A defence of ardour

Adam Zagajewski
1 March 2016

In honour of Adam Zagajewski being awarded the 2016 Jean Améry Prize for European essay writing, Eurozine publishes Zagajewski’s defence of ardour. That is, true ardour, which doesn't divide but unifies; and leads neither to fanaticism nor to fundamentalism.

From Lvov to Gliwice, from Gliwice to Krakow, from Krakow to Berlin (for two years); then to Paris, for a long while, and from there to Houston every year for four months; then back to Krakow. My first trip was involuntary, forced by the international treaties that ended World War II. The second was simply the result of an ordinary thirst for education (back then young Poles thought that a good education could be found – if you looked for it – only in ancient Krakow). The impulse behind the third was curiosity about a different, western world. The fourth was motivated by what we’ll discreetly call "reasons of a personal nature". And finally, the fifth (Houston) was spurred both by curiosity (America) and by what might cautiously be termed economic necessity.

For over a hundred years Lvov had been the capital of Galicia, a province of the Hapsburg empire. It combined western European cultural influences with an openness to eastern emanations (though the East was certainly less obvious here than in Wilno or even Warsaw). Gliwice was once a provincial Prussian garrison town, with a history reaching back to medieval times. After the Second World War, the three elderly gentlemen ceded it to Poland. In school I learned Russian and Latin; I took private lessons in English and German. My family’s – forcible – move from Lvov to Gliwice was symptomatic of a great change. Though it was in fact annexed to the eastern empire in 1945, my country had paradoxically been shifted westward at the same time: the consequences of this shift would surface only later.

My grandfather was bilingual; Polish was his second language, since he had been raised by his dead mother’s German family. But it never even occurred to him to claim volksdeutsche status during the Nazi occupation. As a young man he’d done a doctoral dissertation on Albrecht von Haller, which was written in German and published in Strasburg at the turn of the century.

In Krakow, I sensed the luminescence of all that was best in the Polish tradition: distant recollections of the Renaissance recorded in the architecture and museum exhibits, the liberalism of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia, the energy of the interwar period, the
influence of the democratic opposition just then coming into being.

The West Berlin of the early eighties struck me as a peculiar synthesis of the old Prussian capital and a frivolous city fascinated by Manhattan and the avant-garde (sometimes I suspected that the local intellectuals and artists treated the wall as yet another invention of Marcel Duchamp). In Paris, I didn’t encounter the great minds, the great French arbiters of civilization – I’d come too late for that. But I discovered nonetheless the beauty of one of the few European metropolises to possess the secret of eternal youth (even Baron Haussmann’s barbarism hadn’t ruined the continuity of the city’s life). Finally, at this brief list’s conclusion, I came to know Houston, sprawled on a plain, a city without history, a city of evergreen oaks, computers, highways, and crude oil (but also wonderful libraries and a splendid symphony).

After a time I understood that I could draw certain benefits both from the wartime disaster, the loss of my native city, and from my later wanderings – as long as I wasn’t too lazy and learned the languages and literatures of my changing addresses. And so here I am, like a passenger on a small submarine that has not one periscope but four. One, the main one, is turned toward my native tradition. The other opens out onto German literature, its poetry, its (bygone) yearning for eternity. The third reveals the landscape of French culture, with its penetrating intelligence and Jansenist moralism. The fourth is aimed at Shakespeare, Keats, and Robert Lowell, the literature of specifics, passion, and conversation.

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One August, the month when Europe relaxes intensively, we spent two weeks in one of its most beautiful landscapes, in Chianti, a part of Tuscany. A concert of chamber music was staged in the courtyard of a certain lordly manor, an eleventh-century monastery that hadn’t held monks for centuries and had been transformed into a palace with a lovely garden. The audience for this concert was very distinctive, and consisted, with a few exceptions (one of them being the author of these words), of wealthy people possessing their own palaces, villas, and houses. This international company included a fair number of Englishmen (and also several Englishwomen who had decided for unknown reasons to behave like British clichés), a few Americans, and, of course, some Italians. In other words, the neighbours of the owner of this beautiful estate. Some of them only summered in Tuscany, others were full-time residents. The concert began with one of Mozart’s early quartets; the four young women played wonderfully, but the applause was relatively sparse. I was a little annoyed and decided on the spot that it was time for a defence of ardour. Why couldn’t the affluent audience appreciate this wonderful performance? Does wealth perhaps diminish our enthusiasm? Why didn’t this ardent performance of Mozart meet with an equally ardent reception?

