Going to Lwow: Remembering Adam Zagajewski

VICTORIA NELSON

My first in-person meeting with the late (how strange it feels to write that word!) poet Adam Zagajewski took place in the spring of 1986 at the international wing of the San Francisco airport. I'd set up a reading for him in the city and was picking him up to stay with me until he transitioned to University of California, Berkeley for a second reading I had negotiated on that campus.

I knew more or less how to recognize the man—slender, hair already graying, distinctive black eyebrows—from the photograph on the inside jacket cover of *Tremor*, his first book of poems in English, just published the year before, but he had no idea how to recognize me. Suddenly the very fellow appeared some feet away from me, acting strangely: walking head down, very determinedly, in my direction until he stopped cold, pivoted, and then began striding equally fast, head still down, in the other direction. Disoriented and clearly nervous. Verdict: not exactly cool.

This Polish poet was not cool! How that realization instantly endeared him to me after prior encounters with insufferably hip German avant-gardists of the sort the Coen brothers memorably parodied in *The Big Lebowski*. The person revealed to me as we finally connected was indeed the opposite of cool. That is, he was genuine, honest, disarmingly open in the way you expect and hope any human being other than a visiting writer to be. A person, not a personage. Fresh and unspoiled. Unworldly even, though clearly a good ten steps closer to worldly than I was. And on the trip over the Golden Gate to Mill Valley we discovered to our mutual delight that we had both turned forty the year before.

During the decade of the eighties, thanks to the pathbreaking Penguin Writers of the Other Europe series, I'd acquired a deep

interest in Polish literature, in particular the work of the interwar figures Witold Gombrowicz and Bruno Schulz. As a way of bringing more of their work to light, I'd begun provisional translations of little-known bits of these two writers' work from the intermediate German. In Munich I'd picked up a copy of one of Adam's three novels, *Der dünne Strich* ("thin stroke" of a pen, referencing the hero's slender physique, from *Cienka kreska,* the original title in Polish). This was a loosely autobiographical roman à clef about a young Pole living in Berlin on a fellowship (as Adam had done); I read it with interest and was moved to translate one of the chapters. In this remarkable essay inside a fiction, Adam frames the true story of an interwar writer of popular novels, Jochen Klepper (identified only as "J. K."), in a fantastical conceit that casts the entire sweep of human history as the fictional creation of a personified Fate dubbed the "Head Author."

changed á to à: ok?

Adam's Fate is a capricious, unpredictable, highly energetic scribe with powers far exceeding those of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, to whom I suspect it is a playful homage. This "highly distinguished" Head Author is "more industrious than Balzac if not as conscientious as Flaubert" and not at all averse to cliché, burdened as it is with an insatiable need for the raw material that feeds its abundant "creative fantasies." During the hapless J. K.'s lifetime, Fate is engaged in writing a monumental epic novel whose numerous aesthetic failings, notably that "really extreme alexandrine," Adolph Hitler, literary critics (read: historians) rail against to no avail. Much like Milan Kundera's clueless poet antihero in *Life Is Elsewhere*, Klepper chose increasingly to identify with the powerful rather than the powerless ("like those stammering, bespectacled youths who dream of befriending the class bully," Adam's narrator Henryk says), but he ultimately committed suicide along with his Jewish wife and stepdaughter when the latter were scheduled for deportation to the camps. On a visit to Klepper's former home at the Wannsee and the nearby cemetery where the three are buried, Henryk reflects that Fate, in much the same way as his creation J. K., "as an artist . . . stands on the side of the weak; as an inspired and boundlessly prolific author, however . . . always bolts back over to the side of the strong, since it feels itself to be one

of them, feels itself greater than them." And if you think the epic the Head Author wrote for the thirties and forties is something, Henryk adds ominously, wait till you read what it's writing now.

