

A Mirror or a Lamp?

Adam Zagajewski

Nous sommes dans un temps où les hommes, poussés par de médiocres et féroces idéologies, s'habituent à avoir honte de tout. Honte d'eux-mêmes, honte d'être heureux, d'aimer ou de créer. Un temps où Racine rougirait de Bérenice et où Rembrandt, pour se faire pardonner d'avoir peint la Ronde de nuit, courrait s'inscrire à la permanence du coin.

—Albert Camus¹

[We live in an age when men, pushed by mediocre and ferocious ideologies, have become used to being ashamed of everything. Ashamed of themselves, ashamed of being happy, of loving or of creating. A time when Racine would blush because of Bérenice and when Rembrandt, in order to be forgiven for having painted “The Night Watch,” would run to the nearest doctor’s office.]

There was once a young, red-haired poet in Leningrad, who began to write in the late fifties, and by the mid-sixties was widely known in the West. Born in 1940, Joseph Brodsky survived the siege of his native city during World War II, when he was an infant. His parents survived the cruelest years of the Stalinist era. When he reached the age of intellectual maturity, something had changed in the totalitarian

¹ Albert Camus, “The Artist as a Witness of Freedom,” 1947 speech, my translation. A different translation is available at <<http://albertcamus.webpark.pl/esej.htm>>.

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machine of the Soviet state, and a temporary relaxation of Stalinist mores occurred. It was now possible to find some time-worn booklets of Mandelstam and Tsvetaeva in the back rooms of second-hand bookstores. One was no longer sent to labor camps on the evidence of keeping these books at home.

Historians of culture should study this case: an entire current of Russian poetry, the Acmeist school, which claimed the right to artistic freedom and to the joy of embracing the entire Western tradition of art, had been destroyed physically and politically in the thirties, and its shadow was now poised as if waiting to see whether some young, red-haired poet would deign to revive it lovingly—or, if not, whether it would remain silent forever, buried in the secret archives of the secret police. Yes, Anna Akhmatova was alive and writing, but it is one thing to have one remaining author still active and quite another to see the hearts and minds of younger writers warm up and open to the forbidden past.

Brodsky was not alone in his quest for the “shadows of forgotten ancestors” (to quote the title of a film by Paradzhanov). An entire group of young poets, with Yevgeny Rein and Alexander Kushner among others, decided to learn their craft and their metaphysic not from the mediocre poets promoted by the Marxist state, who praised the grayness of the Soviet reality, but from the Acmeists, whose books had been out of print for decades. Anna Akhmatova, who knew the young poets well and liked them, called them “a magical chorus.” This is an example of how poetry travels from one generation to another, over the gap of time and mass graves, on the wings of a disinterested intellectual passion.

At the same time, in the fifties and sixties, you could hear in Western Europe many a theorist asserting that poetry was dead. It is not easy to say whether this was a simple echo of Adorno’s famous warning concerning the very possibility of poetry after Auschwitz, or whether the indefatigable activity of the structuralist movement had already started to thwart the voice of poetry (as it almost successfully did in France later on).

It seems to me that the reasons for this mournful claim denying poetry’s right to existence must have been quite deep, and maybe a noticeable geographical correlation with the territories once occupied by the Wehrmacht, Germany’s armed forces during the World War II, was not quite accidental. I well remember from the first years of my own poetic apprenticeship that British authors, for example, did not join in the trashing of the lyric so typical then for continental writers.

The example of Joseph Brodsky is telling: poetry is a Phoenix that can be reborn out of ashes. With all due respect for the thinkers and ideologues (well, to tell the truth, more of this respect goes to the former than the latter), Brodsky’s case teaches us that poetry, although always linked to philosophy, also has a second life and a second lineup of heritage: the life of the art of poetry as embodied and preserved in the immediate or not quite so immediate past.

Isn't this a model of survival for all the arts, at least since Hegel's severe judgment pronouncing the inevitable decline of the Western imagination? Painters find solace—and learning—in other painters' work, musicians read and admire old scores, poets study Homer and Baudelaire rather than Hegel and his numerous progeny. Art needs philosophy and shuns it as well.

Some other poets who were active during Brodsky's lifetime (he died in January 1996) are worth mentioning here. Czeslaw Milosz spent the fifties in Paris and was exposed to the venoms of an ideological culture obsessed with the notion of radical social rebellion. The extent of this obsession can be traced even in such a noble book as Albert Camus' *The Rebel*, where the author needs 300 pages to convince the reader that the rebellion shouldn't be confounded with revolution. The latter, says Camus rightly, always creates its own terror, its own bureaucracy and stagnation—and thus recreates the monster against which it turned in the first place. The Parisian context wasn't propitious for poetry. Indeed, we know from Milosz's autobiographical writing that the Parisian decade was more like a desert than an oasis for his poetic creation.