One of my vacation books at the time happened to be Thomas Mann’s essays, including, among others, a piece called “Freud and the future”, a text written (and given as a lecture) in the thirties. What connection could there possibly be between the summer response of a rich crowd at a concert and Mann’s essay? Perhaps only that I also found a rather summery, ironic attitude at work in Mann, who was searching for a new intellectual orientation while writing Joseph and His Brothers. It goes without saying that Mann’s motivation had nothing in common with the blasé audience at an afternoon
concert. In the essay, Mann interprets Freud’s chief purpose as being something like the work of a sapper in a minefield: we’re dealing with explosive materials of great force. Ancient myths conceal immense dangers; they’re bombs that must be defused. Of course we need to read Mann’s essays in historical perspective, recalling their context. The author of Buddenbrooks saw Nazism and fascism as a return to the energies of the mythic world, to the destructive violence of archaic myths, and hoped to resist this great wave of terror with the soothing substance of humanist irony. But this irony wasn’t entirely defenceless, it wasn’t simply abstract, “chamber” irony. It too was rooted in myth, but differently; it fostered life without recourse to violence.

Did Thomas Mann finally win? Since today, after all, we hear rather similar tones within the most au courant, postmodern circles. Irony, it’s true, has changed its meaning; it’s no longer a weapon directed against the barbarism of a primitive system triumphing in the very heart of Europe. It expresses rather a disillusionment with the collapse of utopian expectations, an ideological crisis provoked by the erosion and discrediting of those visions that hoped to replace the traditional metaphysics of religious faith with eschatological political theories. More than one eastern European poet employed irony as a desperate defence against barbarism – in this case, barbaric communism with its soulless bureaucracy (this time has passed – isn’t neocapitalism an adroit ironist?).

But no, Thomas Mann didn’t win, it was a different irony. In any case, we find ourselves in a very ironic and sceptical landscape; all my four periscopes reveal a similar image. The last bastions of a more assertive attitude stand guard perhaps only in my homeland.

Some authors flog consumerist society with the aid of irony; others continue to wage war against religion; still others do battle with the bourgeoisie. At times irony expresses something different – our flounderings in a pluralist society. And sometimes it simply conceals intellectual poverty. Since of course irony always comes in handy when we don’t know what to do. We’ll figure it out later.

Leszek Kolakowski also praised irony in his once-famous essay, “The priest and the fool” (1959). It really was famous, and not just in academic circles. It was avidly studied in Warsaw and Prague, in Sophia and Moscow, and probably in East Berlin. Brilliant and profound, it promised a new point of view. It called attention to the ubiquity, albeit in very contemporary disguise, of long-standing theological traditions. The dogmas of the hieratic priest – and every intelligent reader realized he was dealing with a passionate critique of Stalinism – were opposed by the behaviour of the fool, quick-witted, shifty as Proteus, mocking a petrified civilization built on doctrine. Even today this essay still retains its freshness and the exceptional force of its reasoning. It marked a vital contribution to the critique of communist civilization; at the same time it arose from the moods of those times. In it we catch echoes of those countless, inspired, hilarious student cabarets that produced, in Gdansk, in Warsaw, in Krakow (and no doubt in other European cities seized by Moscow), a champagne of anti-Soviet humour. We also catch tones close to the “fool’s” ontology in poetry (in Szymborska, for example, whose poems of that period should be read in concert with Kolakowski’s programmatic essay).