The power of this essay-fiction moved me to seek out the just-published *Tremor*, and the brilliance of the work in those pages moved me in turn to want to introduce this poet to the West Coast's vibrant academic and poetry scene. When Adam and I arrived at my small two-story flat tucked inside a large wood-shingled house deep in Blythedale Canyon late that night, however, the close quarters suggested to both of us unworldly characters an inconvenient erotic subtext. Inconvenient for my part since it hadn't been a groupie-style invitation and, Moscow-apartment style, many guests of all sexes had already passed through that space. For his part Adam remained a proper gentleman and stalwart partner of Maja Wodecka back in—was it Paris where they were still living, the Wall not yet having fallen? The night passed easily and decorously on separate floors. The only echoes otherwise were his announcement in the morning that he had dreamed he was Joseph Brodsky (a noted womanizer) and Maja's mysterious failure to answer the phone at the other end for more than twenty-four hours—a circumstance that upset him considerably. I wondered about a bit of mock payback over staying overnight with another woman, but this possibility didn't seem to occur to Adam, who was only partially relieved when he finally got through to her.

The group reading in San Francisco Adam participated in—I can't remember any details of the venue or the occasion—was a success. From there he was booked in advance of his next reading into the UC Berkeley Faculty Club, situated in an idyllic corner of campus where Adam wondered gently if he risked being "mugged by squirrels." There was some time in between for sightseeing. Of one of the characteristic "fairy rings" near my house in Mill Valley—a circle of small secondary-growth redwoods hugging the giant stump of a logged tree—he remarked, "Lesser poets around a dead master," and on a trip to Audubon Canyon on the coast observed that the pine-forested slopes of Mount Tamalpais looked a lot like the area around Zakopane. (Curiously, people hailing from both the northern

and southern regions of Europe seem to find the terrain of Northern California a familiar landscape.)

As we drove around and walked on trails, I learned about Adam's deep connection with Maja, the ups and downs of their relationship as they broke up, she married another, and then reunited with Adam, the difficulties of living with anyone who did not understand a writer's need for solitude. There was a vacation in the south of France when he outraged her by declaring he wanted to stay on another week by himself. "I used to think it would make more sense to be with a fellow writer," he said, "But now I know I wouldn't want to." Maja had saved him from "drowning in books." They had a great love, he told me, along with all the joys and sorrows that entails.

I was to meet Maja Wodecka when she returned with Adam not long after when he was invited back for another reading at Berkeley, and a lovely, generous, radiant spirit she proved to be.

In many good ways Adam was still a boy in those days, with a boy's fresh, innocent, unfiltered personality. But if he was a kid at heart, this was no spoiled brat but an acutely sensitive child, the kind who from a very early age exhibits highly pronounced likes and dislikes. I recall the utter repulsion Adam expressed, turning his head quickly away, when we passed a glass bottle full of mummified frogs in a dusty Chinatown apothecary window in San Francisco. In later years there were also, occasionally, signs of a temper, but more the exasperated outbursts of a sensitive man than signals of deep implacable rage.

He was not soft or sentimental in his judgments. At the time of his first visit I was reading many writers' biographies and, off on a private tangent of my own, working out to my satisfaction which ones behaved unselfishly, or more simply were "good." When I proposed Chekhov as a candidate, Adam, exposing his own deep familiarity with writers' biographies, cried, "Good! Are you crazy? Chekhov exploited his sister mercilessly." He was amazed I'd even want to consider this personal quality in judging a writer. Indeed, in time I not only stopped being interested in finding goodness in writers but gave up reading their biographies entirely, realizing that the lives revealed were either

(1) uneventful and sad, or (2) overeventful, tragic, and sad. Extrovert adventurers make more interesting, and cheerful, subjects.

Not long after, Adam interviewed at various American universities for a teaching post. (One East Coast college, he told me after an interview there, carried the "stink of ignorance.") Eventually he took a half-year position at the University of Houston and soon complained that classes were a mutual conspiracy to prevent teachers and students alike from writing. But the post gave him the freedom to spend the rest of the year back in Krakow—this was now the 1990s—to devote to his work.

