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“Thou who hast sewn together this canvas.”
Adam Zagajewski’s Search for the Absolute

ABSTRACT

Adam Zagajewski’s poetry proves how complex man’s relationship with the sacred can be. Despite the poet’s testimony of complete independence from established formations, including denominational ones, in his early work, when he described himself as “an atheist of both churches, non-partisan among party members, an unbeliever among believers, uncertain among the convinced” (*Mogę mówić tylko za siebie* [I can only speak for myself]; *Oda do wielości* [Ode to multiplicity], Zagajewski 1983), literary criticism has long emphasized the presence of a broadly conceived sphere of the sacred in his poetry. When reading Zagajewski’s poems, one has the impression that the sacred is permanently present, and that the poet is constantly brushing against the figure of the Absolute, while not being able (or sometimes not wanting) to fully see it. The reader even gets the impression that perhaps this may be a purposeful impossibility. For Zagajewski, an extremely important theme is circular movement, constant circling around the same issue, and a need for constant questioning. This article discusses these complex relations, proving that Zagajewski consistently reflects in on the figure of the Absolute, that the subject of his poems seeks the sacred, and that the question of the Absolute seems to be more than a poetic strategy for the author, but also a very personal dilemma. The poet died on March 21, 2021.

KEYWORDS: Adam Zagajewski, contemporary Polish poetry,
sacred in literature, interpretation, literary criticism

STRESZCZENIE

„Ty, który zszyłeś to płótno...”. Adama Zagajewskiego poszukiwanie Absolutu

Poezja Adama Zagajewskiego dowodzi, jak wysoce skomplikowana bywa relacja człowieka z sacrum. Mimo świadectwa całkowitej niezależności od ustanowionych formacji, także wyznaniowych, jakie poeta dał w początkowej fazie twórczości, kiedy to określił się mianem „ateisty obydwu kościołów,”

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bezpartyjnego wśród partyjnych, / niewierzącego wśród wiernych, / niepewnego pośród przekonanych” (*Mogę mówić tylko za siebie; List. Oda do wielości*, Zagajewski 1983), w krytyce literackiej od dawna podkreślana bywa obecność w jego poezji szeroko pojmowanej sfery sacrum. Podczas lektury wierszy Zagajewskiego odbiorca ma wrażenie, że sacrum jest w nich permanentnie obecne, że poeta co rusz ociera się o figurę Absolutu, jednocześnie nie mogąc (nie potrafiąc, czasem nie chcąc) jej w pełni dojrzeć. Czytelnik odnosi nawet wrażenie, że być może jest to niemożność programowa, bowiem dla Zagajewskiego nadzwyczaj istotne znaczenie ma ruch kolisty, nieustanne krążenie wokół tej samej kwestii, konieczność ciągłego podawania w wątpliwość. Niniejszy artykuł przybliży te złożone relacje, dowodząc, że Zagajewski konsekwentnie prowadzi w swych wierszach refleksję nad figurą Absolutu, że podmiot jego wierszy poszukuje sacrum, a pytanie o Absolut zdaje się mieć dla twórcy charakter nie tylko strategii poezjotwórczej, lecz także dylematu bardzo osobistego. Poeta zmarł 21 marca 2021 r.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Adam Zagajewski, współczesna poezja polska, sacrum w literaturze, interpretacja, krytyka literacka

In Gliwice, Victory Street
might have led to heaven but stops short, alas.
(Zagajewski, 2008, p. 39)

Where are you, glance of exaltation?
Everything's boredom without you.
(Zagajewski, 1989, p. 93)

Adam Zagajewski's relationship with the sacred¹ has always appeared complex. Despite the poet's testimony of complete independence from

1 I understand the concept of sacred in literature broadly, as suggested by Mircea Eliade, who used the term to include everything religious (a kind of reality common to all religions), making the opposition between the sacred and profane a tool for examining reality (cf. Eliade, 1966; Eliade, 1974, as cited in: Sawicki, 1981, p. 172). Here and there, however, I make this generality more precise, in line with the findings of Stefan Sawicki, who, focusing on the Christian idea of the *sacrum*, which is the most influential in our *Kulturkreis*, considered this category, as present in literature, to be a catchword for various sacred elements. He also wondered about the essence and legitimacy of the opposition between the sacred and profane, since – taking a certain perspective on human history – everything seems to be included in God's plan for the history of salvation and as such may be considered sacred. Sawicki points out that in the context of the history and culture of the opposition between the sacred and profane is something absolutely important and noticeable, and in a dynamic way, it explains the interpreted reality, so it can be used in research, while the very *sacrum* may appear in the subject field through themes, topics, threads, plots (surface area), topoi, archetypes, and symbols (box deeper meanings). According to the researcher, not only the object of speech may bring poetry closer to religion, often the very nature of utterance and attitude towards reality can do so (an attitude of contemplation,

established formations, including denominational ones, in his early work, when he described himself as “an atheist of both churches, non-partisan among party members, an unbeliever among believers, uncertain among the convinced” (Zagajewski, 1983), literary criticism often emphasized the connection of his poetry with the broadly understood sphere of the sacred. His above declaration was received with doubt, if not to say that it was not taken seriously.² As it turned out years later, the intuitions of critics, who found more than what Zagajewski openly admitted at the time in his poems, should be considered correct. This is evidenced by some of the

penetration into reality, opening up to it, and subjecting its impact in an anastomosis). Moreover, the concept of religiousness in poetry can often be conceived as a type of sacred vision, understanding and interpreting the world and man. What is important for this chapter’s analysis is that, according to Sawicki, religiousness may also be sought more deeply, near the function and essence of poetic texts. It is the last problem area – the broadest, most relevant, and most debatable. The researcher is aware of the fact that the indication of the “sacred” subject matter by means of the opposition between holiness and sin does not exhaust the issue, which appears to be much broader, since literature “often contains rich and subtle theological issues, expressed in existential language, far from the recognized and established terminology.” The author also mentions that it is possible to speak not only of theology in literature, but also of a theology of literature – even when neither in a work itself, nor in its authorial or native context can we find a conscious acceptance of the theological message implicit in the work of literature, when we want not only to read its message, but also to unveil its sense, the sense of specific literary phenomena in theological perspectives, for example in the perspective of the biblical history of salvation. Then the interpretive frame of reference comes with the recipient: the reader and the researcher. The recipient is the revealing instance, co-creating the theological inner and outer meaning of the work (the adjective “theological” should be understood broadly to include the human being experiencing his or her relationship to God) (Sawicki, 1983, pp. 172, 178, 182–184, 186, 189, 191). In this article, I focus on the presence in of such images of the Absolute which can be considered close to both the recognition of Eliade as cited at the beginning, as well as Stefan Sawicki’s, in Zagajewski’s poetry.

- 2 This is evidenced by early attempts to locate Zagajewski’s work against the background of the dominant currents and trends within the historical literary process. In 1992, for example, Bożena Chrzastowska listed Zagajewski as one of the representatives of the metaphysical-religious trend in the then-obligatory textbook for high school (cf. Chrzastowska, Wiegandtowa, & Wysłouch, 1992, p. 101).

Zofia Zarębianka placed Zagajewski’s work in the context of one of the two attitudes represented by the authors of post-war religious poetry, describing this attitude as the “search for and desire of God.” Ragnar Strömberg drew attention to the poet’s religious way of seeing in which an ethical and ecstatic vision is embodied at the same time. Tadeusz Nyczek wrote about the Christian values of Zagajewski’s poetry, putting this formulation in quotation marks; Dariusz Pawelec emphasized the biblical origins of the figures and motifs crucial to this poetry, such as solitude, alienation, or exile; the author of the discussion devoted a separate chapter to the sphere of the sacred in Zagajewski’s poetry and essays. These are, of course, only selected diagnoses, situating the poetry of Adam Zagajewski in the context discussed here (cf. Zarębianka, 1992, p. 10; Strömberg, 1998, p. 132; Pawelec, 1994, p. 170; Bodzioch-Bryła, 2009, pp. 42–63).

poet's statements, including one at a meeting held during one of the literary festivals as reported by *Kurier Poranny*, when he confessed:

I am a very bad Catholic; I don't go to church, but I remain faithful to Christianity. I generally don't like Polish priests. I understood a long time ago that there is a gap between religion and church (Doroszkiewicz, 2019)³.

