics?" resists a mere "broken jar / a small broken soul" as the subject of art. In the case of a twenty-first-century poet, the pose is a remarkable and courageous one. Still, the persistent pursuit of poetic understanding by Zagajewski will not present miracles of comprehension of the divine; it will not anachronistically wring a sole meaning from an object via meditation. Indeed, at first this observed life yields only inscrutability. The poet responds by continuing his press forward. His reach may define the limit of the human realm, but it does not mark an end to human, poetic potential. Moreover, the poet confirms that understanding will not be an easy grasp. He will glimpse the sacred only indirectly as it lingers just beyond his reach. In the end Zagajewski reinvigorates the transformative role of poetry and reaffirms the capacity of the sacred to revive the poet.

For Zagajewski, however, transformation does not take the shape it has typically taken in poetry. Rather than plunge into a world that will assuredly—although not without difficulty—yield comprehension as its fruit, Zagajewski faces a world in which any direct fruits of understanding remain persistently distant. Still, in every case, that which remains distant has been tested. The unknowable is unknowable because it has been reached for and missed. This landscape of unknowables maps the path of the poet's work. He reaches, and when he cannot attain revelation, he recognizes the vacancy that he names "unattainability." Then his work continues because the "unattainable" includes the prospect—at its root—of attainability. His goal persists. Witness this in Zagajewski's poem "Fruit" (for Czesław Miłosz).

How unattainable life is, it only reveals  
its features in memory,  
in nonexistence. How unattainable  
afternoons, ripe, tumultuous, leaves  
bursting with sap; swollen fruit, the rustling  
silks of women who pass on the other  
side of the street, and the shouts of boys  
leaving school. Unattainable. The simplest  
apple inscrutable, round.  
The crowns of trees shake in warm  
currents of air. Unattainably distant mountains.  
Intangible rainbows. Huge cliffs of clouds

flowing slowly through the sky. The sumptuous,  
unattainable afternoon. My life,  
swirling, unattainable, free.

Zagajewski finds life unattainable from the outset. His only hopes of access are, as he says, through "memory" and through "nonexistence," both elusive prospects. The quest for understanding via memory is the more common trope of postromantic, post-Freudian poetry. Memory does play a part in Zagajewski's poetry, and his inquiries into the life of memory (like the aunts he will "resurrect" in "To Go to Lvov") create a crucial personal context for the human condition explored in his work. The quest for understanding "in nonexistence" will be a paradoxical pursuit. When Zagajewski pursues life's nonexistent "features," he does not expect to find life's essence in its negative or to find the elusive seed of meaning buried in the observed world. That would not be transformation; that would be sleight of hand. Instead, he follows the crown of the world's "ripe" and "sumptuous" fruits toward that which exceeds the world. And if, along the way, he discovers repeated places where these fruits surpass his grasp, then he is on his way to proof that—as he guessed—the world is swollen and inexhaustible. He will still seek an understanding of the world, but not because he will be able to confine it within such understanding. Although he remains tireless, he will not engage in endless efforts to enfold everything, including the "unattainable," inside a knowable life. Instead, his individual "failures" of attainment are a welcome mark of the limit of human understanding. With them, he confirms a space for the sacred, that limitless realm that begins at the moment the human ends. This knowledge—found in the not-knowing—discards any assuredness that might claim uncertainty as the only truth and suggests instead a higher responsibility. Zagajewski insists that our position allows us to look outward, to the sacred, and he insists that we are not merely held to our human knowledge.

Of course, the sacred can only be approached via its negative: the human. One does not attempt to stare directly into the sacred or even dare to understand it fully. As the poet looks around this poem's "unattainable afternoons," his understanding will not have the materiality of a symbol, as it would have for Keats equating the situation of the poet with that of autumn. It will not have an objective correlative—that tangible relation—as Eliot would prefer it. Rather, Zagajewski understands in the poem not from one of the afternoon's many things but among them. Or, more precisely, his understanding comes not from one moment of insight but through a series of foreshortened comprehensions. Throughout the poem, he has been "swirling" in his quest for understanding: up to each leaf, each piece of fruit, each time meeting the limit: unattainable, unattainable, unattainable, inscrutable, intangible, unattainable, unattainable, unattainable, on the

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other side of the street. Nine times he reaches this limit in the poem's fifteen lines. And the result is not bankruptcy but, unexpectedly, freedom.

