

ILYA KAMINSKY: A CONVERSATION

with

Tatyana Mishel*

Mishel: What do you get from writing in English that you don't in Russian?

Kaminsky: My first impulse is to say: Nothing. But as you know by now that would be a lie. Writing poetry in English allowed me a certain private realm, a sense of liberation not just from worldly affairs (anyone writing poetry seriously attains that) but from myself. Writing in a foreign language, I could see myself—my life—from a distance almost immediately. These foreign words offer themselves willingly into anything Ilya Kaminsky wants to shape with them. But who is Ilya Kaminsky—an imaginary character? Even his name is written in foreign letters, not my native Cyrillic. At some point, I realized that, strangely, if the native language is an expression of one's soul, then one's acquired language offers something else: a clear view on oneself from a distance.

Mishel: When you sit down to write do you have a sense of where you're going—or where you want to end up? How much is the element of surprise imperative to your poetry writing?

Kaminsky: Surprise is very important. In life we do not know what awaits us in the next moment. It is test of a mystery, yes? If a poet (or a reader) knows what he or she will encounter in the next line, the poem fails that test. But it would be a lie if I say that I have no clue what possible shape the longer poem will take as it evolves. I do have wishes. Meanwhile, I do not see my book as a collection which combines different forms, prose and poetry; I see it as a musical composition. A good composition has more than one rhythm; there should be many instruments of delivery, many tonal variations. In English, that again has to do with my wish to have much life on a page. Prose does on a page the job it also does so well in real life. Life is not only made of poetry. You must have both.

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Mishel: In your longer poems, “Natalia” and “Musica Humana” (an elegy to the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam) you combine free verse and prose poetry. At times, especially in “Musica Humana,” I thought of a Greek Chorus. Can you talk about combining these two forms?

Kaminsky: In “Natalia,” the prose pieces serve as a sort of an imaginary rabbinical commentary, a parallel text which co-exists associatively (but not always logically) with the poems above it. It is a duet. In “Musica Humana” the reasons for prose are personal. I felt it would be wrong to give Mandelstam an “I” and to then to speak for that “I” in a lyrical voice of my own making, without giving him a chance to speak for himself. The prose pieces did just that. Of course, there was also an issue of musical composition. Prose and poetry speak to each other directly and indirectly, their re-occurrence creates a rhythm. This “chorus” as you would choose to call it also creates the possibility of an epic form which does not sacrifice the lyrical means; the narrative exists in the poem without imposing itself on the lyrics. And to conclude: I have repeated the word “life” many times in this conversation, and I have no hesitation in repeating it again. Poetry (or any great art) is not an escape from life, it is life. It exists by the same laws that life itself exists on earth. Our postmodern friends misunderstand Ezra Pound’s advice to “make it new—they make it new, but it is dead. I say: make it live.

Mishel: Your book contains many images of people dancing. The poem “In Praise of Laughter” has the line: “we dance to keep from falling.” It seems that dancing represents a form of fighting for life. But your poetry doesn’t feel like it’s fighting anything. Can you elaborate?

Kaminsky: I think I may have already answered that question in our conversation somehow. I do not write a poetry of protest. I do not raise my voice in protest against the inevitable. Instead, I praise what we do have. Because we have so much! If the fact itself that we are here (however briefly) is a miracle, why protest it? Do not compare, Mandelstam has taught me; the human existence is incomparable.

Mishel: You hold a joyfulness—a hopefulness—in your poetry, even when it refers to horrible images and tragedies, as in “A Toast.” “Imagination! a young girl dancing polka, unafraid, betrayed by the Lord’s death (or his hiding under the bed when the Messiah was postponed).” Would you mind sparing a few words on this poem?

Kaminsky: This poem arrived with my decision not to write about the Holocaust. It began as a letter to a friend. It certainly has nothing to do with Adorno [post-war German philosopher and social critic] or other theorists on the topic. Poetry is possible after the Holocaust. Poetry about the Holocaust is very possible (see work by Carolyn Forché, Anthony Hecht, Geoffrey Hill, William Heyen, and others). It is a personal choice. My family was involved in the Holocaust, our close relatives died or were in the camps. And I choose not to write about it (“A Toast” illustrates the conflict I had at the time of making that decision) because one chooses what one wants to leave the world. I would like to leave the world with praise. Now, a reader may or may not get all this information from the poem. But that is the story behind my attempt to write it.