Along with the protest against church structures there comes a complicated relationship with the sacred, and as a consequence – an interesting reflection on the Absolute, which Zagajewski treats as an essential component of spirituality and metaphysics. This approaches an attitude close to deism, and sometimes agnosticism. Not infrequently, we also see imagery similar to the classical Judeo-Christian way of representing God. Zagajewski's attempts to draw an image of the Creator undergo constant evolution, but the very frequency of the appearance of this thread signals that this very circle of exploration occupies the poet deeply, giving rise to questions that have not ceased to pervade him for years. The specifics drawn in the poems sometimes resemble biblical imagery (most often Old Testament), at other times bringing to mind representations of an omnipotent being threatening humanity (which might be associated with a malicious demiurge), while at other times they are coming close to a pantheistic anticipation of God making himself present in the phenomena and elements of nature. A weak God, a helpless God, an incapable being, is also a common way of characterizing the Creator. In *Song of an Émigré*, the poet says: „At the Orthodox / church in Paris, the last White / grey-haired Russians pray to God, who / is centuries younger than they and equally / helpless” (New York Times, 1991). In *Rogi obfitości* [Cornucopia] he confesses: “*Smutno żyć ... bez nadziei, stwarzając się / codziennie od nowa, bo Bóg był słaby /*

3 Evidence of the translatability of this stance into a poetic form can be seen in the poem *Niedziela* [Sunday], from the latest volume, *Prawdziwe życie*, in which a deeply ironic tone is combined with an ironic statement: “Proszę bardzo, idźcie do kościoła/ w każdą niedzielę, o jedenastej/ lub dwunastej, w czystych koszulach/ starannie wyprasowanych sukienkach./ [...], tam czeka na was / kapłan o tłustym podbródku./ [...] / Rozkaże wam, co myśleć i co czynić. / Bóg jest gdzie indziej, gdzie indziej. / My nic nie wiemy. Żyjemy w ciemności. / Bóg jest gdzie indziej, gdzie indziej” [Go ahead, go to church / every Sunday, at eleven / or twelve o'clock, in clean shirts, / carefully ironed dresses. / ..., there waiting for you / is a priest with a double chin. / ... / He will tell you what to think and what to do. / God is somewhere else, somewhere else. / We know nothing. We live in darkness. / God is somewhere else, somewhere else] (Zagajewski, 2019, p. 56).

Taking into account Zagajewski's authorial declaration mentioned in the introduction, and the motif of searching for the Absolute that is strongly present in his poems and contradictory at the same time, I will treat the lyrical “I” as the figure of the authorial subject.

i stworzył nas niestworzonych, / połowicznie, w brulionie” [It is sad to live without hope, creating ourselves / each day anew, for God was weak / and created us uncreated, / half-heartedly, in a notebook”⁴] (Zagajewski, 2009, p. 56). In Zagajewski’s work, God can also be outsmarted. In *Bez kształtu* [Without Form], the poet says: “If only this existed, a tree on which a star slumbers, / empty cathedral in Chartres ... / and the force which doesn’t fall asleep ... and symbols of freemasonry, / that Mozart has hidden even in his *Requiem*, / cheating God ... ” (Zagajewski, 1989).

The person of the Creator is sometimes unjust and indifferent to the fate of the individual (especially the weak individual):

*Bóg jest po stronie silnych, słabym
ofiarowuje długie godziny nicości
i strachu, daje im las, świt i gwiazdy,
muzykę i czułość, a sam wychodzi na palcach,
wraca do swoich grających w karty cesarzy.*

[God is on the side of the strong, the weak
He offers long hours of nothingness
and fear, He gives them forest and the dawn and stars,
music and tenderness, and He goes out on tiptoe,
returns to his card-playing emperors.]
(Zagajewski, 2009, p. 67).

He can also be cruel:

Go find the height ... where
... faith in the good God who does
and undoes, kindles
and extinguishes, light and desire,
and who with his quill of years
long reminiscences
on the loveliest faces;
who tempts Abraham, and casts up the domes
of Rome, and the Auschwitz barracks...
(Zagajewski, 2009, p. 71).

In one of the poems, the persona of God takes the modern form of a cinema operator or a DJ: “*Bóg cofa taśmę. Ekspedycje karne / wracają do koszar*” [God rewinds the tape. Punitive expeditions / return to the barracks] (Zagajewski, 2009, p. 33).

4 All translations in square brackets by the translator.

There are also moments when this search is rejected in favor of creating an image of emptiness formed after the removal of the sacred, only to return to it again according to an intuitive feeling of its existence. Like the lyrical protagonist of the poem *Podróżny* [Traveler] “*który w nic nie wierzył*” [who believed in nothing] but with the help of “church bells ringing in unison,” that could “*znaczyć coś więcej niż zwykle znaczyły*” [could mean something more than they usually meant], he suddenly senses the possibility of a higher meaning.

*Pewien podróżny, który w nic nie wierzył,
znalazł się w lecie w obcym mieście.
Kwitły tam lipy i obcość kwitła żarliwie.*

*Tłum szedł nieznaną pachnącą aleją,
wolno i pełen lęku, może dlatego,
że zachodziło słońce cięższe niż horyzont*

*i szkarłat na asfalcie mógł być
nie tylko cieniem i gilotyna
mogła zdobić nie tylko muzeum*

*i dzwony kościołów bijące unisono
mogły znaczyć coś więcej niż zwykle znaczyły.
Może dlatego podróżny co chwilę
kładał dłoń na piersi, nieufnie sprawdzając
czy wciąż ma przy sobie bilet powrotny
do miejsc zwyczajnych, w których my mieszkamy.*

[A traveler who believed in nothing,
found himself in a strange city,
in the summertime. The linden trees
were in bloom there and strangeness blossomed fervently.

Strange crowd was walking along a fragrant avenue,
slowly and fearfully, perhaps because
the sun was setting, heavier than the horizon

and the scarlet on the asphalt could be
not just a shadow and the guillotine
could decorate not just the museum

and the bells of churches ringing in unison
could mean something more than they usually meant.
Maybe that is why the traveler

every now and then
put his hand on his chest, mistrustfully checking
if he still had his return ticket with him
to the ordinary places where we live].
(Zagajewski, 1994, p. 40)

This disturbing, surprising intuition, a glimpse of the existence of what is unclear, or unknown, is nothing but an inner, private epiphany, a premonition of the sacred, commanding the lyrical “I” to not stop searching.

If one were to attempt a strict analysis of the relationships between objects and the sacred in Zagajewski’s poems, one could say that *Divinum* (divinity, holiness as a category belonging to God) is almost always shown with some kind of flaw, while *sacrum* (that is, sacred things, objects) is usually identified with the sphere of cultural products, monuments, masterpieces, and it is usually these motifs that trigger the admiration of the speaker (sometimes this admiration is experienced from a distance, mediated, as if tinged with fear). In contrast, the category of *sanctum* (belonging to one who is holy, holiness of a created nature) appears extremely rarely. Instead, the poet often invokes the figures of the dead, bestowing upon them the highest kind of respect. One could say that the connection between *sacrum* and *sanctum* has been broken. Derek Walcott notes that Zagajewski’s innocence is monastic, even medieval, so his works have a secular sanctity, a purposiveness of the missal (Walcott, 2002).

Premonition of God

The Soviet Cosmonauts claimed they didn’t find
God in outer space, but did they look?
(Zagajewski, 2011, p. 4)

I feel you, I listen to your silence
(Zagajewski, 1998a, p. 73)

Zagajewski realizes that contact with the sacred generates questions that cannot be answered unequivocally. In *Król* [King], he asks: “*Czym jest ta chwila, kiedy objawia się boskość? / Skąd możemy wiedzieć, skoro mówimy o niej / wyłącznie w czasie przeszłym lub przyszłym (z nadzieją!)*” [What is the moment when divinity is revealed? / How can we know, since we speak of it / only in the past or future tense (with hope!)] (Zagajewski, 1999, p. 27). At the same time it becomes important to observe the world, which every now and then provides evidence of the existence of the Absolute.