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Zbigniew Herbert, another major Polish poet, half a generation older than Brodsky, thrived in the atmosphere of the Sovietized Central Europe—thrived through polemic rather than participation. Many of his poems read as variations on the theme of the place of poetry within a totalitarian environment.

For example, his poem “The Power of Taste”² can be read in different ways: as a proclamation of an aesthete or of a stoical philosopher, as an ironic belittlement of the agents of the *Zeitgeist*, or as a poem written in hindsight (indeed “The Power of Taste” has the flavor of a historical reminiscence; written in the late 1970s or early 1980s, in the years of a slow decomposition of the Soviet empire, it breathes a self-confidence which probably was not so obvious in the time of trial, when Stalin was still alive and well).

“The Power of Taste” is dedicated to Professor Izydora Dambaska, a philosopher of neopositivist orientation, a woman of admirable courage, and one of the rather few incorruptible Polish scholars. The dedication complicates the task of the reader a little: this poem praises art but is an intellectual present for a scholar, not an artist.

Nonetheless it is a praise of art. We hear about taste but we should, I think, put the word “art” in its place. Herbert's poem can be understood either as a nonchalant dismissal of the Communist totalitarian state, or, more interestingly, as a mini-treatise on the power of art, on art as a spiritual armor. In other words, this poem is either telling us about the

² Zbigniew Herbert, “The Power of Taste,” *Report from the Besieged City*, trans. John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter (New York: Ecco, 1985) 69–70.

whim of an aesthete who frivolously decided to pooh-pooh the call of a “progressive” political movement or about the incommensurable force of art facing dictatorship. Of course it is the latter. It is a hymn to moral wisdom hidden in art; beauty, addressed by the speaker of the poem, is not the superficial beauty of “Marie Claire” but beauty of the most serious and complex kind. “So aesthetics can be helpful in life/one should not neglect the study of beauty,” says Herbert. And if so, then the dedication to the philosopher could be seen as an ambivalent gesture, as a tribute to her adamant stand but also as an almost ironic hint that amounts to saying, “I admire your moral force, but my force springs from art, not philosophy.”

If my reading of “The Power of Taste” is correct, Herbert’s stance doesn’t differ that much from Brodsky’s; both poets knew or felt that in difficult times a trustful turning to art, to poetry, can be much more fruitful than relying on theory alone.

There were other differences between them, though: Herbert (as well as Milosz) didn’t share Brodsky’s rejection of a direct dialogue between poetry and social reality, of any direct critique of the totalitarian situation. Brodsky’s attitude was highly aristocratic: a free imagination embodied in perfectly crafted poems was supposed to put to shame the gray, prison-like world of totalitarian Marxism just like that, automatically, by the sheer display of inner greatness. Not so for Milosz and Herbert—or Wislawa Szymborska, for that matter; they regarded poetry as the voice of an individual living within society and exchanging gifts of poetry and reason, of rapture and critique, with this society. Even Milosz’s long-term exile didn’t bar him from this trade; his poems and essays voyaged to Poland, smuggled by all kinds of travelers.

The difference between Brodsky and the others is cultural and can be explained both by the distinct poetic traditions in Russia and Poland and by disparate political contexts: in the Soviet Union the normative aesthetic of socialist realism was still upheld in the sixties whereas Poland enjoyed a rather relative freedom of artistic expression. In Poland only the political content of literary works was censored, not their formal aspect; the sheer formal freedom in Polish poetry was not seen by the government as politically defiant.

Historically, the model of poetic tradition transmission that I have just outlined—the two rails of this transmission being theoretical thinking and/or the pure energy of poetry itself—has changed significantly since Western literature crossed the gates of Modernity. Of course, philosophy had always influenced poets. Renaissance poets studied Marsilio Ficino with probably the same zeal with which many twentieth-century poets read Bergson (not to mention later thinkers). And much earlier poets did not shun from reading Plotinus (or Plato). Yet—I am not an historian of ideas, so these are just speculations, hopefully not too fantastic—Modernity has changed the delicate balance between theory and poetry, privileging the former.

If we go back to E. R. Curtius’ book *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, an inexhaustible source of knowledge about the medieval writers’ appetite for tropes found

in ancient Latin texts, we realize how much the purely “literary” channel of transmission dwarfed the theoretical one at that time.³ Medieval poets studied Latin poets, especially Virgil and Ovid. “Studied” is not strong enough of a word, though. They devoured these ancient poems; they literally pillaged their works. Or, to use a more gracious image, they built their spiritual homes from the material they found in those giants.

