

The New Salon: Writers in Conversation

Adam Zagajewski with Alice Quinn

AN INTERVIEW

Introduction by Petro Moysaenko

Washington Square is pleased to bring its readership yet another installment of *The New Salon: Poets and Fiction Writers in Conversation*. Convening regularly at New York University's Lillian Vernon Creative Writers House, *The New Salon* provides a forum in which talented writers discuss their work and craft before an attentive audience. On the evening of September 25th, 2008, Alice Quinn interviewed the eminent poet, novelist, and essayist Adam Zagajewski.

Born in 1945 in Lwów—a baroque assembly of churches and cathedrals above the Carpathian Mountains—Zagajewski was pushed from the city when the Soviet regime drew close and was raised in Gliwice and Kraków. He staked his claim as a Polish poet among the dissidents of the “Generation of 1968” and published his first book in 1972, fittingly titled *Komunikat*—or *Communique*. Over years spent in Paris, Houston, Chicago, and Kraków, he released a succession of other books, political to varying degrees, but always concerned with the problems of home and person, the fractured brain and the abyss. Zagajewski's most recent book of poems, *Eternal Enemies*, expands upon his dialectic of hope and doubt through a collection of elegies to late poets and his own evaporated days. In September, he read to a packed room and when he finished, someone asked for another poem.

He obliged after sitting for what he termed a “debate” with Alice Quinn, another irrepressible force in the world of letters. After editing with Alfred A. Knopf, Alice Quinn served for two decades as the poetry editor of *The New Yorker*. She stepped down from that post in 2007 to continue her work with the Poetry Society of America and Columbia University. In 2006 she sparked controversy with *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box*, her collection of previously unpublished poems by Elizabeth Bishop. She is now in the process of editing Bishop's journals and letters. At the Lillian Vernon Writers House, Quinn engaged Adam Zagajewski in a dialogue about identity, aesthetics,

memory, and witness. What follows is an exploration of inspiration, friendship, legacy, and the art of holding on and passing through.

ALICE QUINN: We had only one little debate when we [*The New Yorker*] were set to publish “Try to Praise the Mutilated World,” and it was over the word “praise.” Adam was teetering between “praise” and the word “extol,” which in the moment would not have been right, but in hindsight seems very much a Zbigniew Herbert kind of choice. And in this wonderful book that Adam has edited, *Polish Writers on Writing*, there are the most extraordinary letters from Herbert to his philosophy professor...

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: Henryk Elzenberg.

ALICE QUINN: Herbert reveals his almost helpless intellectual courage and his moral courage in these passages, and I thought I should introduce it. It’s almost impossible, Adam, not to ask you about these figures because it’s like being in the presence of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes and not asking about Marianne Moore and T.S. Eliot. Herbert is trying to decide whether he’s going to be a philosopher, and what he says is wonderful:

“I was urged to study Thomism. I started going to readings of the Summa and, indeed, many things began to fall into place and become clear. I felt happy and free and this was the first signal that I should run away, that something in my human substance was being distorted. I felt the pleasure of judgment and classification, but a human being is better defined by words beginning with ‘un’ after all—unrest, uncertainty, unconformity; and does one really have the right to abandon that state?”

I want to ask you to explore the influence of his bracing vigilance on your own work because he’s been such an important figure for us here.

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: Well, I think it happens to many poets, who in their youth pretend that they study philosophy. They are completely different from philosophers. I don’t think they’re stupider; they’re just seeing the world from the other end of the binoculars. Herbert was a typical young poet who didn’t know who he was, but slowly discovered that he was not a philosopher. He tried. These letters were written to a philosopher, Henryk Elzenberg, a noble, lonely figure, somebody who in Stalinist Poland was very independent and

had a very modest life as a translator but never betrayed his philosophical positions. So in this letter—this is a funny letter because Herbert is trying to flatter him—he says he doesn’t need to have certainty the way Descartes would want it. He doesn’t need what philosophers dream of. They want to find the ultimate formula, and poets don’t want to find the formula.