One could say that the more uncomplicated the matter of reality – the more emphatically it proclaims the conviction of the existence of God. This is the case, for example, in the poem *Anteny czuwają* [Antennas keep watch], where the personified mountain landscape, pierced by the blade of technology, awaits the coming of the Messiah:

*Nocą, wysoko w Alpach,
Anteny nie śpią,
Anteny czuwają,
Obracają się uważnie
I szepczą:
Mesjaszu, przyjdź wreszcie*

[At night, high in the Alps,
Antennas don't sleep,
Antennas keep watch,
They turn attentively
And whisper:
Messiah, come at last!
(Zagajewski, 2005, p. 11)

Zagajewski often seeks the signs of divine presence not in churches, but in the signs coming from the world. He is no stranger to looking at the element of water through the filter of sacralisation. In *Eliade*, he writes: “Zbawienie to wysoka fala, ślepa uderzająca / o piaszczysty brzeg, jeżeli jest brzeg, ocean...” [Salvation is a high wave, blindly striking against / a sandy shore, if there is a shore, an ocean...] (Zagajewski, 2002, p. 43). In *Night is a cistern*, he intuits the existence of the Absolute in the following words: “High waves cry from the sea, / the wind rocks pines. / An unknown hand draws the dawn's first stroke” (Zagajewski, 2008). In *Santiago de Compostella*, the weather is defined by means of a figurative comparison of sacred provenance: “Lekka mżawka jakby Atlantyki / robił rachunek sumienia” [Light drizzle, as if the Atlantic / is doing an examination of conscience] (Zagajewski, 2019, p. 12), while in *On Swimming*, the lyrical self seeks an analogy between the figure of a swimmer and the body of a person making prayerful gestures:

I love to swim in the sea, which keeps
talking to itself
in the monologue of a vagabond
who no longer recalls
exactly how long he's been on the road.
(Zagajewski, 2019, p. 37)

What attracts attention here is, on the one hand, the perception of an element as an individual capable of conducting an unceasing dialog with itself, communicatively self-sufficient, one could say – narratively self-reversible, and on the other hand – sacralization of the only active position a human being can take in relation to water. All this is located within the association of the automaticity of swimming with the repetitiveness of prayerful gestures.

In *A Fence. Chestnut trees* we find a perfect illustration of a labyrinthine vision of the world, at the base of which, as if in the structure of a complicated braid, is the Absolute – the “first cause”⁵:

*Parąkan. Kasztany. Powój. Bóg.
W pajęczynach ukrywa się
pierwsza przyczyna, w gęstej
trawie schną błyszczące
dowody na istnienie.
Pachną warłocze i wiatr
wpleciony w usta narzeczonej.
Kwaśny jest smak łądygi,
rozartej pod językiem.
Czarne jagody nie będą
naszym jabłkiem niezgody.
Kwitną zawilce nad strumykiem,
piłka ucieka przed dziewczyną,
spokojnie kółysze się
dojrzały, żółty głóg.
Zgaś słońce jaskrawe,
posłuchaj wspomnień maku.
Parąkan. Kasztany. Powój. Bóg.*

[A fence. Chestnut trees. Bindweed. God.
In the cobwebs there hides
the first cause, in the thick
grass, dries the shiny
proof of existence.
The scent of braids and wind
entwined in the lips of the bride.
The taste of a stalk is sour,
crushed under the tongue.
Black berries will not be
our apple of discord.
Anemones bloom by the stream,

5 I originally analyzed this poem in my book *Kaplan Biblioteki...* (Bodzioch-Bryła, 2009, pp. 18–21).

The ball runs from the girl,
The ripe yellow hawthorn
Sways serenely.
Extinguish the bright sun,
Listen to the memories of poppies.
A fence. Chestnuts. Bindweed. God.]
(Zagajewski, 2002, p. 39)

This poem is an example of an interesting, masterfully complicated poetic puzzle, in which numerous symbols are smuggled in, referring to the sacred conceptualized as divinity hidden in the labyrinthine and confusing thicket of nature and shining through it. The labyrinth and spherical motifs appear as overriding, dominant ones here.

The plant metaphors used in the poem, combined with the bracket that frames the poem – close the labyrinthine space consisting of sequences of enumerations, almost every element of which is a part of a complicated braid. An enumeration follows: a thicket of grass, a weave of braids, “wind entwined in the lips of the bride” (the motif of betrothal can also be treated in this context as a harbinger of a future union, which is also a kind of a “weave”), and finally a spider’s web, which in itself constitutes a structural labyrinth. All of this is framed by the sequence of enumerations: “A Fence. Chestnut trees. Bindweed. God.” (this verse initiates and ends the poem). Within it, the essential role is played by the juxtaposition of two ranges of meaning, built on the basis of the words “fence” and “bindweed,” in addition to “chestnut” and “God,” referring to the semantics of labyrinth and roundness.

The theme of roundness, or circularity, is gradually being developed. The round objects listed include chestnuts and bilberries that are compared to the also round “apple of discord”; also hawthorn fruits are round, as is the ball. Round is the sun, and a poppy seed, but also the most important element referring to that semantic field is the word “God” listed in the framing verses. When we mention the stance reaching from Orphism to Neoplatonism to Christian mysticism to modern times (Lurker, 1994, p. 164) that “*Deus est sphaera cuius centrum ubique, circumferentia nusquam*” (God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere) (Poulet, 1977, p. 331) “*Deus est sphaera intelligibilis, cuius centrum ubique, circumferentia nusquam*” (Forstner, 1990, p. 57) it becomes apparent that in this case, the semantic capacity begins to give way to a symbolic one in the poem. The symbol of the circle interpreted as a sign of God implies, amongst others, eternity, the absolute, perfection, and continuity.⁶

6 This figure is, moreover, in a sense, semantically identical to the labyrinthine space, because both are characterized by a kind of closure, or limitation. After all, a circle can be looked upon as a perfect figure; wandering around its perimeter would be a permanent, never-ending

The alternating arrangement of circular and labyrinthine motifs used by Zagajewski suggests a reminiscence to the arabesque. This alternation is clearly visible, above all, in the aforementioned binding frame within the poem. However, we can speak of a bipartite structure and the domination of two motifs as well: labyrinthine in the first part, and rich in metaphors belonging to this very semantic area (cobwebs, thickets of grass, braids, “wind entwined in the lips of the bride,” and circular in the second part. As one can see, the labyrinth is located low, right next to the ground, among the thick grass, the bilberries, the anemones, the rocking hawthorn and poppies. Therefore, the author proposes a poetic image of the Absolute hidden in the labyrinth of the world thicket.

A similar situation happens in the case of Zagajewski’s flagship poem, *To Go to Lvov*. In the course of reading, we learn that not only the city of Lviv, but also the sphere of the sacred (including the very sacred of Lviv) is omnipresent. It begins to touch not only on the most important matters, but it penetrates into every crevice of the subject’s existence recalled in this poetic affirmation/afterimage of the city.

For my parents

To go to Lvov. Which station
for Lvov, if not in a dream, at dawn, when dew
gleams on a suitcase, even express
trains and bullet trains are being born. To leave
in haste for Lvov, night or day, in September
or in March. But only if Lvov exists,
if it is to be found within the frontiers and not just
in my new passport, if lances of trees
– of poplars or ash – still breathe aloud
like Indians, and if streams mumble

activity. The maze and the circle are associated in the cultural space more strongly than it might seem, and the proof of that closeness can be circular labyrinths. Examples of these are provided by Aleksandra Olędzka-Frybesowa in her book *W głąb labiryntu* [Into the Labyrinth], where she mentions, among other things, circular decorative compositions appearing on the floors of Gothic churches, which are deemed to be “a double heritage: of the labyrinth and the cosmic circle” (Olędzka-Frybesowa, 1979, p. 272). Documenting the experience of her world travels, Frybesowa writes: “Here is an outline the labyrinth engraved directly in the rock ... The soft, circular and semi-circular stacking coils around the center marked with a circular recess. ... Spanish myth scholar Luis Bonilla ... demonstrates the parallelism ... of Cretan myths like the Minotaur and the labyrinth with the ancient Iberian ritual of the heroic ‘trial’ of the elected king – his encounter with a bull in an enclosed circular space before the assembled people” (Olędzka-Frybesowa, 1979, pp. 268–269). Also D. Forstner notes that the drawing of a labyrinth is usually made with black and white stones and details. He distinguishes square, circular, less often oval or octagonal planes of various sizes (Forstner, 1990, p. 63).

their dark Esperanto, and grass snakes kike soft signs
in the Russian language disappear
into thickets.

...