Poetry—metaphysical, romantic, modern—has often sought to collapse or cut through the divide, to bring the sacred down to earth, to find the supernatural in the natural world, to locate an idea within a thing. Freedom for Zagajewski comes with the knowledge that the divide persists. The poet has begun to understand life by the way his own life falls within unattainability. Zagajewski does not inhabit a charged, symbolic realm wherein he negotiates his afternoons by divining the significance of every aspect in search of greater truth. Nor does he suffer the posture of desperation as does the Polish poet Aleksander Wat, who proposes the "situation of the poet" as "precisely like that of the prisoner who leaves prison for a short spell" and who, during his freedom, is frantic for signs and higher meaning. Most of Zagajewski's life—all of it, more likely—will pass in the realm of the profane, with the computer, pencil, and typewriter he has before him in "Self-Portrait." Yet to acknowledge these facts is not to rest in their profanity. Zagajewski picks up his pencil because he believes that the world, which remains largely unattainable, can still teach such virtues as "tenacity, faith, and pride." The freedom afforded him by his human condition does not obviate a responsibility to learn a preferred guidance from this condition. And yet this guidance arrives only in flashes and scraps.

Zagajewski purposefully plumbs the line of understanding, even if his achievement is, admittedly, often "just scraps of the precious thoughts" from "the great philosophers." Elsewhere, in what we might now call his "Self-Portrait of an Unattainable Life," he emphatically discerns exactly "three elements in music"—but then must admit to a fourth that "has no name." More revealing are some inscrutable trees near the middle of the poem. "Beside me trees expressing nothing," he writes, "but a green, indifferent perfection." That "nothing," experienced for a moment alone as the line breaks, taunts us with a worrisome emptiness. But if "nothing" is the aspect of these trees, their mode remains expressive. They aspire to present a particular meaning, and the poet encountering them remains eager for their transforma-

tion before him. Still, no metaphysical fireworks are wrought from a forest in Zagajewski's work, nor will there ever be. The expression of these trees becomes, in the next line, a complex of "green, indifferent perfection." On the side of the poet's understanding, those trees, however expressive, remain "indifferent" to him, as inscrutable as apples. But if this is the extent of what he can know, on the other side they still glimmer with "perfection," that hallmark of the sacred. The position of the poet is between these terms: suspecting—sometimes trusting in—perfection but often finding only indifference.

Still, "indifference" may indicate neither the world's stubborn refusal to reveal itself nor the poet's failure. The world is not a nut that "transformation" can crack. Perfection will only obliquely reveal itself to him. In fact, indifference—like unattainability—may itself be a meaningful signal meant to keep the poet from chasing individual signs. Even so, Zagajewski insists on remaining forceful and forward in his oblique approach, as the poet in "A Quick Poem" speeds toward the sacred: "I was listening to Gregorian chants / in a speeding car / on a highway in France. / The trees rushed past. Monks' voices / sang praises to an unseen God." The poet and the monks ride parallel trajectories through the dark in their like quest for illumination. For the monks, the calm, sure vehicle of praise need not guess its way to a God who is certain and near—"just growing in the garden." For the poet, his poem provides uneasy passage: "Where was I going?" he asks, as he ventures toward the "abyss" of the "future." He is sure only of the great distance he must journey; right now he is "Far from dawn. Far from home." The meditative mode by which monks—and poets—transcend the known world has undergone a modern shift for this poet: "In place of walls—sheet metal. / Instead of a vigil—a flight. / Travel instead of remembrance. / A quick poem instead of a hymn." There is no fixed point from which to triangulate the sacred. Zagajewski's steel point of reference is itself on the move. There is no safe home for quiet contemplation of the unknown. Zagajewski's eye is intent on the horizon. There is no longer any looking back using memory as a map. Despite these substitutions, Zagajewski persists with his

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"quick" song and moves only onward toward salvation from his "tattered" life on "both sides of the road."