The image that comes to mind is that of a certain square in Lucca, in Tuscany. This particular piazza—Piazza Anfiteatro, as it is called in Italian—has an atypical shape. It is neither rectangular nor oval; it is perfectly circular and reminds the tourist of a stadium or theater. And rightly so: a Roman amphitheater once existed there. Nothing is left of the ancient structure, not a single marble slab. The piazza is perfectly flat; its paved surface polished every day and night by innumerable tourists’ shoes. And yet the amphitheater’s marble has not disappeared: it was reused when the Lucca cathedral was constructed, when churches and some of the more opulent houses were built. The shape is all that is left of the Roman amphitheater, a symbol of a kidnapped and transformed beauty. The square was once used as a marketplace (in the 19th century), then abandoned, and only recently it became what it is now: the visible geometry of the transmission of cultural heritage.

Something similar was usually happening in poetry during the Middle Ages; instead of marble, metaphors and similes were reused. Luckily there are no empty spots in Virgil, Ovid, or Catullus—the robbery went almost unnoticed, thanks to the quasi-immaterial nature of language. Language, like the sun, can warm endless quantities of human beings, robbers, and others.

It is probably with Friedrich Hölderlin, the great, marvelous poet rediscovered by Norbert von Hellingrath just before World War I, that poetic Modernity begins, and it is right there where Hegel’s influence begins as well, innocently at first, on the benches of a Tübingen college.

So what is the fate of poetry as seen today? My experience encompasses two territories: contemporary American poetry and Polish poetry.

In July 2003, during the conference “Americans in Krakow,” the Irish poet Eavan Boland spoke passionately of a largely dissolved covenant between poets and their public—a covenant undone in the process of Modern and then Postmodern poetry becoming more and more rarefied, more and more intellectual, more and more narcissistic, interested mainly in its formal qualities and epistemological constraints. The question is whether such a covenant has ever existed, and if it has, whether it was not weakened much earlier.

³ Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (1953; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

But intuitively one is tempted to agree with Eavan Boland: some unwritten law of a deep communication between poets and their readers seems to have been damaged. Some delicate equilibrium between emotion and reflection seems to have been blurred, a common ground fractured.

I don't want to blame philosophers and critics for that; such a generic and anonymous blame would not make much sense. But I think I can still claim that as poetry has become more "intellectual," poets have become more interested in attentive listening to the voices of theory and philosophy, a listening more intensive than before, and that this is an ambivalent thing for poetry.

Somebody might ask me: But why is this an ambivalent thing for poetry? What's actually wrong with the fact that poets pay more attention to the intellectual environment? What's wrong with the intellect?

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I would answer: poets (or maybe artists in general) can be like a mirror or like a lamp. I borrow this juxtaposition from the title of M. H. Abrams's deservedly famous book *The Mirror and the Lamp*.⁴ I understand the meaning of the opposition differently though; for M. H. Abrams, it symbolized an intriguing mutation in the artistic paradigm, the passage from art understood in a broad way as mimesis to art conceived more as expression. His book describes in a masterly manner the switch from an ancient, traditional understanding of art as reflecting the cosmos to art expressing the human personality, the latter driven more by the typically modern emphasis on subjectivity than by some ideal, meditative passivity.

But the symbolism of the mirror and the lamp can also be defined in relation to this mysterious force that we usually call the *Zeitgeist*. Mysterious indeed because we don't know how this powerful agency operates in us. The only thing we know is that we are deeply historical creatures, driven—or guided—by some invisible energy that constantly changes its dresses, rejuvenates itself each year, never dies, and never gets older; on the contrary, it seems to become younger and more energetic every spring. So much so that, after we cross the Dantesque age of 35, it always seems to be younger than us. That's the energy that makes us applaud Ballets Russes and Stravinsky in the early twentieth century in Paris and that would make us repudiate Haydn's music if we thought it was written today. (We love old things; we literally adore them if only we're told that they are old.) This is the energy that dictates to men and women the shape and color of their jackets, the tenor of Ph.D. dissertations in philosophy, the tone of novels, the subject matter of poems, the way we laugh, and the way we cry. This force does exist; its nickname,

⁴ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

Zeitgeist (it's only a nickname, we don't know its real name—it might be more specific than this), comes from Hegel's blacksmith shop but even the most un-Hegelian thinkers can't deny its quite triumphant—though at the same time discreet—existence.