And burdocks, green
armies of burdocks, and below, under the canvas
of a Venetian café, the snails converse
about eternity. But the cathedral rises,
you remember, so straight, as straight
as Sunday and white napkins and a bucket
full of raspberries standing on the floor, and
my desire which wasn't born yet,

...

There was always too much of Lvov, no one could
comprehend all the boroughs, hear
the murmur of each stone scorched
by the sun, at night the Orthodox church's silence was unlike
that of the cathedral, the Jesuits
baptized plants, leaf by leaf, but they grew
grew so mindlessly, and joy hovered
everywhere, in hallways and in the coffee mills
revolving my themselves ...

The bells pealed and the air vibrated, the cornets
of nuns sailed like schooners near
the theater, there was so much of the world that
it had to do encores over and over
... My aunts couldn't have known
yet that I'd resurrect them,
and lived so trustfully, so singly;
servants, clean and ironed, ran for
fresh cream, inside the houses
a bit of anger and great expectation. Brzozowski
came as a visiting lecturer, one of my
uncles kept writing a poem entitled *Why*,
dedicated to the Almighty, and there was too much
of Lvov, it brimmed the container,
it burst glasses, overflowed
each pond, lake, smoked through every
chimney, turned into fire, storm,
laughed with lightning, grew meek,
returned home, read the New Testament,
slept on a sofa beside the Carpathian rug,
there was too much of Lvov, and now
there isn't any, it grew relentlessly

and the scissors cut it ...
But scissors cut it, along the line and through
the fiber, tailors, gardeners, censors
cut the body, and the wreaths, pruning shears worked
diligently, as in a child's cutout
...
Scissors, penknives and razor blades scratched,
cut, and shortened the voluptuous dresses
of prelates, of squares and houses, and trees
fell soundlessly, as in a jungle,
and the cathedral trembled, people bade goodbye
without handkerchiefs, no tears, such a dry
mouth, I won't see you anymore, so much death
awaits you, why must every city
become Jerusalem and every man a Jew,
and now in a hurry just
pack, always, each day,
and go breathless, go to Lvov, after all
it exists, quiet and pure as
a peach. It is everywhere.
(Zagajewski, 1998a, pp. 55–58)

The personified lyrical space of Lviv, which – sometimes like atmospheric phenomena, sometimes like a person – “turned into fire, storm, laughed with lightning, grew meek, returned home, read the New Testament,” is filled with obvious or more distant references to the sacred. It is co-created by motifs, such as: the “Orthodox church,” whose “silence was unlike that of the cathedra,” the “cathedra,” that “trembled,” the “voluptuous dresses of prelates,” “the cornets of nuns,” and the bells that “pealed and the air vibrated.” Also relatives recalled in the poetic reminiscence engage in activities that can be described in this context as meaninglessly indifferent. “My aunts couldn't have known/et that I'd resurrect them, / and lived so trustfully, so singly”, “one of my / uncles kept writing a poem entitled *Why*, / dedicated to the Almighty.” Zagajewski recalls, asking in the final lines of the poem: “why must every city / become Jerusalem and every man a Jew”? It is, after all, the sphere of the sacred that initially helps build the verticality of the city's skyline (the vertical direction is connected both with the motif of the cathedral which “rises ... as straight / as Sunday,” or the evocation of the Jesuits who “baptized / plants, leaf after leaf, but they grew, / grew so mindlessly”) that is the most mercilessly affected in the second part of the poem by the process of the city's destruction, along with the borders of statehood, culture, and finally, the human identity engrained in them (“But scissors cut it, along the line and through / the fiber, tailors,

gardeners, censors / cut the body, and the wreaths, pruning shears worked / diligently,” “Scissors, penknives and razor blades scratched, / cut, and shortened the voluptuous dresses / of prelates, of squares and houses, and trees / fell soundlessly ... / and the cathedral trembled, people bade goodbye”).

The poem is based on an opposition between permanent, unlimited expansion and reduction, which is so painful to the lyrical “I” (“there was too much of Lvov, and now / there isn’t any, it grew relentlessly / and the scissors cut it ...”). The hyperbolic enumeration of the personified elements of nature (“poplars or ash ... breathe aloud,” “streams mumble / their dark Esperanto,” “the snails converse / about eternity,” “There was always too much of Lvov, no one could / comprehend all the boroughs, hear / the murmur of each stone,” “there was so much of the world that / it had to do encores over and over”) and the already mentioned sacralization of space, which allowed this very piece to become the most important proof of love to the eternal, although forever lost, homeland.

Symptoms and glimpses of the existence of the sacred are numerous in this lyrical space, but they do not add up to a coherent, even vaguely concrete persona of the Absolute. This is not surprising. The enormity of the wrongs and injustices recorded by the lyrical self on a personal mental map is so overwhelming that it is impossible to think that a single being could be responsible. The epiphanic glimpse of divinity thus seems to give way in this case under the onslaught of evil. However, in other poems in the same volume it happens to be different as well. In one of them, the poetic confession refers to a clearly concretized, personified figure of God:

*A jednak istniejesz i cała ziemia
mieści się w twoim uważnym spojrzeniu.
Okręty płyną pod twoją zuchwałą banderą
i wiozą w ładowniach lekką radość,
dla której jedyną granicą będzie
szlaban śmierci, obrzmiałe gorączką wargi
ostatniego pożegnania. I nawet tam będzie
z tobą miłość, początek nieskończonej
pamięci.*

[And yet you exist and the whole earth
is contained in your attentive gaze.
Ships sail under your bold flag
and carry in light joy in their load bays,
the only boundary being the barrier of death,
the lips swollen with fever
of the last farewell. And even there

love will be with you, the beginning of an endless
memory.]

(Zagajewski, 2009, pp. 67–68)

God is somewhere else, somewhere else

The lyrical self of Zagajewski’s poems visits churches, but it would be difficult to say that he sought only the presence of God in them. What always excites him is architecture and that is what he finds in the sacred interiors. His attention is captivated. One might even have the impression that through it and thanks to it, it becomes possible to experience the sacred. This is the case, for example, in the poem *The Gothic*, in which, having entered a space governed by its own laws, by its own complex symbolism (Cf. Hani, 1998), he immerses himself so definitively in medieval architecture that it becomes for him almost a medium capable of transmitting signals from the beyond. Gothic architecture turns out to be a palimpsest through which the divinity begins to shine through.

The poem as a whole, because of the features of Gothic architecture inscribed into it, brings to mind a homage paid to it. This is an obvious exemplification of the intersemiotic translation of an architectural form into verse, as Zagajewski incorporated and creatively transposed the most important features of the Gothic style into poetic images, beginning with the size of the cathedral (the speaker “suddenly subject to a new atmospheric/pressure”, notices its majesty, wanders “the cathedral as suddenly vast as a Babylonian square,” feels “interred in this slim vault,” lost, as a result of which he repeats the question “Who am I...?” three times), to more concrete features, such as cross-ribbed vaults (as he wanders under “its ribs of granite,” where it “whirling/ pointed life” goes on), and pointed arches (“the Gothic arches”). The reader is also blown away by the size of the poem, which is 74 lines long,⁷ giving the impression of rising upwards like a soaring edifice. Zagajewski clearly marked the boundary between the sacred and profane (the latter is populated by “Small demons in bodies / borrowed from bestiaries,” budding “on the church”⁸). The colors of the lyrical images are organized by a clear opposition between the darkness prevailing inside the temple (“the dark,” “evening now, dark,” “who is speaking to me so obscurely?”), asks the lyrical self) and light appearing on the outside (“fire soaring, the pure fire / of salutation” hovers above

7 This five-stanzas-long piece is one of the longest in poems by Zagajewski.

8 This type of thinking is consistent with the classic symbolic division of a Christian church. Cf. Hani, 1998, p. 80.

the church). The juxtaposition of light and darkness becomes significant also in order to make the figure of the Creator concrete, as an unpredictable, paradoxical being who “kindles / and extinguishes” or “dims / in the lightning,” and whose presence is signaled by the oxymoronic “bright gloom.” Symptomatically, this symbolic opposition acquires meaning only in the immediate vicinity of the poem’s church, because beyond it, the world regains its natural colors (outside the cathedral, there spreads “the ocean of green earth,” and “white morning glory” blooms). Essentially, then, this poem contains an interesting color solution: the identification of the sphere of darkness with the sacred⁹ is manifested within the

