

Talk given at Festivo, Belfast, Maine, October 2005

Thanks to the organizers of this event, particularly Troy Casa for the vision and commitment to make this happen. My talk today will probably be a bit on the short side of the allotted time so you can exhale right away. As a poet I tend to look at a poem that is ten lines long and say, “Couldn’t it be eight lines? Do you need quite so much?” I go in fear of wordiness.

I wish to begin this talk with a quotation from the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski’s recent book of essays, *A Defense of Ardor*. The remarks come from an essay with the suggestive title, “Against Poetry”:

“This invisible, discrete inner life, is, in its passion, its naiveté, its bitterness and its indefatigable, vivifying enthusiasm, the final and indispensable energy propelling both poetry and people. Contemporary mass culture, entertaining and at times harmless as it may be, is marked by its complete ignorance of the inner life. Not only can it not create this life; it drains it, corrodes it, undermines it. Science, caught up in other problems, likewise neglects it. Thus only a few artist, philosophers, and theologians are left to defend this fragile besieged fortress.

Defending the spiritual life is not merely a sop thrown to the radical aesthetes. I see the spiritual life, the inner voice that speaks to us, or perhaps only whispers, in Polish, English, Russian, or Greek, as the mainstay and foundation of our freedom, the indispensable territory of reflection and independence shielding us from the mighty blows of modern life.”

It should be noted that these remarks come in the context of a piece in which Zagajewski is arguing against inflated claims about poetry. He is very far from thinking of poets as the “unacknowledged legislators of the world.” He is a wary man—his school, so to speak, has been what he terms “the vast tragedy of the twentieth century”—and his remarks have, to my mind, more force for his wariness.

When we look around us at this dismaying moment in history, it is unlikely we will be jumping with glee at the prospects afforded us. I have lived my life under various regimes in the land of the free that fought various wars directly and by proxy, none of which I particularly understood, to say nothing of believed in. However sadly, I have come to take that as a given, the price of power caught between its idealism and its realism and glorying in its lethal virtue. What bothers as much, that has occurred over the course of my life is what Zagajewski is referring to—the attack on the inner life.

By “inner life” I mean nothing recondite or arcane. I mean the habits of meditation, reflection, conscience, aesthetic response, sensibility and personal consideration. I mean the habits by which we designate an individual to be truly an individual, someone who sees the individual as more than an agreement with whatever the authorities—electronic, political, or otherwise—are proposing.

The attack on inwardness can be witnessed on virtually all fronts today; perhaps it is the inevitable outcome of mass, technologically oriented societies. Emerson noted long ago that things were in the saddle and riding mankind. In that sense this is nothing new. What disturbs me, however, is the aggressive dismissal of the inner life. We are not to respond to a national calamity by reflecting or meditating; we are instructed to go shopping. We are not to consider how we are using up the earth's resources at a rapid clip; we are instructed to keep on driving. We are not to cherish the subjective individuality of each student; we are instructed to believe in the validity of so-called objective tests as a benchmark of worth. We offer our young endless stupid images of violence and calculated sexuality and wonder why they turn to the despair of substance abuse and suicide. We eat food that is the domain of corporations, breathe air that is the domain of corporations, and are subjected to who knows how many toxins that are the result of corporate blindness and greed and are told to believe that is the price we pay for our endless progress. We tell people to leave a city in the face of a disaster but ignore those who do not have the means to leave the city. The last one seems like a parable of individualism run amok if it were not so sadly true.

People I know who grew up in places like Cambodia and Russia have told me worse things happen and I know they do. Bombs are not raining down on us. Our gulags are largely reserved for the unfortunates of class and race. We honor the rule of law more than less. Bribery is more of an exception than a way of life. I agree but I also feel that some changes that occur are more insidious than the overt nightmares we call "history." What bothers me is the denial of the domains that the inner voice honors—subjectivity, conscience, independence, sheer human feeling. What bothers me is the vaunting of the image at the expense of the word, the sound bite at the expense of the discussion, the dismissive smirk at the expense of the honest consideration, the empty convenience at the expense of the sustaining labor, the desire to please at the expense of saying what needs to be said. What bothers me is the ease with which mass society can focus on what is trivial in the face of what is ominous.