Kolakowski distanced himself from his manifesto – his evolution reveals a growing fascination with theological issues (which had always intrigued him). Philosophy’s splendid “technician”, the author of Main Currents of Marxism, never ceases to approach
faith asymptotically, as if to say (not being a poet, he’ll never just come out and say it) that you can’t remain permanently in the fool’s position, since its meaning is exhausted by its polemical attitude, its ceaseless needling of powerful opponents.

In a much later essay, “The revenge of the sacred in secular culture”, Kolakowski writes, “A culture that loses its sense of ‘sacrum’, loses its sense entirely”.

The priest can get by without the fool; but no one’s ever spotted a fool in the desert or a forest hermitage. Our epoch, though, that puer aeternus of history – worships perversity. It’s no accident that Bakhtin’s idea of the “carnival”, the revolt against hierarchy, appeals so strongly to professors of literature.

In a section of The Dehumanization of Art eloquently entitled “Doomed to irony”, Ortega y Gasset points to the ironic character of twentieth-century avant-garde culture, its violent aversion to pathos and sublimity: “[T]his inevitable dash of irony ... imparts to modern art a monotony which must exasperate patience itself.”

Too long a stay in the world of irony and doubt awakens in us a yearning for different, more nutritious fare. We may get the urge to reread Diotima’s classic speech in Plato’s Symposium, the speech on the vertical wanderings of love. But it may also happen that an American student hearing this speech for the first time will say, “But Plato’s such a sexist”. Another student will note, on reading the first stanza of Hölderlin’s “Bread and Wine”, that in our great cities today we can’t experience true darkness, true dusk, since our lamps, computers, and energies never shut down – as if he didn’t want to see what really matters here, the transition from the day’s frenzy to the meditation offered us by night, that “foreigner”.

We’re left with the impression that the present day favours only one stage of a certain ageless, endless journey. This journey is best described by a concept borrowed from Plato, metaxu, being “in between”, in between our earth, our (so we suppose) comprehensible, concrete, material surroundings, and transcendence, mystery. metaxu defines the situation of the human, a being who is incurably “en route”. Simone Weil and Eric Voegelin (thinkers who loathed totalitarianism and from whom I first learned about Plato’s metaxu) both drew upon this concept, albeit somewhat differently. Voegelin even made it one of the key points of his anthropology.

We’ll never manage, after all, to settle permanently in transcendence once and for all. We’ll never even fully learn its meaning. Diotima rightly urges us toward the beautiful, toward higher things, but no one will ever take up residence for good in alpine peaks, no one can pitch his tent there for long, no one will build a home on the eternal snows. We’ll head back down daily (if only to sleep ... since night has two faces. It is a “foreigner” summoning us to meditation, but it’s also a time of absolute indifference, of sleep, and sleep demands that ecstasy be utterly extinguished). We’ll always return to the quotidian: after experiencing an epiphany, writing a poem, we’ll go to the kitchen and decide what to have for dinner; then we’ll open the envelope holding the telephone bill. We’ll move continuously from inspired Plato to sensible Aristotle ... And this is as it should be, since otherwise lunacy lies in wait above and boredom down below.

We’re always “in between” and our constant motion always betrays the other side in
some way. Immersed in the quotidian, in the commonplace routines of practical life, we forget about transcendence. While edging toward divinity, we neglect the ordinary, the concrete, the specific, we turn our backs on the pebble that is the subject of Herbert’s splendid poem, his hymn to stony, serene, sovereign presence.

But the connections between high and low are complex. Let’s take a look at one of Chardin’s still lifes, perhaps his beautiful *Still Life with Plums*, which hangs in the Frick Collection in New York: what we’ll see is apparently only a tumbler made of thick glass, some gleaming enamelware, a plate, and a bulging bottle. Through them, though, we’ll come to love singular, specific things. Why? Because they exist, they’re indifferent, that is to say, incorruptible. We’ll learn to value objectivity, faithful depictions, accurate accounts – in an age so adept at exploiting falsehoods, particularly in Central Europe.

