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Walking on Streets That No Longer Exist Talking About Poetry with Ilya Kaminsky

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PHILIP METRES

Walking on Streets That No Longer Exist

Talking About Poetry with Ilya Kaminsky

This interview took place on November 20, 2016.

PHILIP METRES Can you talk a bit about your origins in Odessa, Ukraine? Your education as a poet there?

ILYA KAMINSKY When I return to Odessa—I try to go once a year—I walk by the streets that no longer exist; some have different names, but others actually are no longer there. I walk through them anyway, saying hello to neighbors that once lived in these now-imaginary buildings of a now razed and empty area of Odessa.

A poet is not born into a country. A poet is born into childhood. And, those who are lucky, stay in that domain.

Childhood doesn't stop when one is issued a passport on one's 16th birthday. It doesn't stop when the country suddenly breaks down and then war starts in neighboring Moldova, only two hours away. Childhood doesn't stop when one's father's friends are shot in the street simply because they are journalists writing about wrong things at a wrong time. Childhood continues. In the USSR I read books of course, but my education was the city itself, the world around me—an agitated woman beating up a man in a bakery because he stole a little *bulochka*, my spine trembling like a compass needle.

PM So in the battle between lyric and narrative, you take lyric!

IK Odessa in 1980s and 1990s was lyrical in its details: the rawness of its colors, its smells. Odessa has one of the largest food markets in Eastern Europe, *Privoz*. But why do I mention the food market, when you just asked about education? Because in Odessa, where Yiddish, Ukrainian, Russian, and several other languages are spoken, languages flirt with one another at *Privoz*, they bargain with each other and batter, attack and comfort, full of little slaps and clacks. The food bazaar is where one finds the language being reborn continuously, on the tongue, along with *brinza* cheese and sour apples.

You know what is strange? In America our sensual life doesn't exist in much of our daily experi-

ence—we don't find people walking on streets in most neighborhoods or suburbs in this country, we don't even have smells in our supermarkets—the world around us is neat, packaged, and comes straight out of the cooler. Now, that *is* strange. That is surrealism poor old Salvador Dali didn't have the guts to imagine.

PM You overhear conversations—

IK I was a nearly deaf boy since I did not wear hearing aids in Russia. Hearing aids entered my life when I came to the USA at 16. Odessa was a silent city where I watched lips; the language was utterly physical, bodily, sexual, and full of trams and taxis and newspaper kiosks and puddles of snowmelt and sandals and acacia trees and sunlight. The city was the conversation I overheard.

That is one way to speak about education—for what is a library? Even that infamous library that Borges told us about? And how serious and desperate—and with what sort of longing—are we to speak about libraries if we don't even mention blind Borges' love for Buenos Aires? How are we to speak of libraries if we forget to speak of the love and abandon of a man going blind—who touched every wall of his city with his fingers the way he touched the faces of people he loved, also, with fingers. Isn't *that* the way to speak of libraries? So, how would you like a man to speak to you about his "origins" in Odessa, in a country he's lost? With his fingers?

PM My daughter Leila and I recently watched you read "We Lived Happily During the War" and she wondered, "why is he singing it?" Can you talk about your mode of reading aloud/declaring (your) poems?

IK If we agree that poetry began as a sacred activity of wooing, of speaking in tongues, of casting a spell; if we agree that it began in the ecstatic, in the shamanistic, in the irrational, if we listen to the earliest recorded poets (and with the earlier technology we have voices of say Whitman, Yeats, Akhmatova, Plath, Mandelstam, Pasternak, Lorca, Césaire, and so on); if we consider that less than 100 years ago poets *all* read their work with that

kind of concentration and devotion; and if we read their work we will certainly see that they (as different as they were in their poetics, their politics, their maladies) had strong belief in the sacred, ecstatic origins of their verbal art; then why would one (unless one is a child who doesn't yet know this history) ask this question in the first place?

Why not, instead, ask how did it happen that most contemporary poets in the West today read—or rather, dictate—their poems in the same way they read their lectures to auditoriums of undergraduates who are supposed to sit there taking notes? Wooing? Casting a spell? Speaking in tongues? Forget it.