9 This colligation of the sacred with the dark seems interesting and symptomatic, fitting into the context of the original understanding of the category of sacred. The word sacred is derived from the Latin adjective *sacer/sacra, sacrum*. It originally defined both that which was sanctified through contact with a deity or other supernatural forces (and thus consecrated to the gods) and that which was cursed and rejected. These extremes are united in one category through a moment of exclusion from the realm of everyday life – either through contact with the sacred or through excommunication – which renders the objects involved untouchable. The particular duality of this category has been preserved by the Greek equivalent of the Latin *sacer*: *hagios*, implying both something consecrated and something wicked, or cursed (Nossol, 1998, p. 14). As noted by Władysław Stróżewski, *sacer (sacra, sacrum)* – consecrated to God, holy – is of Umbrian-Oscan origin. From Oscan *saḡarater* come words such as *sacratu*s, *sacer* and *saḡahiter*, which meant the same as Latin *sancitur*, from which stems the name of the Umbrian-Sabine deity, Sancus. From the Umbrian *sanco*, the Latin *sancio, sancire, sanxi, sanctum* derived, meaning: to make inviolable by religious ordination, consecrate, place, resolve, as well as *sanctus*, meaning sanctified, inviolable, or sacred. Interestingly, both *sacer* and *sanctus* are derivatives from the same root. However, in terms of meaning they began to diverge at some point. Namely, *sanctus* took only positive connotations, and hence the later was the right word to be used by Christianity in the liturgy as the name of God. Meanwhile, *sacer* is ambivalent in meaning and axiologically, because on the one hand it implies: dedicated, consecrated to the gods, and on the other, also dedicated to the gods of the underground, destined to die, cursed, abominable, disgraceful, shameful, or infamous. This semantic and axiological ambiguity seems very important (Stróżewski, 1989, pp. 23–24). Sawicki (and Caillois he cites) makes a similar recognition, noting that holiness and sin, good and evil, appear – both in the perspective of the beginning and in existential experience – as dialectically related opposites within a certain complex, important whole. (Sawicki, 1981, p. 181). Blasphemy and holiness, even properly recognized, appear as two poles of one area. This is why even in highly developed cultures they are often referred to by one and the same word (Caillois, 1973, p. 63). This dialectic of the sacred, originating from primordial ambiguity, is fascinating from the cultural studies point of view, the division into antagonistic and complementary elements, in relation to which man has feelings of reverence and disgust, desire and fear, respectively (Caillois, 1995, p. 39). Sawicki also emphasizes that the current of holiness is constantly accompanied in literature by a current of evil, which can incarnate in various, more or less personified elements of the plot. “This mysterious relationship of good and evil, holiness and sin, is something commonly seen in the literature of the first half of the 20th century, that we used to call «Catholic». Let us recall, for example, the novels of François Mauriac or Graham Greene, who, reaching the essence of the Church’s holiness, unveiled its «power and glory» in a deliberately constructed situation

space of the church, and that which is light and colorful with the profane¹⁰ located outside.

What strikes the most in the course of reading, is a poignant conviction that here we encounter as if a modern, private revelation, analogous to that which happened to St. John. As if Zagajewski, like John the Evangelist, experienced visions, heard voices, “of suffering older than Cain’s” of those who have passed away, “voices of carpenters, / ashes of ash now? / voices of vanished pilgrims / who still can’t stay still?”, “languages, voices, sighs, / the hopeful laments of those who loved / and those who preferred hatred, those who betrayed / and those betrayed, all of them / voyage in the labyrinth, above them / the fire soaring, the pure fire.” Of particular note, however, is the clear voice of the Creator, as the poet confesses: “I feel / your presence in the bright gloom, / a sheet of thorn paper, healing, healing / again, no trace, no scar/ ... I feel you, I listen/to your silence,” to immediately afterwards confessionally signal to himself and the reader that the architectural Gothic is marked by the divine hand: “go back to the nave, the heart, / in its ribs of granite, the whirling / pointed life of the Gothic arches / lazily combing time, enduring / ... Go find the height again, and the dark, / where longing, pain, and joy live / and faith in the good God.”

The speaker, aware of the moment’s significance, is doubly aware of the message Sender’s omnipotence and his own smallness: “who speaks to me so obscurely / Who am I, suddenly subject to a new atmospheric / pressure? Whose voices fill / this stone space? / Who am I, interred in this slim vault, / where is my name / who’s trying to snatch it and hurl it away / like wind stealing a cap?”, he asks. It is painful to realize the ruthlessness of the Creator, whose image combines both the element of perfection, goodness, and the element of unforgiveness. Not without reason, the theme of theodicy appears in the poem. After all, it is about “faith in the good God / who does / and undoes, kindles / and extinguishes, light and desire / and who writes with his quill of years / long reminiscences / ... who tempts Abraham, casts up the domes / of Rome and the Auschwitz

of the greatest human weakness and the greatest darkness. It also seems that in ... great ... world literature, evil always demands goodness, it is as if a condition for revealing or suggesting value” (Sawicki, 1981, p. 180). I have discussed the relationship between the categories of the sacred and profane in separate articles (cf. Bodzioch-Bryła, 2014, pp. 119–138; Bodzioch-Bryła, 2016, pp. 25–51). Due to the fact that the poetic imagery of Adam Zagajewski seems very close to diagnoses of theologians and cultural anthropologists, for the purposes of this discussion, I shall recall once again the aforementioned reflection.

10 The church is transformed, at some point, into a maze. I discussed the theme of this dynamic and the labyrinthine symbolism thoroughly in my book *Kapłan Biblioteki...* (Bodzioch-Bryła, 2009, pp. 11–60).

barracks.” Such an overwhelming sense of the Divine presence is given to the lyrical self at extremely rare moments.

The lyrical self of Zagajewski’s poems does not see himself as a skilled instance in verbalizing the dialog with transcendence. His search¹¹ most often takes the form of “attempting” (as indeed it is usually called). In *Ancient History*, he recollects:

I stood stock-still on the street, pinned
by desire, partly painful, partly sweet
and prayed, ineptly
for myself and others,
for my mother, who had died,
and for my death,
an untamed animal.

(Zagajewski, 2000, p. 185)

It is difficult to determine precisely to whom these prayerful endeavors are directed, because in Zagajewski’s poetry, we see an interesting procedure of gradation of the Absolute. Analyzing this gradational structuring, one can notice that the poet usually places the divinity inherent in the nature of the world (e.g. natural beauty) at the highest level, while the sacred in the Christian sense is assigned a space that stretches far below. It is this layered ordering of space, combined with a pantheistic view of the world, that is found in *Ancient History*, in which the speaker looks at the sky, where “Beyond the rainstorm the beaming deity / of this evening, this world, lay sprawled” and “Beyond the deity was nothing, / just an earliest blackbird singing its ecstatic song” (Zagajewski, 2000, p. 185). Above, there spreads a void that, however, can also inspire. In the poem *Impassive*, awareness of the void becomes the guarantor of achieving inner peace (the lyrical “I” confesses: “... No one saw, no cameras, / only an azure eye; absolute ignorance, / serenity, glory, bliss.” (Zagajewski, 2018, p. 66), (“*Tego dnia nicość / jakby z przekory / stała się ogniem / i paliła wargi / dzieciom i poetom*” [On that day nothingness / as if out of spite / became fire / and burned the lips / of children and poets] (Zagajewski, 1994, p. 59).

Over time, however, the sense of emptiness begins to be bothersome. So is the inability to believe, to genuinely feel the existence of God. Traces of these struggles can be found in the poems *Go through this town* and *Conversation*, in which the speaker multiplies questions, initially concerning

11 The most complete representation of these inquiries is concluded in Adam Zagajewski’s *Trzej Królowie*, which I have discussed elsewhere (cf. Bodzioch-Bryła, 2017, pp. 241–254).

past time, childhood, then breaking away from the context of privacy to gradually turn to transcendence:

Why a childhood shadowed
by mining towers and not a forest's dark,
near a stream where a quiet dragonfly keeps watch
over the world's secret wholeness
– who knows.

And your love, which you lost and found,
and your God, who won't help those
who seek him,
and hides among theologians
with degrees.

Why just this town at a gray hour,
this dry tongue, these numb lips,
and so many questions before you leave
and go home to the kingdom
from which silence, rapture, and the wind
once came.