Mishel: There are many references to God and prayer in your poems. Are you wrestling with a spiritual relationship or just letting it create a form of tension in your poems?

Kaminsky: When I began to write in Russian in Odessa I thought it would be a good idea if I wrote each poem as if it was a book in itself. And, I also thought that each poem should begin as a prayer. Now, some other people may consider it a limitation. It may even be a cliché. But it is my way. Is it a right way? I don’t know. After all, one thing that I like very much about the Jewish tradition is that it prohibits one from saying the G-d’s name aloud. So, if I say the word God in the poem, I should also try to withhold something, yes? Whether or not I do it, I don’t know. I hope so.

Mishel: How often are you surprised by what you write, and how much of it is a mystery even to you?

Kaminsky: All of it is a mystery. It should be so in poetry as it is in life. One never knows if it will rain next week, even with all the weather advisories. So, why should one be able to predict the effect of the next line? Maybe it is pretentious of me to answer your question this way, but in truth, I really would rather not know what will happen in the next line (what for?). There has to be some sense of risk, the possibility of God knows what. Why not be an adventurous fool sometimes, like someone standing on the street-corner with a sign that reads: WILL ANSWER ANY QUESTION FOR TWENTY-FIVE CENTS?

Mishel: Excuse the ignorance of this question, but are you able to listen to music? You wore a hearing aid at a recent Seattle reading. Do you now have partial hearing?

Kaminsky: No need for apologies! While I am considered deaf for legal purposes (whatever those guidelines are), I do have some hearing left (I love classical music). It may not be much, but it is enough to allow me to appreciate (I hope) a tiny bit of both worlds: sound and silence. Because the doctors say I am losing my hearing gradually year by year, there is a chance I will one day come to a complete silence—but won't we all? In a way, I see sound as a means of transport from the silence in one human body to another.

Mishel: You recently graduated from law school. How will you be using your degree?

Kaminsky: I am unemployed at the moment, and I'm taking care of my mother who just had a stroke. My most recent job was as a Law Clerk at Bay Area Legal Aid where I tried to help low-income citizens with their legal difficulties: faulty insurance, no insurance, medical bills, disability benefits, and so forth. I've also worked with National Immigration Law Center and with organizations assisting victims of domestic violence. I found these jobs rather inspiring: real people come there every day with their very real problems, and one is actually able to help them! For what more could one ask? I have learned a lot about giving back to community from people who work at these organizations. They are among very few individuals in this country (among those I have met) who actually have a very clear and practical sense of community, of connection with others. I admire that.

Mishel: What poets are influencing you at the moment?

Kaminsky: Gilgamesh. I love that book. I had an old copy of Herbert Mason's translation that someone stole years ago, and I missed it sorely. But Mason's translation had been reprinted recently; I recommend it highly.

Mishel: I read an interview in which you said if you can avoid being a poet or writing poetry you should. I wonder why writers say this when it's really an amazing way to walk through the world, don't you think?

Kaminsky: My first impulse is to say: Yes, everyone should write poetry, of course!

My second impulse is to comment that I also see a lot of frustration in writers and poets. It comes with the expectation of success, either publishing or (believe it or not) financial. Success in these affairs does not exist. (Do you think I am successful? Ha! I am unemployed.) If you are after that sort of success when you begin to write, then you must run away from it. It will ruin your life.

My third impulse is to say that while poetry does not offer material success, it does offer a form of spiritual satisfaction. But to say that is to lie again—poetry is no easy way to understand why we are here on this planet; there is a lot of internal struggle, necessary and unnecessary conflict, a lot of choking with words. A poet achieves the essential on the page, for a moment, and then that moment is gone. So, let's not idealize this way of walking through the world!

Let me say this: whatever works for you (i.e. your way of making sense of how to live on earth) is just fine. Be honest with yourself. Life is a great chance, and we are here "for the last time" (as Akhmatova was fond of saying). Yes, poetry is a joyous gift. If you can write it, then write it with both hands, and may your writing pens be blessed.