*Metaxu* is something more than the state of being suspended between earth and heaven. For those who try to think and write, this category also holds a vital, double-edged warning. Since we can come to rest neither on the heights nor on the ground, we must keep close watch on our own selves and – if we seek a higher reality – guard against the rhetoric to which some pious persons fall prey. Religiosity may sometimes lead to insufferable self-assurance and thus produces, in a purely psychological (and linguistic) sense, the pompous cant to be heard in certain houses of worship. Although perhaps we shouldn’t exaggerate. This is how the poet and philosopher Kathleen Raine deals with such accusations in her autobiographical book *The Land Unknown*: “Current mores have led to an increasingly radical overturning of the norms that dictate what should be said and what is best left unspoken. We think that admitting to base thoughts and deeds is more ‘sincere’, hence more honest, than staying true to those perceptions that surface only when we step outside our ordinary ‘I’. Bringing up visions of lofty, beautiful things is considered hypocritical self-glorification.”

Wasn’t Benedetto Croce also right in the talk he gave at Oxford in 1933, “The defence of poetry”, when he commented that critics “are gifted with a strange immunity that permits them to spend a lifetime dealing with volumes of poetry, publishing them, appending footnotes, discussing various interpretations, studying sources, tracking down biographical information without the slightest risk of becoming personally infected with poetic fire”? He says something similar about priests: “[B]oth great minds and extremely simple people feel the call of religion, but not those who handle sacred vessels, not the priests and sacristans, who perform their rituals indifferently and at times without a trace of respect” (but not all priests surely!).

On the other hand, it’s easy to “freeze” into irony and into a daily existence lived reflexively. This, I think, is the real danger of our historical moment, and not priestly pride (though we shouldn’t overlook the dangers of religious fundamentalism). Moreover – though I may not be a neutral bystander here – ardour and irony are not symmetrically comparable. Only ardour is a primary building block in our literary constructions. Irony is, of course, indispensable, but it comes later, it is the “eternal fine-tuner”, as Norwid called it; it is more like the windows and doors without which our buildings would be solid monuments, not habitable spaces. Irony knocks very useful holes into our walls, but without walls, it could perforate only nothingness.

We’ve learned to value things because they exist. In an age of lunatic ideologies, utopian
nonsense, things endured in their small but stubborn dignity. This isn’t all: we’ve also learned to value things because everything linked to them is distinct, sharp, definite. There’s no haziness, no rhetoric, no excess. Since even Diotima from the Symposium may in her rapture veer off at any moment in the direction of pathos and – who knows – she may embarrass us. Our theologians – don’t they eagerly abandon our sober shores, the territory where we can still follow them? Our Romantic poets, didn’t they go a bit too far?

In effect, the students who try to diminish the sense both of Diotima’s speech and of Hölderlin’s opening stanza are defending themselves against pathos, as if they feared the devastating power of ecstatic experience; they’re being nudged in that direction by the voice of that ironic prompter, our sceptical age. In this way, though, the marvellous va-et-vient, both archaic and contemporary, that negotiates between finitude and infinity, between sober empiricism and our intoxication with what’s unseen, between our concrete, particular lives and divinity, is stopped short in its lower phase. This is not just the students’ doing; they’re joined by the majority of those who make pronouncements in print and on the Internet, our spiritual (or rather, intellectual) arbiters, our cultural leaders, our current bien-pensants.

Uncertainty doesn’t contradict ardour. If we are to sustain the productive tension of metaxu, uncertainty (which is not the same thing as doubt!) will never be a foreign body, since our presence here and our faith can never receive absolute and permanent sanction, however much we long for it. Irony, on the other hand, undercuts uncertainty. When it occupies the central place in someone’s thought, irony becomes a rather perverse form of certainty. Of course we can dig up dozens of uses for irony. In Zbigniew Herbert’s poetry, to take one example, irony is ordinarily directed against the person passing judgment, the seeker of truth or law (the Greek Nomos), and often takes the form of self-irony. The truth-seeker views himself sceptically – “beware however of unnecessary pride/keep looking at your own clown’s face in the mirror” – but not truth or law, as so often happens among contemporary authors, who happily cast doubt on everything but themselves.

