Adam Zagajewski and Edward Hirsch, Krakow 2005

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Edward Hirsch and Adam Zagajewski

A Conversation

This conversation took place in the beautiful medieval city of Krakow on September 16, 2005. The two poets spoke in the offices of ZNAK, which was one of the few independent publishers under communism, and continues to be a successful publishing house. Earlier that day they had visited Czeslaw Milosz's sarcophagus in the crypt at Na Skalce *(On the Rock), a baroque Catholic church, and the weight of his death was very much on their minds.*

Hirsch: This is the first time that I've come to Kracow since the death of Czeslaw Milosz. And I feel a great emptiness here. A giant rock is missing. There's no lion at the gate. I wonder what your thoughts are about being in Kracow without Milosz.

Zagajewski: I agree with you, there is an emptiness. There's a mourning. I have the feeling that we still don't quite understand the value, the true dimension, of his work. But I also feel that his presence was a gift—from destiny, from I don't know whom. In a way, a place like Kracow, the intellectual universe of Poland, was privileged by his presence. There was such a difference between Poland, who had someone like Milosz, and everywhere else. It's an unusual situation in our time to have one dominating intellectual figure, this great bard, this great poet. No country in Europe could claim the same situation, the same figure who would guarantee the stability of truth. You don't have such a single dominating poet in, say, France or Germany, in Russia or the Czech Republic. It was a very unusual privilege for us. It's true there is not a complete consensus about his greatness, there's always going to be some poet or intellectual claiming that he was not so important. But we can disregard this. And now, since he's gone, the situation in this country is back to normal. You have the normal modern and post-modern situation of not having such a great, dominating figure. So for us, who are still alive, and have been working and thinking, it is a challenge what to do now. I look at this not with despair, but as an intellectual challenge, especially for me. I'm not saying somebody has to jump into Milosz's footsteps—nobody can. But those

who are still around have to understand his absence not only as a huge sadness, but also as the beginning of a more normal challenging intellectual situation.

Hirsch: For the American poet, Milosz raised a compelling series of subjects. He stimulated our interests and enlisted our sympathies. One of the things he brought to us was a serious dialogue about poetry's relationship to history. This was especially fascinating to us because America is such an a-historical country and Americans have so little historical consciousness (Henry Ford famously said that "history is bunk"). Milosz raised certain questions of consciousness and conscience without fully resolving them, without ever suggesting that poetry should be completely committed to history. But he did raise the key question about poetry's basic or fundamental relationship to large outside events. I suspect this is a radically different question for an American poet than it is for a Polish one.

Zagajewski: I think it is quite different. This doesn't mean that Milosz's solution, his basic attitude, was a typical central-European attitude. It is not true that poets and writers living in this part of Europe automatically have an intimate relationship with history, as opposed to American poets. Maybe they are much more drawn to history than typical American poets, but Milosz actually did something that redefined the romance with history. I think he was helped by Auden's example. It's not that there were no models in this tradition, there were; but his situation was that the great models in Polish Romanticism—for example, his hero Adam Mickiewicz—were deeply historical poets, almost too historical. They were almost propagandists in the nationalistic case. So Milosz redefined the problem. He took a very modern attitude towards things—by modern, I mean not at all propagandistic. He was the opposite of a nationalist poet, for whom history has this universal value of an avalanche that can kill. He was not in the mold of these great Romantic bards. They were serving a cause. Milosz was not. He meditated on history as Everyman, as somebody who was not especially Polish or Lithuanian, but purely human, and happened to find himself in this rather unhappy part of Europe. But the force of his intellectual personality created a whole phenomenon of a deepened interest in history. So, now, indeed, there's a whole generation of poets who, like Herbert, like Szymborska, have had the same romance with history, though in a very personal way. So, yes, I

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think there is probably a huge difference between an American poet and a Polish poet. And yet the role of history has to be very carefully defined in poetry.