Am I exaggerating? Of course. But having admitted it, let's take a breath. Do you really see that kind of spell-casting on the reading circuit of US campuses? No. You see people who make their living by giving lectures and reading poems exactly in the same way chemistry professors communicate to their classrooms. Or the way stand-up comedians communicate to their audience. It is a well-known joke these days that the talk between the poems is more fun—and more passionate—than the delivery of the poems, and often the poems themselves.

People often ask me about what they call "the Russian tradition" of reading poetry. Are they serious? Have they heard the recordings Yeats reading? Plath? Hayden? Thomas? Would they imagine Emily Dickinson read "Wild Nights" aloud the same way she read the newspaper? Yeats is singing, and wailing, and incanting. I do not feel bewildered because most English speakers asking this question do not know about the Russian tradition. That is to be expected. But why on earth don't we listen to our own poets, in our own language? It's all available online.

If you ever heard Gwendolyn Brooks read you know that is a kind of experience one carries in one's body for a long time.

Listen to Carolyn Forché read. She reads like something needs to change in the world and our lives depend on this language that's a country between us. Listen to Walcott read as if there is an ocean, not an audience, in front of him. But that

is a rarity, these days. The question really is: what changed? Why would your daughter, in the 21st century, not *expect* a poet to cast a spell with poems, with saying poems aloud? How can one *expect* a poet to do anything *but*? For if a poet can't do that—or try to do that, at least, what is our poet *for*?

I am not talking about performance here. I am not talking about “reading” as something elevated. I am talking about one's *attitude* towards language. This is about the necessity of art. About passion in art. About search for the soul's release in language, so to speak. This is also the question of how the tradition of Dickinson and Whitman (one of the wildest things Western culture has known) got so very utterly lost? Where did the *astonishment* go?

On the other hand, though I am no expert in hip-hop or Spoken Word, I have been moved by the energy of the presentations I have seen. Why is there such a divide between the presentation of poetry in the hip-hop or Spoken Word poetry circuits vs. the academic reading circuits? How much does this have to do with racism and elitism in our society, and how much to do with different approaches to craft?

So, that is one way of answering your daughter's question. On a very personal level: I am a deaf man who doesn't necessarily hear the words he reads aloud. So, what you get, for better or worse, is the kind of free human voice—a voice that is uncensored by one's own ear.

PM In another interview from the early 2000s, you spoke of beginning to write in English after the death of your father, and in which you found “a parallel reality, an insanely beautiful freedom—”

IK My father died in 1994, less than a year after we arrived in the USA. I understood right away that it would be impossible for me to write about his death in the Russian language, as one author says of his deceased father somewhere, “Ah, don't become mere lines of beautiful poetry!” I chose English because no one in my family or friends knew it—no one I spoke to could read what I wrote. I myself did not know the language. It was a parallel reality, yes, an insanely beautiful freedom; it still is.

PM How so?

IK There is a beauty in falling in love with a language—the strangeness of its sounds, the awe of watching the sea-surf of a new syntax beating again and again the cement of your unknowing. Learning to speak again can be erotic—the unfamiliar turn of the tongue, the angle of the mouth, the movement of lips.

On the other hand, you are so powerless, so humbled, so lost, bewildered, surrounded by nothing but your own confusion. That, too. You don't know the word, what to do?

And then: the miracle of metaphor. You know other words, they come to redefine what you wanted to say in the first place, you see the world slightly differently from where you began, your mouth makes sounds you didn't know were possible.

PM What changes?

IK Even the shape of my face changed when I began to live inside the English language.

But I wouldn't make a big deal out of writing in a language that is not one's own. It's the experience of so many people in the world; those who have left their homes because of wars, famines, environmental disasters and so on. My being bilingual is no big deal, fellow humans migrate all the time, and have done that for thousands of years.

Migratory and bilingual experience is rather commonplace among writers, too. Here is a sample list: Gertrude Stein's first language wasn't English. Mandelstam's first language wasn't Russian. French wasn't Edmond Jabès' first language. Vénus Khoury-Ghata claims to write in Lebanese *through* French. Li-Young Lee was born in Indonesia to Chinese parents who fled from Indonesia to Hong Kong to Japan before they settled in the USA. Milosz was a man from Lithuania writing in Polish (something that haunted him, as he admitted countless times; he felt he couldn't do things that Polish poets from Warsaw could do; but perhaps what he *couldn't* do gave him something larger?). Hell, Russian wasn't Pushkin's first language—and this is the founder of the Russian literary tradition we are talking about here.

