2017

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

Philip J. Metres
John Carroll University, pmetres@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://collected.jcu.edu/fac_bib_2017

Part of the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation
https://collected.jcu.edu/fac_bib_2017/87

This Creative Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Bibliographies Community Homepage at Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2017 Faculty Bibliography by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.
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 the food bazaar is where one finds the language tongues? Forget it.

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 lip; 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/declaiming (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 break. 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? Thomass? 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 (two of the greatest 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.

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—“

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.

How so?

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 only speaking—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, 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 you could make possible.

What changes?

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. Venus Khoury-Ghata claims to write in Lebanese through French. Li-Young Lee was born in Indo-China to Chinese parents who fled from Indone sia to Hong Kong 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 language, “slant” moments in speech, odd- ities, the music of oddities.

Could you say more about this strangeness?

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 Dick inson 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.”

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

The “Odessa School” or the “Southern Russian school of Russian literature” (as Viktor Shklovsky called it) was still at odds with the rest of education in 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 was 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: a cliché actually, it is pro vincialism, 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.

What poets influenced you? Who were you reading then?

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 Kharmas and Khlebnikov and Zab loty and so on. One names Kharmas and Khlebn ikov 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 Aranzen (a great poet in my opinion) of whom few in the West are really aware. Naming names is a very limiting enter prise, given how limited the field of translation is, today. Another, to make—to use Eliot’s phrase—a raid on the inarticulate. I have even heard a couple of people claim that 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 poetry, which I have studied. For example, 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.

What is mesmerizing about poetry for you?

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 all of us to go 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 must say 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 Jeffrey. Their words live in my body, they move my lips, they organize silences in my mouth. That, for me, is magical, is ekstasis.

You are also a marvelous, nuances 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?

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, covering 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 translation 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 Akhmatova's Leopardi, Tsvetaeva's Lorca and so on. For us, the question was not va's Lorca and so on. The question was, well, if Marshak, whose Burns in Russian is lovely and whose Leopardi has absolutely nothing with Burns, is put on Marshak, whose Burns in Russian is lovely and Russian school of translation where someone like Akhmatova's Leopardi, Tsvetaeva's Lorca and so on. For us, the question was not va's Lorca and so on. The question was, well, if Marshak, whose Burns in Russian is lovely and whose Leopardi has absolutely nothing with Burns, is put on Marshak, whose Burns in Russian is lovely and Russian school of translation where someone like Akhmatova's Leopardi, Tsvetaeva's Lorca and so on. For us, the question was not.
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.

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?

IR 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.