Hirsch: Milosz was continually considering the nature of life in the 20th century. He was obsessed by the nature of the century that we lived in. He wanted to get to the bottom of the riddle of evil in history. I find that exemplary. Your comparison with Auden is also instructive. I find a kind of divide in Auden between his early and late work. There's a split between his early political commitments, so characteristic of the 1930s, and his later compulsion to become a Christian poet. This points toward something that I find deeply compelling. I feel that both Auden and Milosz are spiritual and intellectual guides, poets who confronted an inherent dualism or conflict in the very role of poetry itself. On the one hand, poetry has to pay attention to the world. One role of poetry is to attend to what actually happens. Poetry needs to tell the truth about the world as it really exists. It has to be a conscience. On the other hand, I also feel that it is important for poetry is to forget these things and to seek something that is permanent, something lasting and true. Poetry has a metaphysical depth. And so I feel these poets provide us with the opportunity to think in a serious way about the dual purposes of poetry. Poetry attaches us to this world and to what happens in it, even as it also takes us away from this world. It asks us to try to inscribe language under the sign of eternity.

Zagajewski: Well, I couldn't agree more. I think this is a fascinating duality, which I once I called ecstasy and irony. For me, the most fundamental thing in poetry is the ecstatic quality, the imagination's acclamation of the world—as you say, looking for something that is permanent or seems to be permanent. This is an act or leap of faith in the world, sometimes a leap of faith in God. For some poets, it simply amounts to embracing the world, the living world itself. But for many readers, for many observers, this act of acclamation seems to be ridiculous because there is so much misery in the world—I don't mean economic misery, I mean human misery, the nastiness of political systems and also, somehow, the imperfectness of human nature. I think for every ecstatic poet there is a satirical poet who wants to say, "Oh, wait a moment, wait a moment, you are so enraptured about this and that, why don't you see how horrible the world is?" Both Auden and

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Milosz are examples of poets in whom this duality comes to fruition. If you go too far towards affirmation then you risk losing the brutal, historic reality. But then, if you limit yourself to describing the ugliness of history and societal life, there's no poetry at all. I think poetry lives more deeply in the act of affirmation, in this act of imagination, than in the satirical, Swiftian mood.

Hirsch: I suspect that most poets feel the need to choose between two alternative commitments. They are so inflamed and incensed, perhaps rightly, by what happens that they believe that poetry should and must be a social critique. Poetry must throw itself into the fray because the press of events, at any time, is so great—there's so much suffering, there's so much misery, there's so much political evil. It is poetry's job to resist. And I myself believe that poetry has a tremendous responsibility to seek social justice. On the other hand, there are other poets who think that poetry shouldn't be corrupted in any way by social and political concerns. They feel that poetry should be about large metaphysical subjects, such as the nature of time. Many followers of Rumi, for example, seem to feel that the task of poetry should be entirely spiritual. I also feel greatly pulled toward the spiritual element in poetry. But as soon as I go completely over to this side, if you will, I feel tugged back by resistance to the impure world. And when I'm in the impure world, I also feel the longing for this other pure domain. I admit it: I'm a split creature.

Zagajewski: This corresponds, in many ways, to where we are today. For me, the expression and conquest of spirituality is the royal road in poetry. But sometimes you read poets who (I would not name names) are dwelling too safely in this endeavor without paying attention to all the obstacles. For me, spirituality, as expressed in poetry, is fascinating only if you get the spirituality with all the obstacles. Sometimes it's the mental obstacles: our laziness, our incapacity to dwell forever in higher moments because we are so imperfect. For us, these high spiritual moments are just islands, and we live in the quotidian. Sometimes we betray our vocation—perhaps not in a large but in a small way. What I find truly fascinating is a very complex portrayal of the spiritual, which comes with all the obstacles, many of them of a social nature. I think of poverty and injustice, the stupidity of political systems. For me, what's really interesting is this drama of spirituality coming to itself

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through endless obstacles, through endless moments of stupidity, moments of lacking concentration, or forgetting social injustice. Sometimes poets, or artists of any high art, can almost seem to be condoning the social system. This is horrible when you see the higher intellectual endeavor as a kind of flower under the tyrant's hoof. This may be less of a risk in a democracy. But for me this very drama between high spirituality and its obstacles is almost the essence of poetry. I like the tension between trying to get to the deeper layer, but never forgetting the shallowness of the beginnings of this road, and the ending of this road. In a way, I see the poet as a mystic who not only describes the highest moment of his road, but is also quite scrupulous about all his failings, all his mistakes, and all his clumsiness.

Hirsch: When it comes to poetic means—methods and strategies—I think there's a kind of continuum from the most impure poetry, which would be represented by, say, Pablo Neruda, to the most pure poetry, which would be represented by, say, Stéphane Mallarmé. I'm curious about these two radically different poles of poetry. And I wonder if you see yourself on this continuum: where would you place yourself, between a completely impure poetry represented by Neruda, and a completely pure poetry represented by Mallarmé?