We should remember, though, that in troubled times a move toward “beauty” may arise from an impure conscience, morally dubious circumstances. Thus in his stern essay “Der Schriftsteller Alfred Andersch”, W.G. Sebald mocks Captain Ernst Jünger’s raptures over Paris in flames: *Das brennende Paris, ein herrlicher Anblick!* (Burning Paris, what a sight!). Elsewhere in the same essay Sebald writes: “In *Kirschen der Freiheit* [Andersch’s autobiography], discussions of the weekend flights into aesthetics that permitted the author to revel in Tiepolo’s confectionary azures reveal once again his own lost soul.”

Flights into aesthetics! I don’t know Alfred Andersch’s work well – he was a writer who struck a bargain with the Third Reich early on – but I think that Sebald may be right. (Certainly part – but not all! – of Jünger’s own writing invites the same verdict.) Sebald doesn’t quote another of Andersch’s symptomatic pronouncements: “My answer to the totalitarian state was total introversion.”

Anyone interested in the state of literature today should be aware that one of the paths leading to Platonic heights is the path of hypocrisy. At the same time, though, we can’t overlook other roads that may be free of false piety. And the falsity of which Sebald accuses Andersch is most likely an ailment peculiar to totalitarian systems, and is thus
unknown to Australians or Eskimos – or to the British poet I mentioned earlier, Kathleen Raine. Perhaps generations growing up today will know nothing of it. Beauty in the totalitarian state is a special problem. It is both Mandelstam in Voronezh yearning for Schubert and Ariosto, and the Polish poet Jaroslav Iwaszkiewicz in Podkowa Lesna, the author of marvellous poems and a complete political opportunist. It’s also the stanza of Dante in the camp at Auschwitz that Primo Levi describes. And Wat listening to Bach on the roof of the infamous Soviet Lubyanka. It seems that at least one crucial amendment is in order here: expeditions to “the heights” should be undertaken in a state of personal honesty.

And a sense of humour? Can it coexist with ardour? E.M. Cioran notes in his posthumously published diaries that “Simone Weil has no sense of humour. But if she had, she wouldn’t have made such great strides in her spiritual life. Since a sense of humour keeps us from experiencing the absolute. Mysticism and humour are not on good terms”. The next note in Cahiers modifies this observation, though; Cioran must have suspected that his comment was only half true and set about revising it: “Let us say that holiness can coexist with moments of humour and even irony. But it cannot tolerate systematic irony if it is to survive …”

And it’s easy enough to imagine Meister Eckhart laughing, roaring with laughter. I don’t see any fundamental contradiction between humour and mystical experience; both serve to wrench us out of our immediate, given reality. After all, our head tilts back in both a fit of laughter and a sudden influx of devotion!

Paul Claudel has a famous and beautiful sentence in the essay on Arthur Rimbaud that was published in 1912 in La Nouvelle Revue Française: “Arthur Rimbaud was a mystic in a savage state …” It might easily be used to describe all those poets who passionately seek a hidden truth. What’s more, it works just as well for mystics. Since is it possible to imagine a domesticated mystic, a settled mystic, a mystic with a day job? A poet happy with his hunting? Sadly enough, we know firsthand how frequently one stumbles on complacent bards and self-satisfied theologians. But true quests are conducted, after all, only in a “savage state” … Claudel himself is a good example. His Cinq grandes odes hold marvellous, “wild” passages, while many of his later religious poems are marked by a far-reaching “domestication”.

“We truly must have committed a crime that brought down curses upon us, since we’ve lost the whole poetry of the cosmos”, Simone Weil says. Someone will object at this point: “Perhaps, but we’ve also gained something, we’ve become responsive to the misfortunes that befall both ourselves and those close to us, we’ve freed ourselves from the indifference that can afflict the devotees of poetry. More than this: we’ve become careful and critical observers of social reality.” I don’t want to make light of this: a critical stance (as long as it’s free of Marx’s dogmatic metaphysics) is exceptionally important, and if I speak here of the need for a different kind of quest, I don’t want to be taken for someone who uses his religious concerns to repudiate social criticism. After all, eastern Europe’s former dissidents will never discount the importance of honest, courageous criticism of our social world – even if their own interests have evolved over time. We’d have to be idiots to forget this …