What's important are those little thefts between languages, those strange angles of looking at another literature, “slant” moments in speech, oddities, the music of oddities.

PM Could you say more about this strangeness?

IK The question of strange language, especially as it relates to the lyric poet is something we can talk about for a while. You see, I believe that no great lyric poet ever speaks in the so-called “proper” language of his or her time. Emily Dickinson didn't write in “proper” English grammar but in a slanted music of fragmentary perception. Half a world and half a century away, César Vallejo placed three dots in the middle of the line, as if language itself were not enough, as if the poet's voice needed to leap from one image to another, to make—to use Eliot's phrase—a raid on the inarticulate. Paul Celan wrote to his wife from Germany, where he briefly visited from his voluntary exile in France: “The language with which I make my poems has nothing to do with one spoken here, or anywhere.”

PM How does your education in Russian poetry influence your writing in English? In other words, what has Russian poetry (and language) taught your (American/English) poetry?

IK The “Odessa School” or the “Southern Russian school of Russian literature” (as Viktor Shklovsky called it) was the only real literary school outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg generally accepted by critics in that country. Even so, being a poet from Odessa is already a kind of translation for a Russian speaker. It means—for many—being immersed in the language that is a far cry from the “clean” or “civilized” literary Russian.

As I touched on before, because Odessa is a multinational city (a rare thing in the former Russian empire), the Russian language spoken in Odessa is a language that is constantly reinvented—new words, phrases, combinations, are taking place each morning at the local bazaar or bread line. It is the part of city culture, and the city prides itself on it; it is a cliché actually, it is provincialism, actually. But, in that way, isn't Joyce's Dublin also a provincial place? In fact, Odessa is the city that Joyce dreamt about: the symphony of *Finnegans Wake*, with its invention of words on every paragraph's street corner—behind any laundry-line, in any garage, in any street-fight of the city.

PM What poets influenced you? Who were you reading then?

IK As for what books arrived in Rochester, New York, in my suitcases in 1993: well, all the usual suspects, from Pushkin and Gogol and Shestov and Bely and Akhmatova and Pasternak and Tsvetaeva and Kharms and Khlebnikhov and Zabolotsky and so on. One names Kharms and Khleb-

nikov and Tsvetaeva because those names are known in this country, so one's colleagues can get a point of reference. But it could be just as easy to speak about someone like Aranzon (a great poet in my opinion) of whom few in the West are really aware. Naming names is a very limiting enterprise, given how limited the field of translation is, these days. And of course, for any Russian speaker writing after 1945, it would be impossible to speak about influences without naming Goethe, Shakespeare and so on.

Translation in the USSR was a huge industry, and an important art-form; Pasternak's translation of *Faust* is a work of genius; I have even heard a couple of people claim his Shakespeare is better than the original (!) So, the question here is not only what Russian poetry taught a young boy 80s and 90s, but also what Western poetry as seen through Russian eyes taught me. *Faust* simply doesn't exist in English. Don't get me wrong—many famous hands translated it (Jarrell, etc.). But I have never heard people in America say they know a passage from Goethe by heart. I know dozens of Russian-speakers who can recite pages from Pasternak's *Faust*. So *Faust*, too, is a part of Russian tradition—as odd as it may seem. And, that is just one example. Of course, the same is true of English tradition, too: our Ovid lives in Goldsmith's gorgeous, centuries-old line; our late 20th century Homer lives in Christopher Logue's cinematic mind, and in the 21st century, the *Iliad* casts a spell through Alice Oswald's mesmerizing repetitions in her version, *Memorial*.

PM What is mesmerizing about poetry for you?

IK Poetry isn't just one thing, it is different every morning. So it depends on the morning you ask! But to take a larger look—for me, poetry has always been ecstatic in the ancient Greek definition of *ekstasis*: to stand outside of one's self. The way I see it, poetry allows us to stand outside of ourselves because it is a medium through which one can transport silence, awe, clarity, bewilderment, emotion—from one human body to another.