(Zagajewski, 2018, p. 31)

The enumerative flow of the argument is an evidence of a mental crisis, revealing a consciousness overwhelmed by a multitude of doubts and questions to which no clear answers are to be expected. As the poem reverberates with traces of the poet's personal experiences (“childhood shadowed / by mining towers” is after all a reference to Gliwice, the city where the Zagajewski family lived¹²), and the questions about the Absolute posed here should be read through the filter of the author's “I” (“and your God, who won't help those / who seek him / and hides among theologians / with degrees” (Zagajewski, 2005)). A continuation of the pondering on ultimate matters can be found in the poem *Conversation*, also based on a sequence of rhetorical questions:

We don't, we can't know,
if we'll be saved,
if our microscopic souls,
which have committed no evil
and likewise done no good,
will answer a question posed in an unknown tongue.

12 The poet spoke on this topic during a meeting held in his home high school. Cf. *Co poeta miał na myśli? Agam Zagajewski w VLO*, 21 October 2015. Retrieved from: <https://dzisiajwgliwicach.pl/trzeba-duzo-czytac-zeby-pisac-spotkanie-z-poeta/?cn-reloaded=1> (access: 12.09.2020).

Will poetry's epiphany suffice,
...
we don't know, we can't know,
if we'll be saved
when time ends.
(Zagajewski, 2018, p. 31)

"Thou who hast sewn together this canvas"¹³
Poetic prayers

*Może być więcej
sensu, może być nawet modlitwa.*
[There may be more
sense, there may even be a prayer.]
(Zagajewski, 2009, p. 28)

There are several poems in Zagajewski's oeuvre that, because of the clear directness of the confession (most often maintained in the convention of a lyrical address) and the unambiguously concrete lyrical addressee, bring to mind poetic prayers. There are not many of them – against the background of the author's considerable literary output – but they can be regarded as contrasting with the usually distanced tone of the lyrical utterance precisely because of the above-mentioned features. This is the case, for example, in the poem *A Flame*, in which the lyrical self articulates the following request:

God, give us a long winter
and quiet music, and patient mouths,
and a little pride – before
our age ends.
Give us astonishment
and a flame, high, bright.¹⁴
(Zagajewski, 1999, p. 50)

The title flame is a symbol of inspiration, and the lyrical situation reveals what the poet values the most, evoking admiration without which creative effort seems futile.

¹³ *Gospels in Pragnienie* (Zagajewski, 1999, p. 9).

¹⁴ Translation cited in *The Catholic Thing*, 28 February 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.the-catholicthing.org/2020/02/28/a-flame/>

In the title poem *Tierra del Fuego*, the speaker addresses the Creator concretized as omniscient (the one who sees “the whites of our eyes,” “our homes at night/ and the frail walls of our conscience,” who hears “our conversations / droning on like sewing machines”), hidden (“unseen”), but at the same time being the basis of the world, dispersed in each of its elements (nature, the natural space, He hides “like a bullfinch / in the rowans/ like a falcon / in the clouds’ warm stockings”), and above all, endowed with unlimited power.

You who see our homes at night
And the frail walls of our conscience
You who hear our conversations
Droning on like sewing machines
– Save me, tear me from sleep,
from amnesia.

...

After all, you know there are days
when even thirsty runs dry
and prayer’s lips harden.

...

You who sees the whites of our eyes,
you who hide like a bullfinch
in the rowans,
like a falcon
in the clouds’ warm stockings
– open the boxes full of song,
open the blood that pulses in aortas
of animals and stones,
light lanterns in black gardens.

Nameless, unseen, silent
save me from anesthesia
take me to Tierra del Fuego,
take me where the rivers
flow straight up, horizontal rivers
flowing up and down.

(Zagajewski, 1998a, pp. 155–157)

It must be said that the metaphors used to characterize the lyrical addressee are disturbingly reminiscent of the artistic devices used by Zagajewski in the first phase of his work, in New Wave poetry. The Creator appears here not only as omnipotent, but also secretly invigilating the individual, e.g. eavesdropping on conversations. This poignant lyrical monologue can be interpreted either as a confession of faith by an individual in crisis,

who – aware of his dysfunctions – turns to God asking for a rescue, or as a strongly provocative expression of grief, intended to highlight the contrast between the creative human individual who wants to regain the ability to speak (“open the boxes full of song”) and the supposedly omnipotent and all-powerful Creator, though scant of grace and willing to speak only through signs.

The reflective and prayerful character of the lyrical monologue is apparent, for it soon becomes clear that the lyrical addressee is needed primarily to remedy the speaker’s own problems with feeling, which is a necessary component of creative potency (arguably, this is how the request: “take me where the rivers / flow straight up, horizontal rivers / flowing up and down”¹⁵). The individual elements of the poetic confession (e.g. the style and construction of lyrical utterance, the accumulation of imperative and interrogative formations) prove a very special (partner-like, or sometimes subordinate) way of treating the addressee. “After all, you know there are days / when even thirsty runs dry / and prayer’s lips harden. ... and then ... a charlatan / decides to destroy you / me, and himself,” explains the speaker to the Creator, only to spill out a litany of suggestions and demands maintained in a style much unlike humble prayer (“Save me, tear me from sleep, / from amnesia,” “open the boxes full of song, / open the blood that pulses in aortas / of animals and stones, / light lanterns in black gardens,” “save me from anesthesia, / take me to Tierra del Fuego, / take me to where the rivers / flow straight up...”). The poem ceases to resemble a prayer, evoking associations with grievance, resentment (the latter impression is reinforced by strings of rhetorical questions), and even – as has already been mentioned – a camouflaged provocation. This situation does not surprise a reader familiar with Zagajewski’s work, because the poet has already made us become accustomed to the fact that often the sphere of the sacred is important to him insofar as it can prove useful in the process of creation, to preserve beauty (the formation of beauty in matter), or simply build a mood appropriate to the contemplating works of art.

An apparent similarity of the confessional situation is seen in the poem *Gospels* (from the volume *Pragnienie*), which is supposed to bring to mind the title prayer, commonly associated with the Christian culture of the black inhabitants of the USA.

15 Anna Czabanowska-Wróbel considers *Tierra del Fuego* to be a poetic appeal to an unnamed God hiding outside the world, combined with a request for healing of the heart and mind (liberation from the dangerous contemporary powers of amnesia and anesthesia), as well as a poetic prayer that – if treated universally – directs us toward reflection on postmodern spirituality and its diagnosis – or, if taken literally – it can be read as a request for inspiration (Czabanowska-Wróbel, 2015).

*A może ktoś śpiewał gospels w niedzielę
miękkimi wargami
o Boże Boże przeznaczenia
i podróży
o Ty który się skradasz
o naczynie
Boże powstańców
o Ty który zszyłeś to płótno
o elastyczny
o Ty co w moim śnie
o świeco słońce długiej nocy
o Ty co zapominasz
o niezawodny
o wspólny
o natchnienie
o gospels bez formy
Boże turkawek i tureckich tańców
Boże tonących okrętów
krzyków i czarnej choroby
o sprawco o radości
o który zszywasz o*

[Or maybe someone was singing gospels on Sunday
with soft lips
o God of destiny
and the journey
O Thou that creepest
O vessel
O God of insurgents
O Thou who hast sewn together this canvas
o elastic
O Thou in my dream
O candle of the sun of the long night
O Thou who forgets
o reliable
o shared
o inspiration
o gospels without form
God of turtledoves and Turkish dances
God of sinking ships
of screams and black disease
o maker of joy
o Thou who sew together]
(Zagajewski, 1999, p. 9)

Reading the above-mentioned poetic prayers, one cannot help but feel that the lyrical self is alien to the kind of fervor that might come from the authenticity of religious experience. This lack may be a consequence of the conviction that sometimes not prayer, but the emptiness resulting from its failure to be articulated is capable of producing an authentic need for the sacred, a painful longing for it, and finally, an epiphany, sensitivity to its presence in the images of the world, fragments of space, and peculiar crevices of existence. Following the belief that, according to the poet, “*Może być więcej / sensu, może być nawet modlitwa, / ale nie trzeba się spieszyć, odejmowanie czasem rośnie jak/ciasto na niedzielny chleb*” [There may be more sense, / there may even be a prayer. / but no need to rush, subtraction sometimes grows like / dough for Sunday bread] (Zagajewski, 2009, p. 28). In *Zapatki* [Matches], moreover, an agnostic perspective is revealed. The poet asks why the Creator, if He exists, does not speak out; for what reason reality seems impregnated with the fullness of His revelation; why such an experience is not given to the world, and why the Absolute speaks only through indistinct signs: “*Jeżeli jestem tylko częścią / tego wiersza, dlaczego milczy całość? / Dlaczego Bóg wyręcza się śpiewem / drozdów a błyskawice naszą / rękawiczki na płomieniu?*” [If I am but a part / of this poem, why is the whole silent? / Why does God make use of the singing / of thrushes and lightning wear / gloves on their flame?] (Zagajewski, 2009, p. 28).