This is not to characterize poetry, in whose stead I speak today, as a Cassandra full of dire prophecies. It is to say that as Zagajewski forthrightly puts it, "Poetry opposes lies." It does this not by offering other lies or by a one-size-fits-all notion of ideological truth such as socialist realism but by lovingly scrutinizing and celebrating the myriad textures of our lives on earth. Poetry oscillates endlessly between enchantment—this earth is remarkably beautiful and enthralling—and disenchantment—terrible things happen daily and evil ones frequently. We are equally the captives of disappointment and excitement, confusion and insight. We go to poetry to experience both. For all its protestations of purity, poetry is a profoundly mixed art—that is one source of its strength. At its highest reaches, in the plays of Shakespeare or lyrics of Yeats or Blake or Dickinson, "tragedy and joy," to quote Zagajewski, "collide in every line."

For all the modesty of its means and scope—a few lines on a piece of paper—poetry, as it seeks to bring language, rhythm and sound in concert, is a very difficult art. Typically, we say we have finished a poem when we mean we are exhausted, have lost interest, or simply surrendered to the siren of self-love. I am not telling this audience anything it did not already know in that regard.

Zagajewski feels that poetry is, as he puts it, “finally impossible.” That is a daunting statement but one with which I would agree. To bring together contrarities in a manner that is, at once, forceful and compassionate, ravishing and thoughtful, ardent and humble, seems more than a human endeavor. One understands the numerous myths from around the world that testify to poetry being a gift of the gods. One understands how oxymoron—cruel to be kind or bittersweet—epitomizes this impossible endeavor—as words strain to their utmost.

I think this is part of the reason why poetry despite various publicity spurts and genuine gatherings such as this event remains on the outskirts of American life, far beyond the last strip mall, drive-in and billboard. To admit impossibility is to be—to use an unhappy but apt phrase—un-American. When tragedy occurs, we must turn a positive face to it because we cannot admit there is such a thing as tragedy. We cannot admit that conniving or merely incompetent and indifferent human beings may be implicated in a tragedy and we cannot admit that there is such a thing as an ultimate feeling that cannot be turned into something else. It simply is what it is. No matter how much the pursuit of happiness may protest, grief does not want to smile. Comedy, as the Greeks knew thousands of years ago, exists in relation to tragedy not instead of it. Many an American is accordingly wary of an activity that has no belief in progress, that is indifferent to technological invention (a pencil and a piece of paper will do just fine), that revels in using ancient forms, that is happy to descend into the disregarded depths of etymology, that considers transience to be a gift and moments to be the stuff of vision, that is at home with hauntings and reveries, legends and crones and sprites, that reveres the profound insubstantiality of memory, that refuses the consolations of automatic uplift. Unlike the nation that declares that God has blessed it, poetry is freelance spirit. It is as happy to work in darkness as light. It does not need cosmic reassurance. It is its own blessing. That is a big rub. Although we are pleased to accept the rule of the individual in politics and entertainment (which are increasingly conflated as private concerns are presumed public ones while public ones are considered negligible), accepting the individual poet who speaks for all of us is much more problematic. We have only to look at the status of our two genius poets from the nineteenth century—Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson—to see how spirit remains suspect. Whitman’s embrace of democracy with its homo-erotic overtones is as unnerving as Dickinson’s jumpy interrogations of patriarchal, Calvinist certainty. Are these poets to be taken as quintessentially American? I and many others would answer, “Yes” without a moment’s hesitation but neither poet plays well to an audience that wants its spirit to be carefully apportioned and come with a lifetime guarantee.

I will pause here from my speechifying and observe a poetry break.
[Reads some poems.]

To repeat myself: Are these poets to be taken as quintessentially American? I and many others would answer, “Yes” without a moment’s hesitation but neither poet plays well to an audience that wants its spirit to be carefully apportioned and come with a lifetime guarantee. Poetry has no such guarantees. A question I am often asked about a poem before reading it aloud to someone or suggesting that the person might read it on his or her own, is “Is it depressing?” The implication is that if it is “depressing” then the person doesn’t want to experience that poem. I cannot issue a

blanket guarantee that even a seemingly comic poem by the likes of Billy Collins will not have a dark cloud or two over head. What gives one pause here is that poetry should be judged on the grounds not of whether it makes you feel more deeply as a human being but rather whether poetry will bring up something you would just as soon not think about or know about. By and large, America pleads willful emotional ignorance on this count.