But what is poetry?
Anyone who looks through the catalogues of large libraries will find a fair number of variations upon the “defence of poetry”. It’s almost a separate literary genre, with its own venerable tradition (Philip Sidney, Shelley, and Benedetto Croce are among its classics). At the same time, though, it is a desperate genre, with something panic-stricken about it. The titles themselves, which struggle to convince us of poetry’s “necessity”, vitality, indispensability, sound nonetheless suspiciously close to capitulation. If you have to insist so strenuously ... Authors like Joseph Brodsky have an easier time convincing us, since they defend poetry with such passion – and at times such captivating arrogance – that with any luck they put their opponent on the defensive. (Unfortunately, the opponent ordinarily doesn’t even know that he’s on the ropes; defences of poetry are read, of course, only by its friends).

Fortunately, we don’t know precisely what poetry is, and we shouldn’t try to figure it out analytically. No single definition (and there are so many) can finalize this element. And I, too, have no definitive ambitions. But there’s something tempting, nonetheless, about seeing poetry in its movement “between” – both as one of the most important vehicles bearing us upward and as a way of understanding that ardour precedes irony. Ardour: the earth’s fervent song, which we answer with our own, imperfect song.

We need poetry just as we need beauty (although I hear there are European countries in which this last word is strictly forbidden). Beauty isn’t only for aesthetes; beauty is for anyone who seeks a serious road. It is a summons, a promise, if not of happiness, as Stendhal hoped, then of a great and endless journey.

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“We truly must have committed a crime that brought down curses upon us, since we’ve lost the whole poetry of the cosmos”. We’ve not only lost the poetry of the cosmos (and we lose it a little more every day, which proves, logically speaking, that we still haven’t lost it completely, that we’ve been living for some time in something like a permanent state of losing, just as some governments thrive while continuously increasing their foreign debt). We’ve also experienced that peculiar bifurcation of sensibility that Thomas Mann depicts so precisely in his Magic Mountain. The poetry of the cosmos has divided – just like a cell observed by a modern scientist, a specialist in molecular biology – into Naphta’s demonic whisper and the humanitarian discourse of Settembrini.

Thomas Mann did not invent this schism; it was rather a scrupulously observed diagnosis.

This is the misfortune of our times: that those who never make mistakes are mistaken, while those who make mistakes are right. Ernst Jünger in some of his observations concerning “substance”, T.S. Eliot in parts of Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, and so many other conservative authors may not be wrong “ontologically” in their analyses of man in modernity. But they’re completely immersed in the element of twentieth-century history and are blind to the phenomenal (and fragile) benefits we derive from liberal democracy. On the other hand, those who analyse our political troubles with exceptional acumen and respond to injustice are often completely at sea spiritually. Perhaps this is linked to Charles Taylor’s brilliant observation in Sources of the Self: in our age, Enlightenment values have triumphed in public institutions, at least in the West, whereas in our private lives we abandon ourselves to Romantic insatiability.
We go along with rationalism whenever public, social issues are at stake, but at home, in private, we search ceaselessly for the absolute and aren’t content with the decisions we accept in the public sphere.

The antimetaphysical but politically dependable liberal left (or perhaps rather “centre”) and the potentially menacing but spiritually engaged right: one might summarize our peculiar bifurcation like this.

Since isn’t it true that we’re still dealing with the heroes of *The Magic Mountain*? With the exceptionally appealing Settembrini, who makes guest appearances on our television newscasts or runs a regular column in a popular newspaper where he defends democracy and humanistic values? We listen to him with interest, read his articles, but sometimes suspect him of a certain superficiality. And the demonic Naphta, whom we don’t particularly like, doesn’t he startle us at times with his exceptional insights into the world of culture? It’s difficult to find Naphta on the television; he publishes his opinions in one of those obscure journals of which the happy majority of ordinary mortals has never heard.