Zagajewski: It's a difficult question. I think I see myself on the impure side, but with a huge longing for purity. It's not so much the pull of Mallarmé, but something closer to the purity of some of Rimbaud's late prose poems. But I see the interest of the pure in contrast with the impure. The very significance of the pure, for me, is established in its contact with the impure. This very contrast really gets me going. The pure, in itself, is so immobile; it's very noble. But the drama, the movement, the drive begins with the different temperatures between the impure and the pure. I have a poem, "Sunrise in Cassis," which follows a spiritual act of deep affirmation, but which is built on all the crudeness of the world.

Hirsch: I think that, in a way, the impure and the pure need each other, in the same way that, say, the city needs the country and the country needs the city. Urban literature, for example, seems to define itself, to find its essential character, in opposition to what the country and the pastoral represent. So, too, the pastoral in literature defines and

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characterizes itself—it finds its true meaning—in contrast to the world of the city. In the same way, perhaps, the impure and the pure find their meanings in relationship to each other. We need both.

Zagajewski: But now I would like to reverse the question. I'm curious: how do you see this relationship between the pure and the impure in your own poetry?

Hirsch: I would say that I find myself in a somewhat parallel situation to yours, though, of course, I'm working in an American context. I find myself vacillating between extremes. For example, as soon as someone suggests that poetry is essentially impure, that it must be completely entangled with the world, that it's really only a bodily experience, then I object; I find myself saying, "Wait, no, what about the quest for truth? What about the nature of time? What about Pascal's glorious wager?" On the other hand, as soon as someone suggests that poetry is exclusively the domain of metaphysical truth, that it's all about Pascal's wager, I find myself objecting; I think, "What about human suffering? What about all those people who've been oppressed? What about the daily indignities and catastrophes that are happening to people everywhere? What about the evil taking place around the world? Poetry has to be entangled in this world; it has to be responsible to people, too." And so I find myself in a sometimes productive, sometimes debilitating, dialogue between these two positions. I am sometimes paralyzed by the conflict between poetry's quest for the monastery and its responsibility to go out into the street. Other times, I feel it's a very productive tension; poetry can be created out of its dual affiliations.

Zagajewski: I have a book-long essay, *Another Beauty*, which is also a piece about the city of Krakow. Readers in Poland as well as in some other countries can see my quest for the pure, for the epiphanic, but they also see the description of a common city. But, interestingly, some of my readers here, in this country, attacked me; they said I beautify Kracow as an impoverished city. I thought about this for a long time: I think what happened is that everything in this book, which also describes the magic of some of my revelations in reading, took place in Kracow. Some people felt I was falsifying the reality of the city; they said, "Oh, look, this city was simply filled with police spies, with miserable, poor people. And you have introduced your flights of

imagination into this grim city." But I still defend this book because, for me, each city's also inhabited by flights of imagination. For me, any city without flights of imagination—either mine or somebody else's—is a desert. It's also true that there's something almost treacherous in the imagination. Flights of imagination (they are flights from reality into something bigger) are enigmatic and not easily definable. I find it interesting that imagination, which is our weapon, our matter, the medium in which we breathe, has also this treacherous aspect of making us fly. It lets us forget that there is also a very bizarre and brutal reality beneath us. We have to look down. To keep the equilibrium between the high and the low is so incredibly difficult.

Hirsch: I believe that if poetry becomes entirely a form of social witnessing, then poetry also limits itself terrifically. I mean, aren't there some things that journalism can do better than poetry? A poet is not a journalist. The work of poetry is not merely to witness reality. A poet doesn't limit poetry to description. Without a singular vision, poetry loses its soul. There are historical moments where there's tremendous pressure on the poet to tell what happened. This is true in every country. It happens during certain historical periods of crisis. It's true, too, for every ethnicity. For example, Jewish poets faced this pressure in America in the 1930's; they were leftist poets who felt very much that they belonged to the proletariat. They had to speak for the working class. But most of the poetry that came out of the Jewish socialist movement only has political and historical interest; unfortunately, it doesn't transcend its time. And even though literary theory is now especially intent on placing poetry back into its time, on returning it to its local historical circumstances, I also believe that some part of poetry needs to transcend its time. Poetry longs to be free. It wants to move past its historical boundaries, even if this is not wholly possible.