And, to give this morning's example: I've heard that at the time of my birth in 1977, Elizabeth Bishop was already an old cranky lady. Christopher Smart, already long dead, was a madman who, in the streets of London, stopped strangers and begged them to kneel in the dirt and pray with him. Why should I bother reading their work?

And, yet, like numerous other people, I this morning I want to recite by heart Bishop's “The art of losing isn't hard to master / so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost . . .” or Smart's luminous piece for his cat Jeoffry. Their words live in my body, they move my lips, they organize silences in my mouth. That, for me, is magical, is an *ekstasis*.

PM You are also a marvelous, nuanced translator. I noticed, for example, great bravery and panache in dispensing with line-by-line imitation in your translation and editing of Polina Barskova's *This Lamentable City*, opting not only for a different number of lines, but different stanzas and dropping some lines entirely. Can you talk about that sort of aesthetic decision?

IK Thank you. But that is simply not true: I am an impersonator, a fraud, a sham, I wear a mask, more than one mask in fact. What is translation? Can an Ella Fitzgerald performance be translated from her voice into a violin's? Imitated, yes, but I don't believe a great work of art can be translated.

And yet, however impossible it may be, we *need* translation. Translation is food for literature. No literature can grow and develop without it. With-

out translation we wouldn't have Homer, we wouldn't have the Bible, we wouldn't (in Russia) have Shakespeare, we wouldn't (in America) have Césaire or Tsvetaeva. It teaches us new sounds, new ideas, a new and more passionate syntax. Since we don't really have Shakespeare (in Russia) or Tsvetaeva (in the USA), we are, here, awkwardly naked, cowering with a little fig leaf someone has decided to call "translation."

I rarely (only when publishers or other such mercenaries insist) call what I do translations. I call them "versions," "imitations," "homages," "readings." That admission of imperfection allows me to be more honest with my readers about the act of travesty I am about to commit.

On the other side, translation is a very humbling experience. It is an education for a poet, yes. (Working with poets such as Jean Valentine or Christian Wiman was a wonderful education for me! So beautiful to work with them, to watch them in action, as the poem in English appeared.) But it is also an education in humility, in learning how much one simply cannot do.

As to what Polina and I did—that was a kind of play between two good friends. We both lived in Berkeley, we came to each other's houses for supper. She "translated" my poems and her translations were quite different from my poems. I did the same with hers. We both grew up on the Russian school of translation where someone like Marshak, whose Burns in Russian is lovely and has absolutely nothing with Burns, is put on a high pedestal. Same can be said for Mandelstam's Petrarch, Akhmatova's Leopardi, Tsvetaeva's Lorca and so on. For us, the question was not whether translation is possible. We already know that it isn't possible. The question was, well, if translation isn't possible, what is? What kind of new precision can be found in the chase after a phantom? And that is where—in the attempt to do the impossible—the play begins.

PM What specific challenges are there in bringing Russian into English?

IK Well, the Russian literary tradition is much, much younger than the English. So translating from the Russian is like performing an archeological dig. The translator often is forced to ask: who does Brodsky or Pasternak sound like? Pope? Byron? Lowell? Millay? In other words, an English translator usually tries to "fit" the Russian original into some already available niche in the poetic tradition. And that is a problem, because Pasternak is not Pope. And certainly not Byron. In fact, he is Pasternak only sometimes (since he re-invents himself so much, some say too much). The translator must re-invent English to make Pasternak's delicate balances available in this language. And who in the world is capable of re-inventing English on the level of his re-invention of Russian in *My Sister—Life*?

Even one's attitude toward the alphabet itself can differ from language to language. For example: until the early 20th century, the mnemonic names inherited from Church Slavonic were used for the letters. Which drove Pushkin mad, by the way, he wrote: "The letters constituting the Slavonic alphabet do not produce any sense." Pushkin's remark shouldn't be our concern here. But there is more to it: according to some scholars the names of the first several letters of the Slavonic alphabet seem to form a text:

Аз буки веде глаголь добро есть живете зело,
земля, и иже и како люди мыслете наш он
покой. . . .