*Good Friday in the Tunnels of the Métro*¹⁶, *Wielka Sobota w Paryżu*¹⁷

A poignant poetic gesture, one that began already in the *Komunikat* collection (Zagajewski, 1972), can be also found in locating church holidays in the space of modernity, especially in the realities of the contemporary city. Anna Czabanowska-Wróbel notes that depending on which key is chosen to interpret the moving, but also bitterly ironic, poem *Niedziela Palmowa* [Palm Sunday], in which “*Chrystus ukrzyżowany o świcie, / o tydzień za wcześnie, nieogolony, / w brudnym ubraniu*” [Christ crucified at dawn, / a week too early, unshaven, / in dirty clothes] is presented among contemporary “*żołnierzy / w niedopiętych mundurach*” [soldiers / in untucked uniforms], the poem is either a call for freedom in times of political violence, or the first one in a series about the search for traces of the sacred in a desecralized world. Importantly, the two readings are not mutually exclusive (Czabanowska-Wróbel, 2015). It should be added that in this poem, a clearly perceptible, ironic and scathing tone is

16 Zagajewski, 1998a, p. 65.

17 Zagajewski, 1999, p. 25.

apparent,¹⁸ expressed through the multiple symptoms of pursuance of the traditional ritual and liturgical order:

*Odwołano uniesienia Tygodnia,
...
przerwane są rekolekcje
i mistyczne wzloty dojrzewających
młodzieńców, straciłmy okazję
siedmiu dni ascezy, nie czas
na pokutę...*

[The exaltations of the Week have been cancelled,
...
the retreats are interrupted
and mystical ruptures of maturing
young men, we have lost the opportunity
for seven days of asceticism, no time
for penance...]
(Zagajewski, 1972, p. 52).

The poet places All Saints' Day in a similarly ironic context, but the object of irony in the poem is not the holiday itself, but those who try to profit from it, because – as Zagajewski notes in *Święto Zmarłych* [Hallowmas] – “*Pierwszy listopad jest dniem / kiedy każdy porządny poeta / pisze przynajmniej jeden wiersz*” [The first of November is a day / when every decent poet / writes at least one piece] (Zagajewski, 1972, p. 9). Thus we can see that both in *Niedziela Palmowa* and *Święto Zmarłych*, what the poet is not attacking is the sacred as such, but the context into which contemporary culture likes to force it, and which – in the opinion of the lyrical self – does not serve understanding of the sacred, but actually works against it by distorting it.

Often, moreover, the lyrical self does not locate or identify God in the context of church holidays; nor does he usually engage in prayer. The truths of faith, however, are able to reach him through art. He writes about it clearly in *Good Friday in the Tunnels of the Métro*:

18 Derek Walcott wrote about this position of the ironist, sometimes taken by the poet, referring to the collection of essays *Two Cities* and linking it to the position of a parodist of totalitarian doctrine. “It is an irony that highlights contradictions through their detailed universalism, their pessimism, [and] their conviction of futility. These perverse and bitter epistles take the form of public speeches, private reports (also addressed to God), and confessions poisoned with cynicism foreign to Zagajewski’s poetry and personality. He seems to be saying: I try to describe the beautiful in my poems, but I am no stranger to perversity and I express it in prose, because sin is more permanent than good thoughts or good deeds. Evil is infinite, good is limited, joy is brief” (Walcott, 2002). As it turns out, the aforementioned position of the ironist is also present in some of the poet’s works, such as in one already discussed here, *Niedziela Palmowa*.

Jews of various religions meet
In the tunnels of the Métro, rosary beads
Spilled from someone's tender fingers.

Above them priests sleep after their Lenten supper,
above them the pyramids of synagogues and churches
stand like the rocks a glacier left behind.

I listened to the *St. Matthew's Passion*,
Which transforms pain into beauty.
I read the *Death Fugue* by Celan
transforming pain into beauty.

In the tunnels of the Métro no transformation of pain,
It is there, it persists and is keen.
(Zagajewski, 1998a, p. 65)

In addition to the juxtaposition of the theme of Christ's suffering (a reference to *St. Matthew's Passion* by J.S. Bach, the Good Friday) and the crime of the Holocaust (*Death Fugue* by Paul Celan), the poet builds a clear hierarchy of significance, one might say – a ladder of beings praying and acting for the benefit of religious elevation. This gradation may serve as an ironic commentary on the order governing the Christian civilization, or as a kind of guideline, a simplified explanation of the chronological order and approximate time of the emergence of major religious systems. At the bottom, “in the tunnels of the Métro,” we find the Jews and the speaker, saying that “above them priests sleep,” and “above them the pyramids of synagogues and churches.” We find references to religious devotional prayers and penitential forms in the poem (“rosary beads / spilled,” “Lenten supper”). Hierarchy is emphasized by the syntactic parallelism used by the poet, which manifests itself in the anaphoric construction that opens the enumerative course of the argument (“above them priests sleep,” “above them the pyramids of synagogues and churches”), while the monolithism and power of the observed religious system are highlighted by the following comparison: “the pyramids of synagogues and churches/ stand like the rocks a glacier left behind.” At the same time, attention is drawn to the clear biblical allusion to the *St. Matthew Passion* by J.S. Bach, which uses the text of the Gospel of Matthew.¹⁹

19 In the context of the verse in question, a passage from chapter 16 of the aforementioned Gospel also proves relevant: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Matthew 16, 18. A footnote accompanying the cited biblical verse contains an explanation referring to the theme of the rock: “The Greek word for Peter means rock.” The Greek *Petros*, *petra*; and Aramaic In both cases, the same word *Kefa*.

The confession made in *Wielka Sobota w Paryżu* bears catastrophic hallmarks. The lyrical situation sketched here, taking place during the Easter holiday, As the speaker finds himself in the French capital, marks some symptoms of an impending cataclysm.

*A może to jest tylko
święto wiosennego deszczu:
rynsztkiem płyną okręty
o żaglach z wczorajszej gazety,
która nazywa się świat.*

...

*Ktoś zauważył, że pękła ziemia
i pochłonęła trochę przyszłości.
Na szczęście pęknięcie jest nieznaczące,
jeszcze można je zacerować.
Pojedźmy gdzie indziej, mówisz,
tam, gdzie mnisi śpiewają
swoje pieśni z ołowiu.
Niestety, w dzielnicy arabskiej
chmura dwugłowa jak carski orzeł
zagradsza nam drogę.
I dwugłowe wątpliwości,
smukłe jak antylopy,
barykadują wilgotną ulicę.
Panie, dlaczego umarłeś?*

[Or maybe it's just a
celebration of spring rain:
ships fare down the gutter
with sails from yesterday's newspaper,
called 'the world'.

...

Someone has noticed that the earth has cracked
and devoured some of the future.
Fortunately, the crack is insignificant,
and it can still be patched up.
Let's go somewhere else, you say,
where the monks sing

„Church” Greek word *Ekklēsia* implies an assembly of the people, and also the house in which the assembly takes place. “Gates of hell” suggest the hostile powers of the underworld, striking the rock and the Church founded on it. Ibidem. It would probably be an overinterpretation to link the space of the subway corridors which appears in the poem with the underground world referred to in the Bible, although it is impossible not to admit that this line of associations may constitute an interesting interpretative variant.

their songs of lead.
Alas, in the Arab quarter
a two-headed cloud like a tsarist eagle
bars our way.
And two-headed doubts,
slender as antelopes,
barricade the damp street.
Lord, why did you die?]
(Zagajewski, 1999, p. 25)

A great downpour (“Or maybe it’s just / a celebration of spring rain: / ships fare down the gutter / with sails from yesterday’s newspaper, / called ‘the world’”), and a harbinger of another one (... a two-headed cloud like a tsarist eagle / bars our way”), blocking the way for the sacred, which results in making contact with it impossible. The essence of the Resurrection is concretized in the form of discreetly smuggled, but clear references to the Gospel description. Zagajewski writes: Someone has noticed that the earth has cracked / and devoured some of the future. Fortunately, the crack is insignificant, / and it can still be patched up” (Zagajewski, 1999, p. 25).