When parliamentary elections draw near, we instinctively lean toward Settembrini, since we sense that for all his dishevelment he’ll be able to direct us toward a suitable party, which may not save us (but elections aren’t about salvation!) but also won’t lead us astray, he won’t guide us toward the abyss, toward some wretched, extreme political denouement.

However, once the electoral fever abates, when the respectable landscape of contemporary civilization is reinstated, doesn’t Settembrini bore us just a bit, don’t we begin to miss that interesting Mr. Naphta? Don’t we long to chat with Naphta about our metaphysical anxieties (after all, he’s an expert)? Won’t he fascinate us with his notions about the world’s fundamental unity? We’ll forgive his dubious sense of humour, his awkwardness, if only he’ll summon up that strange, sharp metaphysical shiver we require from time to time, which our amiable, honest Settembrini is unable to provide.

Another example: in an anthology of German essays edited by Ludwig Rohner many years ago, I stumbled upon a sketch by Ludwig Curtius (not to be confused with E. R. Curtius, the wonderful critic and literary historian) called “A meeting in the presence of Apollo Belvedere” (“Begegnung beim Apollo von Belvedere”) from 1947. In the essay, Ludwig Curtius tells about his meeting (whether real or imagined) with a young German architect, a veteran who’d miraculously escaped the slaughter of the world war – as a soldier he’d been conscripted into the Wehrmacht and sent to fight on various fronts. This architect, worn by the horror of recent events, spends three evenings with the essay’s author and gives three extraordinary lectures. The point of departure is the Apollo Belvedere, which had once been admired by Winckelmann and Goethe but had later been revealed to be, like so many other sculptures, a mere Roman copy, and whose reputation had thus suffered in the eyes of many professional art historians. The young architect nonetheless remains true to the Apollo Belvedere and sees in it a rare quality, which he calls “dignity” and finds lacking in many contemporary works of art. The next day he talks about the significance of “proportion” in the evaluation, and even more important, the experiencing of works of architecture. And finally, on the third day, he speaks passionately about the “mystery” present in great artworks, hidden within them
like an apple’s core.

The lectures we hear in the abbreviated form given by Ludwig Curtius are very beautiful.

The fourth day this brilliant, serious architect leaves – he sails to Argentina. For good. And thus the reader isn’t sure if he isn’t perhaps dealing with a figure more allegorical than actual. Since the whole essay might be read as a farewell to the metaphysical element in German culture. The essay’s author, much older and more experienced, is dazzled by his young colleague and says farewell through him to the symbolic future of the German intelligentsia.

At the same time we hope that – if the young architect isn’t made of allegorical matter – he’s not someone who has serious reasons for wanting to hide from the postwar Allied tribunals in Argentina. (All of this, remember, takes place in Rome, which, as we know, didn’t have the best reputation in the years immediately following the war.)

This last doubt is symptomatic – but also well-nigh automatic. Ardour, metaphysical seriousness, the risky voicing of strong opinions are all suspicious nowadays. They take the defendant’s bench immediately, there’s no need for lengthy, conscientious investigations. I have to confess, though, that in this case suspicions about the young architect’s wartime history had occurred to me too.

The more general question comes out rather differently, though. This bifurcation of the spirit, this shifting of signs, this ongoing division between Settembrini, who loves the Enlightenment, and Naphta, who prefers the Middle Ages (or Romanticism), this split that means everyone who experiences powerful religious yearnings is almost automatically suspected of being a “right-winger” – is it simply a given? Or is this contemporary affliction curable?

After all, not every modern writer accommodates the laws of this bifurcation. Simone Weil would certainly have nothing to fear from an exam on the binary categories of The Magic Mountain. Or take Czeslaw Milosz’s work, as rich intellectually as it is poetically. One of the hallmarks of this work is precisely its disregard for the arithmetic of easy ideological classifications. Milosz is, after all, the author of The Land of Ulro, among other things, an essay whose title is taken from Blake’s private mythology. The book accuses our age of total indifference to metaphysical issues; it sorrowfully traces the slow decay of the religious imagination. Yet Milosz could hardly be called a “reactionary” writer, a disciple of Naphta. He’s also, of course, the author of The Captive Mind, which is still fervently studied in all those countries where the intelligentsia can only dream of a rule of law (I’ve heard that Cuban intellectuals have been reading it recently). Milosz wrote both The Land of Ulro and The Captive Mind; careful readers of those very different books would surely never find a common language, they belong to two intellectual parties that aren’t on speaking terms. But Milosz nonetheless manages to reconcile his concern with liberal civilization (which has expressed itself more than once in public forums) with powerful metaphysical yearnings.