I am teaching in Chicago and am on the Committee on Social Thought. They are great scholars, and I’m the only non-scholar among them, and it’s a very strange feeling. They know everything. I’m just asking questions all the time. Herbert’s influence? I admired him, have admired him from the very beginning. I still admire him. I think if you write, you never know who really influenced you strongest—was it Herbert or another poet?

What I learned from him? I don’t know exactly what I learned. When I was preparing this anthology, I desperately wanted to have these letters because they show Herbert when his opinions are not yet completely shaped, not yet formed, when he has this boyish—this very young—relationship to the world. But this cannot influence others because we are boyish on our own account, right? He has become for me a mythological figure because he came to my high school and he was the first living poet I saw. I think that when it happened I probably paid a lot of attention, but only later on, I constructed this whole mythology of how much this event had shaped me. His poetry accompanies me all the time, and what I love is this half-jocular, half-serious tone, this utter seriousness in the disguise of irony. I think he is a master of this.

ALICE QUINN: In your *Threepenny Review* article on Miłosz, you mention his first response to the poetry and the drama of your generation, and his feeling that they were forcibly political, too naked and almost foolishly confrontational. You also speak about the effect of exile on Miłosz because he had lost this unmediated access to the spectacle of his own country. I was wondering if you would talk about how it has been for you, for so many years, and how it’s changed now that you’re able to connect again more fully with your own generation of poets because you’re spending more time in Poland.

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: I live in Kraków. I teach in Chicago. In the mid-seventies a friend of mine, a painter who was able to travel to the United States, sent Miłosz a very fat envelope filled with poems, plays, and reproductions of paintings of our generation, and the common denominator for this creation

was an angry dialogue with the Communist power. Miłosz dismissed the entire business of attacking the Communist government. He thought that this was just too easy, too simple-minded. When I read his letter, it shocked me. It was a moment when I couldn't agree with him, but I knew that he was right in many respects. Now I think that he was also jealous. He was not jealous that we were young—but of course we're always jealous of the young—but jealous that we had this experience of a struggle. He was in Berkeley and had this feeling that nobody reads him there. He has said somewhere, or one of his friends said, that when he turned sixty, he got not a single letter with birthday greetings. He was so lonely, and when one day in Paris, Adam Michnik recited from memory dozens of his poems, he just started to cry. He couldn't believe that somebody could be so deeply interested and in love with his poetry.

I think my exile was different, was shorter, more private. I went to Paris for so-called romantic reasons, for a woman and not for politics, and it doesn't mean that I had easy access to what was going on in Poland, but still I cannot compare these two experiences. His was thirty-two years of solitude in California. For me, twenty years of solitude in Paris. So it's incomparable.

ALICE QUINN: I was very struck, reading an anthology of Serbian poetry introduced by Charles Simic, in which he said he had always thought of himself as an American poet until he immersed himself in Serbian poetry and in the translation of it. Of course you have always been a Polish poet, but I am wondering about the influence of your contemporaries here in America and your friendships with them and your work.

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: And my French contemporaries as well? Well, the French poets told me I'm not a poet. The French have a different aesthetic. This is an anecdote: many years ago when my wife was not yet my wife, she translated some of my poems into French. She was looking for a native speaker who would help her and found a younger French poet and gave him a bunch of her translations, first drafts. He says, "Ok, I'll read them and I'll tell you in a few days if I will do them or not." So they met again and he told her, "I'm sorry, I don't like these poems"; and she says, "But why?" "Look," he said, "he has this poem about Schopenhauer, and in the first line he cites the dates of life of Schopenhauer. This is not poetry. Poetry is timeless." And then I understood that there was no common ground, and it remained like this.