As Mark the Evangelist, in depicting the scenes of the Crucifixion, the Death of Jesus, and the signs and events that immediately followed, focuses on the motif of the tearing, successively, of garments and heaven, as well as of the darkness enveloping the earth, as follows: “And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get” (Mark 15, 24); “At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon” (Mk 15, 33); “The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, «Surely this man was the Son of God!»” (Mark 15, 38–39). John the Evangelist similarly mentions these two facts in the passages concerning The Way of the Cross and the Crucifixion, except that the motif of division/splitting appears as many as four times: “When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. «Let’s not tear it,» they said to one another. «Let’s decide by lot who will get it.» This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, «They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.» So this is what the soldiers did” (John 19, 23–24). Luke, describing the death of Jesus, quite faithfully confirms previous reports,²⁰ while in the Gospel of Matthew,²¹ these events moreover

20 “It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (Luke 22: 44–45).

21 In the passages Crucifixion, The Death of Jesus, The Burial of Jesus.

include information about the disaster of earthquake and rupture of the earth's crust²²: “From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land” (Matthew 27, 45). At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, «Surely he was the Son of God!»” (Matthew 27, 51–54).

By comparing the elements that constitute an essential component of the accounts contained within the cited passages in the four Gospels, namely, the motif of “tearing” (first the garments, then the earth) and darkness (which is a foreshadowing of the coming cataclysm – an earthquake, in some versions conceptualized in less dramatic language as simply “dividing” (first of the garment, then the earth) and then comparing them with the analyzed poem by Zagajewski, it is not difficult to see that the poet smuggles symptoms of all these events into the poem. They are present in the work in a metaphorical poetic image with apocalyptic features (“a two-headed cloud ... / bars our way. / And two-headed doubts, / ... / barricade the damp street”, “the earth has cracked / and devoured some of the future.”), the catastrophic overtones of which, however, are quickly suppressed by the speaker, because – as we read – “Fortunately, the crack is insignificant, / and it can still be patched up.”). It can be presumed that without the aforementioned softening and in a context other than that of Easter, such a poetic image would lose its poetic credibility when integrated into a twentieth-century poetic situation.

The biblical allusions in *Wielka Sobota w Paryżu* do not end there, for like Matthew and Mark end their poignant description of Jesus dying with the words: “About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice «Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?» (which means «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?»)” (Matthew 27, 46)²³, so Zagajewski finishes his poem with a dramatic cry, deviating from the remaining distanced, cold words: “Lord, why did you die?” (Zagajewski, 1999, p. 25).

22 “When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots” (Matthew 27, 35).

23 “And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, «Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?» (which means «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?») (Mark 15,34). In the Gospels of Luke and John, these words are absent. Cf. “Jesus called out with a loud voice, «Father, into your hands I commit my spirit». When he had said this, he breathed his last. (Luke 23,46); “When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19,30).

Only mysteries are immortal

I feel
your presence in the bright gloom,
a sheet of torn paper, healing, healing
again, no trace, no scar
(Zagajewski, 1998a, p. 71).

When reading Zagajewski's poems, one has the impression that the sacred is permanently present, and that the poet is constantly brushing against the figure of the Absolute, while not being able (or sometimes not wanting?) to fully see it. It is as if the poet believes that it is better not to answer certain questions, and that certain truths should remain unsaid forever, because "tylko tajemnice są nieśmiertelne" [Only mysteries are immortal] (Zagajewski, 2002, p. 13), while "obecność ... skażona jest grzechem / pierworodnym istnienia-nadmiarem, dziką / orientalną pychą, a piękno, jak nożyk / do owoców, zadowala się skrawkiem pełni" [presence ... is contaminated with the original sin / of existence-abundance, wild / oriental pride, and beauty, like a fruit knife, / is content with a slice of fullness]. At the same time, man's relationship with God is often concretized in terms of disintegration, fragmentation, and loss of original fullness. Thus, the lyrical self turns to the Creator in *The Gothic*: „I feel / your presence in the bright gloom, / a sheet of torn paper, healing, healing / again, no trace, no scar” [*The Gothic*], *Gospels* (“O Boże / / o Ty który zszyłeś to płótno / o elastyczny / [...] / o który zszywasz o” [o God ... / O Thou who hast sewn together this canvas / o elastic ... / o Thou who sew together] (Zagajewski, 1999, p. 9)), and also in *A quick poem*, where the speaker admits: “My life lay tattered / on both sides of the road, brittle as a paper map.” The transitive lyrical self comes into contact with the sacred:

I was listening to Gregorian chants
in a speeding car
on a highway in France.
The trees rushed past. Monks' voices
sang praises to an unseen God
(at dawn, in a chapel trembling with cold).
Domine, exaudi orationem meam,
male voices pleaded calmly
As if salvation were just growing in the garden.
...
With the sweet monks
I made my way toward the clouds, deep blue,
heavy, dense,

toward the future, the abyss,
gulping heavy tears of hail.
Far from dawn. Far from home.
(Zagajewski, 1998a, p. 152)

This relationship with the sacred is strongly mediated. After all, the lyrical self is aware of the skin-deep shallowness of this contact. “In place of walls – sheet metal. / Instead of vigil – a flight. / Travel instead of remembrance. / A quick poem instead of a hymn” (The church is observed through the car mirror,²⁴ Gregorian chant is heard on the car radio – an assurance of modernity – a strategy quite often adopted by the lyrical self in moments of contact with the sacred). In this poem, however, we have to do with an additional symptom of the sacralization of the lyrical monologue, with a kind of an imitation of one of the elements of the story of the Magi from the East²⁵ – a guiding star pointing the way:

A small, tired star raced
up ahead
And the highway’s asphalt shone
Showing where the earth was,
where the horizon’s razor lay in wait,
and the black spider of evening
and night, widow of so many dreams.
(Zagajewski, 1998a, p. 152)

Reality is complex, with the mystical permeating the one-dimensional. “*Wiem, że są przynajmniej cztery rzeczywistości / a nie jedna, i wszystkie przenikają się / nawzajem, jak cztery Ewangelie. / Wiem, że jestem sam i jednocześnie złączony / z tobą, trwale, szczęśliwie i boleśnie. / Wiem, że tylko tajemnice są nieśmiertelne*” [I know that there are at least four realities / and not one, and they all interpenetrate / each other, like the four Gospels. / I know that I am alone and at the same time joined/ to you, permanently, happily and painfully. / I know that only mysteries are immortal] (Zagajewski, 2002, p. 13), the poet confesses. After all, for Zagajewski, this circular movement, this constant circling around the same problem, is extremely important (cf. Michalski, 2011, p. 170), which in this case turns out to be the problem of “feeling” and identifying the hallmarks of the Absolute, becoming aware of its presence and continuous confrontation

24 In one of his poems the poet says: “*In the rear-view mirror suddenly / I saw the bulk of the Beauvais Cathedral; / great things dwell in small ones / for a moment*” (Zagajewski, 1998b, p. 128.).

25 Instead, the Gospel story of the Three Magi itself becomes the basis for the poem *The Three Kings*, which I discussed in a separate text (cf. Bodzioch-Bryła, 2017, pp. 241–254).

of this awareness with a more rational element of nature, resulting in the need to continuously question. The question of the Absolute seems to be highly personal for Zagajewski, which is why, while trying to find an answer to it, he is unable to get “beyond the vicious circle of his own psyche” (Michalski, 2011, p. 170). Because, as he writes in an essay,

We'll never manage, after all, to settle permanently in transcendence ... We'll never 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 tents there for long, no one will build a home on the eternal snows. We'll head back down daily (if only to sleep ...). We'll always return for the quotidian: after experiencing an epiphany, writing a poem And this is as it should be, since otherwise, lunacy lies in wait above and boredom down below (Zagajewski, 2014, p. 10).

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