"I know letters" "To speak is a beneficence"
"Live, while working heartily, people of the Earth,

in the manner people should obey" "try to understand the Universe . . ."

Imagine that! Imagine that every letter of English alphabet should have a name and together they all form a text. How about that. Where is Borges when we need him?

PM You graduated from UC Hastings with a law degree—my brother got his law degree from Hastings! Is it possible to talk about the common labor of the lawyer and the poet? As a worker within a kind of language, have you seen those labors as overlapping, in the area of human rights and witness? Does your practice of law influence your poetry?

IK Yes, I went to law school, and have at one time worked for Legal Aid and the National Immigration Law Center. While these days I teach at San Diego State, I still continue to work pro bono as a Court-appointed advocate for kids who are orphans on the California/Mexico border. I enjoy doing that that kind of thing.

Does this work influence me as a poet? Surely: losing a case on which someone's health benefits depend certainly taught me about the urgency of language. But then, all of our daily activities and interactions with others influence our vocabulary; if we are to believe Yeats, a poet should always be revising for a more passionate syntax.

But don't poets see/hear/touch language everywhere? Going to the beach with my nephews fills the afternoon with language. Kissing my wife is a moment in which nouns understand their passion for verbs and adjectives shyly watch. Nouns start flying around the room when I engage with my brother in a shouting match, and the cats hide. And is there a better lesson in pacing and line-break for a poet than botching the delivery of a joke?

I love human beings. Time squeezes us from both ends like accordions, and I love this music we make. One might choose to see it from a distance. I prefer to see it from the inside, in the midst these person-to-person interactions. If I fail to be a human being first, I fail my poetry.

PM With the fluid situation of Russia-Ukraine, and your former life in Odessa, I imagine these years have been exceedingly difficult to bear. I recall my grandparents' particular melancholy—the melancholy, I think, of the exile—and how they tried to carry their mother country with them in their daily rituals and Arabic foods, in their language and friendships. It must be bringing up all sorts of memories. What do you make of what's happening there, and what's happening with you?

IK I visited a building in Odessa, not long ago. Nearly 50 people were burned alive in that very same building not long after. How to talk about that in an interview? When this war started, I published articles for places like PEN Center, and now I hesitate to speak about it even to my wife, though I keep interviewing writers from Ukraine and publishing them here in the States. It just goes on and on. People are fleeing their homes with one shopping bag, and their house is bombed out behind their backs. And those are the ones considered lucky. Then some idiot blames that man running away for not staying and fighting.

I have family there, in Russian-speaking areas of the country, not far from where the real violence takes place. Some of them are quite elderly, and can't leave. Yes, one speaks out, one wants to keep speaking out. I prefer not to speak in the voice of someone who lives in the States, but to give interviews to those who live in Ukraine—to have their voices heard here.

I still try go to Ukraine every year, but the rest of the time I am watching events from my comfortable American backyard—which only adds to the guilt and helplessness. And, then, there is the American part of me: I have lived in this country since 1993. There are wonderful things about my life here. The kind of diversity America offers most East Europeans don't even dream about. That is a true gift of this country, I feel.

Then again, in light of recent political events, in 2016, when the American empire suddenly showed its true face, without façade, without makeup, the question of how to be a poet in America, an increasingly racist and imperialist empire (and it has *always* been both racist and imperialist), is a very relevant question in my life, having come from a childhood that was violated by political forces.

Sometimes, I have felt that there is very little moral authority among writers in the United States, very little questioning of what is right and wrong. The art here often deals with surfaces, it refuses to go deep and, in academic circles, it often refuses passion.

Then again, in a time like this, one re-reads Rankine's *Citizen* or the work of younger poets such as Jericho Brown, Sherwin Bitsui, or Victoria Chang, and many other young authors who are deeply engaged with the question of how to live, as a poet, in just such an empire.

PM How does that compare to the place of poetry in the USSR?

In the USSR of my childhood, poets had a clear moral choice.

IK In the USSR of my childhood, poets had a clear moral choice: you either stood up to the darkness or you were part of it.

But, having lived in the USA, I now realize that poetry is probably more important for one's soul in a capitalist society. Here, you lose your soul bit by bit: you are never clear whether you are standing in the darkness or outside of it.