I'm not saying that I have no readers in France, I do, but it's a completely different world. Just a year ago, a well-known French poet came to Kraków and we had a public conversation and I asked him about this "French difference" in poetry. He denied it. "No, we're exactly like everybody else," he said. "Look, John Ashbery writes like us." He also said, "Well, you know, actually, I read Polish poets, in translation of course, and it's a very interesting poetry, so believe me I'm interested in this. There is only one thing that astonishes me when I read Polish poetry. When I read your poems—not just yours—I see that you still have a problem with God. In France we decided it's a childish question. It doesn't exist." I won't tell you his name. Maybe he wouldn't be saved.

It's a completely different thing with the American poets. When I came to Houston for the first time in 1988, there was Richard Howard, there was Edward Hirsch. C.K. Williams was my best friend in Paris. Then I met many other Americans—they gave me a feeling of friendship, of acceptance of what I was doing, and I too was deeply interested in what they were doing. So my semesters in Houston were not only necessary for me on economic terms because I made a living coming to Houston, they gave me a sense of community that I didn't have in Paris. I was and still am deeply interested in the different aspects of American poetry. I have some problems with the youngest American poetry, which is so playful—which is wonderful—but maybe there is some monotony in this playfulness. But of course the younger poets are different, too. I'm not here to debate younger American poets.

ALICE QUINN: When we were in Kraków in 2002, there was a big conversation about American poetry and why we had such a tremendous need for, and appreciation of, Polish poetry. I think it was referred to as our need of a kind of nourishing skepticism. At that conference we talked about Elizabeth Bishop, about Walt Whitman and the cleansing way he approached death, the emptiness that's required for a certain fertility. C.K. Williams talked about writing a poem about Anne Frank, and he said that he wrote it in a white heat, that it was almost a sensual exhilaration, connecting to something so powerful and writing through that lens of history. He referred to it as the adolescence of his ethical self, and I'm wondering if you feel that our poetry is seen a little differently now, whether we have produced significant poets of witness in recent years. I'm wondering whether our poetry has achieved a little bit more weight according to the European perspective.

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: It's a funny question. Who am I to testify before the congress? I don't think we ever thought that American poetry was lacking in gravity, not at all. I think the different layers of American poetry that were accessible in Poland were very complex; this poetry always spoke to the tragic sense of responsibility and also to a sense of language and inventiveness. But these two vectors were combined in American poetry. So yes, I do admire many of C.K. Williams's poems and the seriousness of them and the seriousness of many other American poets. But as I say, I think it's not a very new phenomenon. I see it rather as a constant than something very new.

ALICE QUINN: I think the young Polish critics—not the poets themselves—were saying that we haven't seen the darkness yet, that we have yet to live through this, that World War II didn't really end in Poland until 1989. It was a strong discussion. The younger Polish poets have been fairly influenced by Frank O'Hara and the New York School, haven't they? Is that still nourishing them?

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: Well, I always think it's very difficult to have these big categories. I think younger Polish poets are tired of moral seriousness. They want to be playful like the young American poets. Now, I think it's not so much O'Hara.; it's Ashbery who's the hero. There is a situation of a revolt, of a generational revolt against the seriousness of the poetry of their predecessors. They want to write language poetry. They want to write funny poetry. They don't want dates in poems. They think that poetry has nothing to do with time, only with language. And the language has to be impenetrable, opaque. So that's the situation. Of course, not all of them—there are some younger poets who in a very inventive way continue the tradition of the older generation. I think that it's just a phenomenon that is maybe limited to one generation. But who knows?

ALICE QUINN: I'm reminded of Herbert's moving statement, "I feel the lack of tablets of value in the contemporary world." Let's open the conversation up to the audience.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Since I'm not a trained poet, just an amateur, I find that the translation from one language to the other leaves a lot of problems for someone who was not born here, who did not study it from childhood. I wanted to ask Professor Zagajewski—How do you manage? How many

changes can you make translating one poem from the other? From English to Polish and vice versa—that is what I am doing, and I wanted to see how much freedom you have.

ALICE QUINN: Elizabeth Bishop wrote in a notebook from the 1940s that translating poetry is like trying to put your feet into gloves.