While he was at Houston, we communicated by phone as I sought Adam's advice on various matters of translation having to do with the publication of the Harper & Row edition of *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz*. Schulz's ornate, convoluted prose, condemned as decadent by the Nazis (the author himself murdered by a Nazi officer on the streets of his hometown Drohobycz in 1943) is an absolute bear to translate into English. Believing that the primary translator had not produced a sufficiently idiomatic version, the publisher engaged me to help render it into a more readable form. When the translator refused to work with me, I called on Adam for help difficult passages. My German edition of assorted *Prosa* by Schulz—essays, reviews, and odd bits of fiction not yet available in English—moved me also to suggest adding a few essays that expressed this writer's seductively inscrutable aesthetics. When the proposal was accepted, I was obliged in those pre-internet days to photocopy the pieces I had selected from their original Polish editions in Berkeley's Slavic Library and mail them to the publisher, who mailed them to the translator, who mailed the translated literals back to the publisher, who then mailed them on to me. Working on these translations I also had the backup of my German edition, but the bleaching effect of the resolutely loanword-free German vocabulary ("pure," the Nazis would have said) on Schulz's baroque prose made the transition into heavily Latin- and French-colonized English very tricky. I proposed to the publisher that Adam write the introduction, which he did, though he confided that immersing himself in an author's writings in this way often reminded

him of what he didn't like about that author. He didn't say what he didn't like about Schulz, but I can hazard a guess: the imprecision of Schulz's extravagant images, which could not have been pleasing to the committed allegorist Adam already was.

Years passed and Adam's literary reputation grew steadily, in Poland and abroad. New books of poetry, an essay collection, appeared in America through his publisher, Farrar, Straus & Giroux. He moved his half-year teaching venue to the University of Chicago. Then came 9/11. When his previously written poem, "Try to Praise the Mutilated World," appeared shortly afterward in the *New Yorker*, Adam's recognition skyrocketed in this country. He was now a famous poet here as well as in his homeland. Still I strongly suspect the topical notoriety that sprang directly from the publication of that poem, though always a bonus to a writer's career, would not have made him happy. His sense of history was far more subtle and all encompassing than the day's headlines, as momentous as that particular day was.

History, of course, was a major engine driving Adam's poetry along with philosophy and metaphysics. (In his creative merging of these fields he was very like a Renaissance natural philosopher, transmuting their abstractions in the crucible of feeling to produce the ineffable fifth element of poetry.) He could not avoid being enmeshed in, and responding to, the brutal twentieth-century European cataclysms that had shaped much of his life. But he preferred not to play the role of martyred exile, privately or professionally, and to me he repeatedly stressed that he had left Poland for personal, not political, reasons. (To my moan about not knowing French, this much-relocated fellow said cheerfully, "Just fake it! That's all you need to do.") I remember the regret I heard voiced by American writers back in those Iron Curtain days about the big opportunity they'd missed out on—namely, the chance to write from the center of great political upheavals. I'm pretty sure Adam would have dismissed this as nonsense—as would anyone forced to survive those highly unpleasant circumstances through no choice of their own. He would reject the vulgar notion of imagining you needed an "important subject," the crutch of earthshaking external events—where would that leave

Emily and the fly?—to lend your work its relevance.

In 2004 Berkeley's own Polish poet, the Nobel Prize winner Czeslaw Milosz, died in Krakow, where he had returned to live out his old age. The following year this university where Milosz had taught for decades held a memorial service and Adam came. On a sweltering day, in the shade of dwarf sycamores, we had lunch at a local café. Where he gallantly rejoiced in finding me looking more or less the same, I found a person significantly altered from that lovely fellow I'd come upon lost and bewildered at the San Francisco airport. After twenty years, of course, one would expect the boyishness to be replaced by a measure of mature circumspection, as it was. Unexpected was the weariness—and wariness—that seemed completely foreign to the transparent soul I'd known before. The deadness in the eyes. Where had I seen that deadness before? In the eyes of a brilliant cousin of mine, equally decent, open, and unspoiled in his youth, after he had undergone the savage rite of obtaining tenure at Harvard.

Over the course of our lunch Adam relaxed into a more familiar version of himself (already briefly glimpsed on the way over when he expressed mild anxiety that we were driving too far from campus). We talked of various things. The decency was there (yes, I am still on the lookout for this quality, if no longer for outright goodness), but so was the new guarded reserve, and underneath it something I had never seen before in him (but had in the haunted faces of one or two literati I'd known who had become spectacularly famous, more famous than Adam)—an ineradicable sadness.