I am under no illusions that a nation of readers and writers of poetry would be a better, more peaceful place. One of the principals in the Bosnian conflict was a noted poet. I am thinking, however, that poetry is the stuff of aspiration and that this society desperately needs aspiration. We currently are buffeted on one side by degradation—be it of the environment, language, public behavior, the political process, the food we eat—and on the other side by a truly stomach-turning sanctimoniousness in which we are spared any looks at how we behave because we are blessed by the trinity of God, the free market, and innocence. When I ask young people what serious artists they look up to, they may identify a rap star or a rock star but that is typically as far as it goes. When I ask them what figures in public life they look up to, they often start giggling. I can understand their reaction but I recall people such as Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy and, for that matter, that poet-president Jimmy Carter. What I feel more and more strongly as time goes by is how precious the stuff of aspiration is. We are inevitably going to fall short—to say it again, poetry is impossible—but that does not matter. What matters is that we have notions of the good, the beautiful, the truthful—even the sublime—and that we seek to discover those notions in works of art that at once minister to and challenge people. As a writer one does not sit down with a notion in one's head that the poem will embody. That is not how poems work. They are not fueled by ideas or purposes. Intention does not take a poem very far down the road. Poems are fueled by feeling that is tempered by art and self-criticism. Anyone who has ever seriously revised a poem has experienced a process that I would offer as having in this regard moral implications. The reviser feels that the words could be better. The reviser aspires to making the poem better in whatever ways he or she defines that word. The reviser goes through a process that is often frustrating if not downright maddening but perseveres because something in him or her wants to make it better. There is a species of joy in the work—the joy of trying to use one's abilities to the utmost.

This aspiration would never say, “Done. That's good enough. What's on TV?” It is in touch with the inwardness I spoke of earlier. It seeks to honor that dimension as it acknowledges that our aspirations, large and small, define our humanity. Similarly, when we read a poem or hear a poem, it touches a part of us that vibrates to the inwardness embodied in the words. We are in a realm where our vulnerability is able to speak eloquently, without apologies. Perhaps that is poetry's chief crime in the eyes of those who distrust it—poetry believes our vulnerability is a virtue rather than a liability. It does not seek to abolish our vulnerability because there is no abolition of human vulnerability. Societies and governments in modern times that have tried to practice such an abolition have been without fail murderous. Poetry relishes its vulnerability because it is precisely there that our humanity is most palpable. If we scoff at this or say we have no time for it, we are, in a sense, saying we have no time to be with the essence of being human. To be indifferent here is to write off a large aspect of the human soul as if it were an irrelevance,

something for which we had no further time because we are—to use that eager, self-justifying word—busy.

Zagajewski notes that those contemporaries who practice the art of poetry (and I quote), “Live like the defenders of a besieged citadel.” I do not notice suits of armor in the lobby today so perhaps he is exaggerating slightly. The beauty of this event is that you have the opportunity to hear some poets most of whom live in the state where many of you live and who are perfectly willing to admit to their being poets. No one is here to skulk or hide behind denigration. Poetry is something to be proud of. If in its contemporary state it often is, in Zagajewski’s tart words, “irony parched with sorrow,” (perhaps the inverse also holds—“sorrow parched with irony”) that is more than the braying that is the oblivion of mass entertainment. I predict, however, that you will hear a good deal more than that today. I am going to be introducing six different poets and each one offers distinct pleasures and insights that resonate with the constant values of poetry—texture, cadence, sound, and attentiveness.

To send you on your way, it seems only fair to read a poem in translation by Adam Zagajewski. The poem “In May” is from his first book in English, entitled Tremor. It speaks, I think, to the importance of inwardness and how we dwell in the world of spirits all the time, whether we choose to recognize it or not. It is what I want poetry to be—haunted by the utter strangeness of life and death yet trying as best it can to articulate its profound fascination.