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: But there are socks [laughter]. I do not translate my own poems. I read tonight one short poem of mine translated by myself, but usually I don't do it because I don't trust myself. I have this wonderful translator, Clare Cavanagh, who knows English much better than I do. The business of translation is about these invisible layers of language, unwritten rules of the idiomatic language, which you get when you are two years old. I can't answer your question. Besides, I have no talent for translating. So I simply don't do it.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Who is translating you into French?

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: It used to be my wife, who even after being discouraged by the French poet persisted for some time in doing it, but now she refuses to continue. I think it will be Laurence Dyèvre—she will do the next collection in French.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I just wanted to ask, if it's not too personal, who was that painter friend of yours who was writing to Miłosz?

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: I'm afraid that you would not know this painter. He is not very famous. His name is Leszek Sobocki. He is in Kraków, and he is deeply unfashionable. The young painters don't pay attention to him. He did very interesting things in the sixties and seventies, and I think he still does interesting things. But he is—for me—a very sad example of an artist who is now not young and is completely rejected by the young generation.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: You seem to have written your self-portrait poems over a stretch of years. Is it the very idea of self-portrait that is a spur for you? Has the word itself changed in its integral meaning?

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: Well, it started in a very banal way. You know this is not something I've invented. There are many self-portraits in poetry. I remember once in Houston, Ed Hirsch gave his students the assignment to write a self-portrait, so I thought I could write one, too. And so the idea is interesting for me because I think it's contrary to the main direction of what Miłosz called the Polish School of Poetry. And the Polish School of Poetry is supposed to look at the world, not at yourself. So nothing could be further from this than the Confessional Poets who tell you about their divorces and depressions and the drinking bouts. It doesn't mean the Polish poets didn't drink, but they wouldn't talk about this in their poems. They were talking about universal subjects. So I guess a little bit out of interest in forbidden things I thought, "Why don't I try self-portraits?" Miłosz would not condemn me for this. The first one I wrote when I was turning fifty, a while ago, alas. Then, for a long time there was nothing, and now this year, I suddenly wrote four or five new self-portraits.

ALICE QUINN: Zbigniew Herbert wrote that "we must cling to uncertainty." I wanted to read this little passage from Wisława Szymborska. I think it's from her Nobel speech.

"Poets, if they're genuine, must also keep repeating 'I don't know.' Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was pure makeshift that's absolutely inadequate to boot. So the poets keep on trying, and sooner or later the consecutive results of their self-dissatisfaction are clipped together with a giant paperclip by literary historians and called their 'oeuvre'...."

Well, Adam, the new poems you read are gorgeous.

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: Thank you.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Would you be willing or able to say a little more on the playfulness of the younger poets? Do you figure it is correlated to a notion that since the very question of God is childish, one might as well have some fun? Or is this tendency symptomatic of some distinct immaturity, an inability to deal with final questions?

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI: I like your question very much. I have no answer, and I am simply wondering. I think this playfulness is an intellectual fashion. It's not a stance that each of these younger poets has found for himself or herself. There's too much of it. It's too easy. I think that playfulness is a decor of poetry, and without playfulness, there is no poetry. But I think poetry is a choir that has many voices, the voice of playfulness and the tragic voice, too. I think that to limit this choir of poetry to just one voice is a huge mistake, especially when this is a mass phenomenon, a fad. Some of these young poets are incredibly inventive. They make me laugh; they're so imaginative. I just don't understand why they—I'm not saying all of them, it's never like this—but so many of them have the same relationship to the world and the word where the playfulness is all that is the creed of this poetry. I think the problem in the thousands of workshops in creative writing programs in this country is that these things are not really discussed because you only discuss what happens in the first line, or this line, of the poem. There is this tendency to transform the workshop into an editing class, a class on how to edit a poem and not to ask why this playfulness is so overwhelming, and what is behind it. Can you have a philosophy of playfulness, or is this just a mistake, a very funny mistake?