Zagajewski: Our conversation is very difficult because we agree in almost everything. I completely agree with you here. I see the same limitation in the idea of witnessing, of poetry conceived as a form of witnessing. Great poets like Milosz, who were witnesses of history, were also something else, something more. Within Milosz's witness poems for example, you have another force, the force of imagination. For example, there appears a mysterious mole in a poem such as "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto." This mole can be seen as standing for

imagination. Minor poets don't have this "mole of imagination." I also suspect that after a hundred years our time will be seen as obsessed with history, in a good way mostly, because we are obsessed with memory. Of course, we have to remember the Holocaust, we have to remember the Gulag Archipelago. There is almost a certain intellectual easiness because these things are given to us. There's no spiritual or intellectual risk in condemning the Holocaust. The work of memory is of the utmost importance. I'm the last person who would protest against it, but sometimes when I see young writers, young poets enter into the domain of the Holocaust, or much less so, the domain of the Gulag Archipelago, I think that's maybe a little easy, that they enter this ready-made history. They don't have any trouble, because, it's easy to condemn evil once it's gone.

Hirsch: But I think that the moral stance of poetry is much more complicated when the poet is implicated in something. I think it's more interesting when the poet sees himself (or herself) as part of experience. It's much easier to stand above the world and simply condemn evil, which, at times, needs condemning. I'm interested in the more complicated and even Dostoevskian perspective when the self is somehow implicated in what it's observing. I'm compelled by works in which the self is somehow corrupted or polluted, somehow involved or responsible. This makes for more struggle, more agony, for a more complicated self-consciousness in observing what's happened.

Zagajewski: Yes, I agree, but I think these are very rare cases of great writers who have those two struggles going on—not only the struggle with evil, but also the struggle with themselves. I think that when you say "Dostoevsky," you define the greatness of the culture and the rareness of the prose. But most of the present day, late witness poetry or fiction, I think, is free from this second struggle. It only has the somewhat late and easily winnable struggle with Hitler. There's less of this really fascinating struggle with yourself, with your feelings, with your weaknesses, and with your own evil. After all, Dostoevsky also was, to a large extent, an evil thinker, hating Jews and Poles and Catholics, etc.

Hirsch: I suppose he hated everyone else.

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Zagajewski: Well, except for the Russians.

Hirsch: In a way, I think that poetry is a kind of a testimony, but it's an unauthorized testimony, which is one of the things that distinguishes it from religion. There are elements of prayer in it, but it's the prayer of a solitary individual; it doesn't have the authority of scripture. It doesn't have the stability of scripture, nor does it have the endorsement of scripture. What it has is the solitary consciousness going on it own. And, of course, it can be criticized for this, but this is also its glory.

Zagajewski: The poet is somebody who has no church, but who does have a body of tradition. There's Homer and Dante. For Polish poetry, there's Mickiewicz, Slowacki, Norwid. For American poetry, there's Whitman and many other poets. I absolutely agree there is something in writing poetry that is naked and private and very much exposed to error, to mistake. This is why I think that writing poems is also recording your own life. I don't mean this in the sense of confessional poetry, of complaining about your marriage, but, more deeply, complaining about your imperfectness, complaining about your failings, your inability to establish the truth. This is a kind of second struggle: you struggle with the world, but also with yourself. I think the poet is almost obliged to reveal his weakness, to reveal his imperfectness, to expose himself. Poets should never found sects. The poet's church is a one person church. It dies with the person. This fragility of poetry is something that I cherish very much, although sometimes it makes me shiver…

Hirsch: The loneliness is so great, the solitude so deep, that many poets seek schools, perhaps not religious schools, but aesthetic ones. Poets crowd together, especially in America, which is such a large, indifferent country. There are so many poets, but everyone is also alone. And so poets come together to create schools. It's almost sociological. But, to me, there's something a little crude about schools in poetry. It takes courage to write poetry, as well as aesthetic means. You have to work alone; you have to proceed with your own unauthorized testimony. You have to be free to think and feel for yourself with all your flaws, with all your weaknesses, with all your personal agonies. And you struggle to reach beyond them, to leave something permanent behind. But, in a way, there's no escape from the fact that you have to do it yourself.