We know now that such salvation will not be easy or assured. Up ahead "a small, tired star" tries to guide him. But the star will not grow in brightness, nor will dawn flood the poem with its sole insight. Instead, the promise of the horizon is a "razor," a danger, a predator that "lies in wait," and the poet, peering just beyond this gauntlet, faces another adversary, "the black spider of evening and night." If "remembrance" has already been thwarted as mode of access to the divine, this "widow of so many dreams" stands in front of the unconscious portal. This leaves only poetry. Although the poet's prospects at the end of this poem are dark, he maintains his forward momentum toward the horizon of the sacred.

Zagajewski's most illustrative quest-poem, "To Go to Lvov," internalizes this dynamic. In it, the poet seeks the lost city where he was born, a city that was erased by redrawn boundaries after the war. It begins in transit, its goal of Lvov simultaneously elusive and already met in the timeless, uninflected state of the infinitive.

To go to Lvov. Which station  
for Lvov, if not in a dream, at dawn, when dew  
gleams on a suitcase, when express  
trains and bullet trains are being born. To leave  
in haste for Lvov, night or day, in September  
or in March. But only if Lvov exists,  
if it is to be found within the frontiers and not just  
in my new passport . . .

His drive for Lvov is not the flight of a dream; he is looking for the worldly platform from which he might leverage a departure. It is not the typical retrieval of memory; because he left the city as an infant and then heard of its glories from his family, Zagajewski has mostly *memories of memories* of Lvov. Rather, his quest will take place "within the frontiers" of existence. The original and happy fields of Lvov are not a far-off idea, nor are they a sign stamped in a passport. They are evidenced in the world yet not confined by its brute fact. They exist; they align him with the world he lives in; and they suggest that there is more beyond this world. Indeed, all of Lvov—its cathedral and its Orthodox church, its silence and its pealing bells, its buckets full of raspberries and its forsythia—is strong and present, and these facts then overbloom the poem. We experience firsthand a bounty that "overflows" any container for Lvov, and then we experience the import of this: "no one could comprehend" it. This surfeit places Lvov not alone—it is not a sole perfection—but *among* the whole, rich, overbrimming world. Lvov is as unattainable as all the rest. This does not diminish Lvov. This makes Lvov an emblem of the sacred and Zagajewski's quest for it a metaphysical pursuit.

In his quest for Lvov, Zagajewski faces a darker threat, lamentably. There was, we now know, "too much," "so much," too "too much of Lvov"—and then excess breaks off "and now there isn't any." The excess of Lvov falls to a kind of base materiality employed by censors and other chilly, critical gardeners of the world who prune the world's tendency toward infinity and replace it with leafless fact. Left alone these same tailors would hem poetry into statute. They would cut down its reach.

Perfectly, these final perils do not cancel the poet's quest but rather broaden it. The Lvov that cannot be reached and which censors erase confirms its supreme place. If it could be had, it would not be sacred. But if Lvov is sacred, it is not unique. Its ubiquitous impossibility configures all of Zagajewski's life—and it may just transform our lives as well. Faced with impossibility, unattainability, Adam Zagajewski pauses only briefly. Why, he asks, "must every city become a Jerusalem and every man a Jew"? But before his question can stall in lament, he is off toward his holy city, more sure of its sacred existence, and he would charge us to hurry always toward our highest prospect, too, that remarkable moment when the quotidian bursts into the transcendent: "and now in a hurry just / pack, always, each day, / and go breathless, go to Lvov, after all / it exists, quiet and pure as / a peach. It is everywhere." **WLT**

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