An artist who is more a mirror than a lamp will, in quite a debonair manner, reflect the *Zeitgeist's* assignments. Everybody who has anything to do with colleges and universities, not only in the U.S., must have noticed something quite extraordinary: that the rather vague doctrine of so-called “postmodernism,” a puzzling philosophy rejecting the validity of the notion of truth, raving about the pleasures of relativism, and denying the tragic possibilities of art, is no longer a kind of advanced intellectual joke but has been internalized by numerous students and professors, and among them artists. They really believe in it! They know nothing else. Years of teaching an absurd theory will always produce an absurd generation of students who just can't be blamed for having listened to their professors and having remembered their skeptical gospel.

There will always be more mirrors than lamps. A poet (an artist, a philosopher) resembling the lamp rather than the mirror, somebody who will draw on his own inner resources, in loneliness if need be, in joy or in sadness—and in indifference to the fashion of the day—is not a common phenomenon. And yet only “lamps” build the history of art; “mirrors” merely clone it. An artist who's like a lamp takes risks; he will swim against the current of expectations—will risk entertaining religious ideas in a time when religion is supposed to have evaporated, will defend his personal ideas before checking to see whether they are politically correct, will passionately fight for what he deems to be true before taking the temperature of the day and month and year.

It is especially rare to meet a “lamp” in a time like ours, an era of ideology. Ideologies today are less conspicuous and less aggressive than in November 1948, when Albert Camus pronounced, in the Pleyel Hall in Paris, the words I quoted in the epigraph: “Nous sommes dans un temps où les hommes, poussés par de médiocres et féroces idéologies, s'habituent à avoir honte de tout.” [We live in an age when men, pushed by mediocre and ferocious ideologies, have become used to being ashamed of everything.] I love the sound of Camus' words: you immediately feel that here an independent mind expresses itself, a proud and free spirit speaks—a burning lamp, not a meek mirror, somebody who draws on his inner resolve, not a servant of a current fad.

Ideologies are less visible today, but they still linger around American universities. They withdrew largely from the open political space and found shelter within the humanities. They slowly die (hopefully) in the hallways of English and French departments.

A typical American poet/professor teaching in one of too many MFA programs (I exclude my friends from this portrayal) pays little or no attention to larger philosophical questions. Content with his tenure, he delegates to philosophers the tiring activity of thinking and assumes that the Postmodern Phantasm is an invincible force. Having accepted this, he can calmly deal with the intricacies of syntax. The technology of poetry, the

“how” and almost never the “why” will dominate his class conversation. He’ll never reach back in the poetic tradition beyond Wallace Stevens. He’ll never try to find connections between poetry and other segments of contemporary culture. (I don’t see any contradiction between my former statement to the effect that poets are too aware of the voice of Theory and the critique of the MFA mind, which I accuse of paying no attention to larger philosophical questions. Paying no attention whatsoever makes you extremely vulnerable to what you ignore.)

The entire MFA system is mirror-oriented and tacitly discourages the lamp-oriented quest, simply by avoiding the discussion of great, general questions and concentrating on the hundreds of technical issues—on the length of the line, the value of enjambment, the avoidance of mixed metaphor, etc., etc. And yet, if poetry can be taught at all, it must be taught as a discipline that—not unlike philosophy—can only survive and flourish if steadily questioning itself, asking important questions concerning its own meaning, its changing position in the world of ideas amidst contemporary society. Poetry cannot be taken for granted, as seems to be the case within the MFA system, where the final diploma is seen as a kind of easily reachable driver’s license. Maybe it is a kind of license—but for this license the roads have yet to be built and the car invented.

While a metaphysics of the *Zeitgeist* would be suspect, we cannot deny the existence of something that constantly shapes and remodels our sensibilities. And yet, we should recognize that the process of receiving this influence is one of struggle and resistance, not of humble passivity. We should fight against the advice coming from this strange prompter. The problem is that even if, as it seems, we’re condemned to an eternal dialogue with the enigmatic whisper of the *Zeitgeist*—and yet the degree of our enslavement to it is probably very different and absolutely negotiable—art and theory are like two different observatories sitting on two different hills and having their antennas directed toward the inscrutable deity of time. Art and criticism differ in so many ways; they also differ in that they decode quite distinctly and idiosyncratically obscure messages of Time.

The fate of the arts relies on the artists’ courage, and the essence of this courage is independence from intellectually fashionable clichés. Artists need to realize that they have access to a special knowledge. They should remember that their imagination is a living source of valid intuitions, of a wisdom different from any other learning.

One of the clichés of our time is the conviction that artists living under totalitarian rule are somehow privileged and that democracy—with all its goods—cannot inspire great art. If indeed there seems to be some spiritual surplus in the totalitarian context—on the side of the oppressed, of course—it is simply due to the fact that artists living within it reject any intellectual reliance on the theories floating in the dominant political field and are ready to embrace the loneliness of imagination. Imagination, when left to its own devices, to its own inspiration, opens up and creates an entire world.