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Zagajewski: But there's also no escape from the zeitgeist. It either goes that poets are looking for poetry schools, or poetry fashions are looking for poets. There's this double quest or search. Fashion is one thing, but the zeitgeist, alas, exists; and I think there are many things that are more or less in play unknowingly . . .

Hirsch: Unconsciously . . .

Zagajewski: Unconsciously there is the working of the zeitgeist, which produces a lot that happens in our minds. We are lucky if we escape the action of the zeitgeist just a little bit. We're lucky to be able to have moments of individual vision.

Hirsch: I agree, because some of the conventions are invisible to us.

Zagajewski: Absolutely invisible. When you go to the museum and look at the 17th century paintings, you discover that, in a way, they are all alike. Now they have the dignity of history. Nobody will attack any one of the Caravaggista for following Caravaggio. I'm amazed at how strong the zeitgeist always was. It's as if all the paintings from one century form one body of work, of which the great painters like Rembrandt or . . .

Hirsch: Vermeer . . .

Zagajewski: . . . managed to get beyond. They all found five inches of great individuality. It's almost depressing to see the scale of the zeitgeist's impact on human imagination. We like to see the imagination as totally free, but, of course, it's not free at all. It works under the influence of the zeitgeist, of this very mysterious substance, which does not need to be thought of in Hegelian terms. What is the zeitgeist? We are all part of it. Even our conversation is infected by it. There's no solution, but at least we should be aware of it; we should try to escape the zeitgeist, which in everyday practice is expressed in fads and fashions.

Hirsch: At the very least, we can interrogate the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times we live in. We can try to be conscious. At least we can bring to our experience all the tools of poetry. We can bring forward what we know about the history of poetry. I think that all the strategies of

poems, all the poems that we love, can help us to a fuller consciousness, a fuller sensibility.

Zagajewski: Yes, erudition helps, a well-understood erudition. But I think that there is also a problem with a heightened awareness. Younger poets obviously have very little sense of it. They just enter the zeitgeist like a swimmer who enters a lake. They swim in the zeitgeist and let themselves be driven by its waves. I think only with age—first you reach fifty, and then you reach sixty (which is, alas, my case)—comes a certain kind of knowledge. You look at your own path, and you see how many waves you've already outlived. You recognize the historicity of writing, and you see how little can be saved from that historicity, from the breath of the zeitgeist. But, of course, there is something that can be saved.

Hirsch: I want to conclude by proposing that poetry nonetheless seeks the stability of truth. Despite the fact that we're entangled in historical circumstances in ways we can't understand and can't escape, despite the reality that there are invisible conventions operating upon us at all times, the role of poetry, in the largest sense, is nonetheless to seek something that is permanent and a-temporal.

Zagajewski: I agree. I think the problem with the stability of the truth, or the truth itself, in this case, is immensely complex; and the tools we have, like imagination, like memory—

Hirsch: —language itself—

Zagajewski:—are complex and they fail us sometimes, or we fail them. One of the challenges is that the reader has the right to expect the stability of truth. But once you are inside your own imagination, your writing, your work, you see the immense complexity of the tension between imagination and reality, between honesty and inspiration. Inspiration is a little bit dishonest because it creates, sometimes, an easy paradise for a day. You have no external criterion; there's nobody there to tell you, "Oh, you went too far in this direction, you went too far . . ." You're the only master of this equilibrium. I agree that you are searching for the stability of truth, but you also need to do unpopular things, and the most unpopular thing is complexity. I think

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that the very archaic need of the reader is simplicity, or, at least a complexity that's manageable. I think when you are born under the sign of Gemini, which is my case, and when your mind is intoxicated by contradictions (not invented but real contradictions) you see that it's so difficult to be loyal to the full complexity of things. It's important not to capitulate, not to go in one way or the other. It's crucial to reproduce this complexity. And yet, you also need a lyric impulse, which is divinely simplified. I think that poetry always consists of these sort of painstaking intellectual contradictions. There's also the great wind of lyric inspiration, which is beyond intellectualism, which is almost the essence of the human, the humane.

Hirsch: It's the lyric song of being here.

Zagajewski: The song of our presence is, in a way, very simple. Poetry has to live with the contradiction, the equilibrium, between the intellectual impulse, which compels us to reflect, to think, and the lyric impulse, which, in itself, has the simplicity of life.

Hirsch: Poetry makes many demands on us, but I do love the idea of the lyric as the song of pure being. We're here. We need to sing about it.