Fame. That was the difference with Adam now, I speculated. He was already well regarded in Poland when I first met him, but in the intervening years he had become incontrovertibly famous on the international scene as well as at home. So it shouldn't be surprising, I thought, if a carapace of sorts had hardened over him. For a public figure a persona is a necessity, not a choice. The obvious line sprang to mind: Yeats's "sixty-year-old smiling public man." (And to think, Adam and I were now only a year away from that age!)

But Adam didn't fit this description because he wasn't smiling. Where once he had seemed younger than his years, he now seemed

older. My memory, which may not be reliable on this score, says he told me during this visit that he'd been seriously ill a few years back with a brain tumor. Or had he been referring to his father, who had recently died? But it didn't seem to me that poor physical health was the cause of this melancholy.

All ambitious young writers long for fame. No matter how unworldly, they—we—all have an inner hustler lusting for that prize. Winning it, however, does very different things to different people. Because fame confirms what our egos have always whispered we deserve, those who find that outcome entirely pleasing are the ones whom it expands, on the personality level. They are comfortable with fame; it fulfills their perceived needs, rests easy in their psyches. Others, the more self-questioning ones like Adam—the artists, not "authors," who are perhaps less yoked to their egos—it saddens. For them fame becomes a burden laid over what the soul knows is true.

I am reminded somehow of an observation Emanuel Swedenborg recorded in his journal: "There is no sadness like the sadness of the wealthy." To have everything the world thinks is important is to have nothing.

In the course of our conversation it gladdened me to hear Adam affirm once again that he and Maja, in spite of the difficulties over the years, had still had their "great love." Now a great love is not the same as the Nobel Prize, which rumor had it Adam was in the running for. In the fifteen years remaining to him I am thankful he didn't get it, though I'm sure he would have relished it, who wouldn't? But relishing is different from deep enjoyment.

A word or two here about the Nobel Prize. There is a big problem with prizes in general and this literary prize of prizes in particular, which automatically and forever stamps the label "Great" on a writer with no questions asked. Though winners have mostly been at least worthy (while also having the advantage, until recently, of direct access from the top rung of the Western imperial ladder), they also share a certain translatability, cultural as well as literary, that smooths their progress in the international literary arena—the kind of perceived significance that can be readily explained across many

languages. Could it be that James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov and Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust were possibly just a little too great (in the lower-case, genuine sense) to offer that sort of translatability?

Adam's 9/11 poem checked all the right translatability boxes, but for me his artistry overall possesses the quieter reflective energy of a Robert Walser or a Heinrich von Kleist, equally "great" but not as showy or triumphal as their smiling public contemporaries, the toweringly successful Wolfgang von Goethe and Thomas Mann. "God is the opposite of Rodin," Walser once remarked. It's easy to imagine Fame (so often allegorized in medieval times) as a good-natured but careless and amoral private secretary to Adam's Fate, scattering rewards and slights over literary lives both un- and over-eventful with a fine disregard for merit, recognition, or emolument.

In 2015 I had an email from Adam mentioning his recovery from serious heart surgery. "These days I'm getting too many prizes," he said, "how different from hungry days in Paris."

I return to the poems of his I first read, and especially to "To Go to Lvov," an ode to the city of his birth, from which he and his family were ejected when he was three years old by the Soviet redrawing of national boundaries, a city that is now renamed Lviv, part of Ukraine. As Lviv, Lemberg, Lvov, Lwow, it is the impossible vanished realm we yearn all our lives to get to. "There was too much of Lvov and now there wasn't any," Adam keeps repeating in this incantatory poem, "in a hurry" as he constantly urges us, himself, to

> just
> pack, always, each day,
> and go breathless, go to Lvov, after all
> it exists, quiet and pure as
> a peach. It is everywhere.
>
> (trans. Renata Gorczynski)

Go in peace, Adam. I am happy you wrote your great poetry and had your great love. How it grieves me we have stopped being the same age.