Let’s listen:

I keep my eyes closed. Do not rush me,
You, fire, power, might, for it is too early.
I have lived through many years and, as in this half-dream,
I felt I was attaining the moving frontier
Beyond which colour and sound come true
And the things of this earth are united.
Do not yet force me to open my lips.
Let me trust and believe I will attain.
Let me linger here in Mittelbergheim.

I know I should. They are with me,
Autumn and wooden wheels and tobacco hung
Under the eaves. Here and everywhere
Is my homeland, wherever I turn
And in whatever language I would hear
The song of a child, the conversation of lovers.
Happier than anyone, I am to receive
A glance, a smile, a star, silk creased
At the knee. Serene, beholding,
I am to walk on hills in the soft glow of day
Over waters, cities, roads, human customs.

Fire, power, might, you who hold me
In the palm of your hand whose furrows
Are like immense gorges combed
By southern wind. You who grant certainty
In the hour of fear, in the week of doubt,
It is too early, let the wine mature,
Let the travellers sleep in Mittelbergheim.

This is an excerpt from the poem “Mittelbergheim”, which Milosz wrote in 1951, at a time – as we know from his own commentary – when he was tormented by the ideological and political problems of the mid-twentieth century. He’d come under ruthless attack by the émigré community when, after serving in the communist diplomatic service for several years, he’d “chosen freedom”. These attacks drove him to despair, led him to doubt poetry. Alsatian Mittelbergheim, the village, or town, to which his friends had invited him – by happy onomastic coincidence, the place’s name holds “mountain” as well as “middle” and “home” – offered him the possibility of inner rebirth. He had a spiritual experience, an experience of “something else”, something one would be hard pressed to come upon in Paris, an enormous city as saturated with ideology, in the forties and fifties especially, as a sponge is with water and soapsuds; an experience of nature, world, fire.

The Alsatian town revealed to the poet a dimension transcending the ideological quarrels typical of the mid-twentieth century. The Alsatian town or perhaps simply the world, both archaic and contemporary, the world of mountains, vineyards, and the thick old walls of village homesteads.

Throughout Milosz’s work, and not simply in this poem, we find a ceaseless wandering between ideas and transcendence, between the need for honesty and transparency in
collective life, the need for the good, and, on the other hand, the unquenchable yearning for something more, for epiphany, for ecstasy, in which a higher sense is revealed (but never fully, and never completely clearly). Milosz’s exceptional ability to withstand great pressures, his ability to move from social territory to the domain of metaphysics, endowed him with enormous poetic energy, an energy rarely encountered today. It derives from his ability to transform the condition of metaxu into an ongoing, vivifying pilgrimage, an occupation for the long-distance artist.

Nietzsche’s followers will readily recall the myth of Anteus, who renews his strength only when he touches the earth. In his poetry Milosz has revised this myth, giving us an Anteus who recovers his strength by contact with both the earth and the sky.

The happily double-edged nature of Milosz’s poetic (and essayistic) talent, his scrupulous attention to the truth of collective life and a higher, ecstatic truth, has enabled him to create a body of work before which both Naphta and Settembrini must stop short – not only with profound respect but with great interest. Perhaps, then, true ardour doesn’t divide; it unifies. And it leads neither to fanaticism nor to fundamentalism. Perhaps one day ardour will return to our bookstores, our intellects.

Published 1 March 2016

Original in Polish
Translation by Clare Cavanagh
First published in Adam Zagajewski’s Obrona zarliwosci (a5, 2002) (Polish version); A Defense of Ardor: Essays (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) (English version)
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