In the oppressed society in which I was born the dividing line was clear, but in the USA nobody is there to say: this is right, that is wrong. It's much harder for a writer. The senses get dull. Morality is a bad word among our American poets and intellectuals, isn't it? Or, rather, the word has been stolen from us by extremists. In Western society, people are so afraid to say they are lost out loud. But it's who we are—we are lost. And a lyric poet is never afraid to admit such a loss. A lyric poet is able to take that condition of being lost and make art out of it.

PM Are you saying that sometimes watching the events in Ukraine and thinking of the USSR you see some parallels with the current events in America?

IK It's easy for us to be horrified by the senseless violence in another country. But, in just one example of the senseless violence in our own country: aren't Black children dying on our streets because they are Black children? I think, sometimes, American writers aren't terrified enough of the country they live in. Why is that?

PM And where do we—as artists—go from here?

IK I don't have an answer. But I do find myself thinking of that inner space, that *duende* of Lorca, a space which sings even in a dark fire. I think of the experience of a poet such as Akhmatova, who

began as a marvelous erotic poet and became one of the wisest voices of the 20th century through her engagement with the despair of history. I think of Frost's "the best way out is through."

A poet is a very private person. How can a private person live in history? A poet retreats to an inner space, away from reality, however violent or however uncaring and bewildering—and in that space one is alive, one is at the center of the earth, one holds a book in one's hands and reads it at the top of one's voice, and the earth turns on its axis, the earth swings on its axis, gently, just for you.

And the pigeons on the balcony shit, without hesitation, on the fancy cars of capitalists, just for you.

And the dogs in the neighbor's apartment bark, in the middle of the night, just for you.

And, then there is March again, and the world is alive again, also, for you.

Because you are part of it, and you cannot escape it, that world which is all about us.

And who would want to escape it anyway, this wonder, this astonishment?

We all know that a lyric poet is a very private person. But from that private space, the poet emerges, with (if one is lucky) a poem. And the poem (if one is lucky) finds a way to give voice to others in this moment in history which is—whether or not we like it—all around us.

Think of Dickinson. In the end, as cloistered as she might be, a great poet writes work that is gorgeous enough, powerful enough, to speak privately to many people at the same time.

PM In a time such as this, what can be useful for an American poet to know about the Russian poetic tradition?

IK What I do admire—deeply—about the Russian (and, in general, East European) tradition is that it has always been able to use a civic tone well. That is not common in contemporary North American literary practice. Whether you are a reader of Akhmatova or Mandelstam or Pushkin or Brodsky or Tsvetaeva or Zabolotsky or Slutsky or say someone completely unknown in the West, like Chichibabin—you will always find poetry that can address civic events, and not sound merely rhetorical. In the end, poetry that is not about an event, but *is* an event. And, Russian poetry is a tradition in which many poets have found a way to speak in a tone which touches on a time of crisis without becoming journalistic, without being profane—a tradition in which a lyric poet can speak truth to power, lyrically, with metaphysical depth—and makes a song others whisper to themselves to stay sane.

What can American poets take away from the Russian poetic tradition? Akhmatova relates a story about standing outside a prison where a woman asked her: can you describe all this? And the poet said: I can. ◀

ILYA KAMINSKY was born in Odessa, former Soviet Union in 1977, and arrived to the United States in 1993, when his family was granted asylum by the American government. He is the author of *Dancing in Odessa* (Tupelo Press), which won the Whiting Writer's Award, the American Academy of Arts and Letters' Metcalf Award, the Dorset Prize, and the Ruth Lilly Fellowship given annually by *Poetry* magazine.

PHILIP METRES has written and translated a number of books and chapbooks, including *Pictures at an Exhibition* (2016), *Sand Opera* (2015), *I Burned at the Feast: Selected Poems of Arseny Tarkovsky* (2015), *Compleat Catalogue of Comedic Novelties: Poetic Texts of Lev Rubinstein* (2014), *Concordance of Leaves* (2013), *abu ghraib arias* (2011), *Ode to Oil* (2011), *To See the Earth* (2008), and *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront since 1941* (2007).
