

## INTERVIEW WITH ILYA KAMINSKY

---

Colleen Marie Ryor\*

**Ryor:** When did you first get acquainted with poetry? When did you start to learn English, and how did it manage to become your preferred language for literature?

**Kaminsky:** Well, I wrote verses in Russian for quite some time before we came to America. When we came to this country, I was sixteen years old. We settled in Rochester, New York. The question of English being my “preferred language for literature” would have been quite ironic back then, since none of us spoke English—I myself hardly knew the alphabet. But arriving in Rochester was rather a lucky event—that place was a magical gift, it was like arriving to a writing colony, a Yaddo of sorts. There was nothing to do except for writing poetry! Why English then—why not Russian? My father died in 1994, a year after our arrival to America. 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 choose 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, an insanely beautiful freedom. It still is.

In a way, writing in a new language was for me a living embodiment of one poet’s great line: death thou shall die. While my poems in Russian are very formal (they aim to be poems, made things), in English I have no such intention. English for me is an attempt to put life on a page—as much life as I can get there: details, details, details, details.

**Ryor:** What were the circumstances leading to your arrival in the United States as a teenager?

**Kaminsky:** My brother left the country first. He fell in love with a woman who was going to America, got married and left. But my father did not want to leave. Odessa was not only a home for my father, but also his life. Immigration is a difficult game; I would not advise it to

---

\* Colleen Ryor is editor of *The Adirondack Review*. Ryor’s interview of Ilya Kaminsky appeared originally in *The Adirondack Review* in February, 2004.

anyone. It is a period of a tremendous emotional change. It breaks lives. But as Soviet Union collapsed it became considerably more difficult to live as a Jewish family in Ukraine. My father was a rich man during Soviet times, and so he was able to bribe officials in exchange for our safety. Later, in the independent Ukraine, party members became, quite openly, the members of the mafia, and it became almost impossible even to bribe—plus, my father's fortune disappeared with the inflation. It was a time of significant civil unrest. There was a war going on in the neighboring Moldova—bombs were dropped on schools, we had friends who left their houses with a single change of underwear—and never came back. When, in 1993 United States approved our application as political refugees, we left.

**Ryor:** How have you adjusted to life in the United States? Was it difficult at first? Did you experience major culture shock? Do you still return to the Ukraine from time to time? Do you miss it?

**Kaminsky:** As I said, we arrived to Rochester, New York. A culture shock? Well, I personally tend to think of exile as a wonderful gift. One is able to look immediately at one's past—as if it is a city on a valley, and you are flying above it. And it is not a dream. And, no I never went back. It is almost ten years now. It is a different country. They even speak a different language—Ukrainian. The country I left does not exist anywhere except in my imagination. Which is, perhaps, a good thing. But you have got to understand something else: how can I come to the city of my childhood as a tourist? It would have been extremely vulgar. The people suffer there, you understand. I cannot allow myself to be a tourist in their suffering.

**Ryor:** What is it like to write poems that are widely accepted in a language that is not your native one? Was it a strange experience at first? How do you feel when you write in Russian, now that you have been living in the States for some time?

**Kaminsky:** Well, I still write in Russian to begin with. And I read in Russian a great deal. But do I consider myself I an American poet? Yes, I do. But, then, I must answer a question: what does it mean to be an American poet? What is my American experience? It is laughing with my friends, to making love to my girlfriend, fighting with my family, loving my family, loving the ocean (I love water), loving to travel on train, loving this human speech. But we all have these things don't we? Yes, we do. And therefore, I fiercely resist being pigeonholed as a

“Russian poet” or “immigrant poet” or even “American poet.” I am a human being. It is a marvelous thing to be.

**Ryor:** Why do you write poetry?

**Kaminsky:** Because I cannot stop. As good old Yeats says, “Argument with someone else is a rhetoric. Argument with yourself is poetry.” A lyrical voice is first of all a human voice, which we all have. And poetry is an international language. An image of a boy playing a flute to his cows in a poem by Horace is available in any language, understood by any civilization. I love languages; English, Russian, Ukrainian, Slovenian, Bulgarian, Polish and so forth. But poetry, I admit, exists above any speech. Being able to write poems in more than one language only affirms me in this statement.

**Ryor:** On translation: how do you feel about the mechanics of translating poetry? What about the spirit of it? How much is lost in translation? Do you translate your own poetry?

**Kaminsky:** Akhmatova says somewhere that translating poetry is in a way almost like eating one’s own brain. I can see her point quite clearly; but it is a cruel point. I think that the work and position of the translator is a very important, almost spiritual task. So what is lost in translation? Quite a bit. Music of the native language for sure, some archetypal cultural affinity. But what is gained? What is preserved? Image survives. If the translator is skilfull (and lucky) he preserves the rhythm.

**Ryor:** You were recently awarded the Ruth Lilly Fellowship in Poetry, among many other prizes. You have also enjoyed a glorious reception from many of America’s most highly regarded poets, yet you remain surprisingly humble—and it doesn’t seem put on! How has all of this affected your work? What was it like to receive praise from so many established poets at such an early stage of your career as a writer—at such a very young age?

**Kaminsky:** Well it is a different art: all of that, praise, acceptance, prizes, publications; these are all wonderful things, I am extremely—extremely—grateful for them. But what do they have to do with poetry? Nothing. When I sit down to write a line, or when I walk humming a line to myself, or when I tell a line to a friend—I stake my life on that line! It is my being, my voice, my memory, my imagination: these things are private. When I write poetry, it is a private thing. Yes, many folks have

noted that my poetry has a public appeal. But this public “appeal” is simply a way of being able to speak privately with many people at once. And, about young age—well, I am almost 26. Lermontov, a great Russian poet, was already dead at 26. So, I sort of . . . have a different kind of standard to look up to, yes?

**Ryor:** Your chapbook, *Musica Humana*, is rather unique in its format. What made you decide to write the work this way? Could you explain to readers who have not yet read your book what makes it unusual in style?

**Kaminsky:** Well, you place me in an “unusual” position here, I am quite awkward at self explanations . . . So let me try to be impartial: *Musica Humana* has three long poems: “Musica Humana,” “Natalia,” and “Praise.” Some folks have noticed that the book seems to work together as one piece, one united whole. And that makes me happy. My goal with that collection was to write (and here I am being immodest) something of “epic proportions” by “lyrical means.” One should not be ambitious. And ambition was not, in fact, my goal. My goal in this book was to write the way poets I love wrote: Celan, Mandelstam, Emily Dickinson. I have always loved how their speech is always clean and lyrical. But I had no wish to write *like* these poets. So, this is where the “long poem” comes in—the long poem allows me to tell a narrative, a tale in verse, of sorts. I have also experimented a bit with prose. The prose has always fastinated me; its rythm, its endless possibilities for reopening the narrative. So, a long poem for me, in its combination of poetry and prose, is like an orchestra, it goes (to use Pasternak phrase here) “above the borders, smashing those borders.”

And, another thing—I have always complained that not one major poet—absolutely nor one—is writing happy poems these days in America. What happened? It is after all up to the writer what to leave his readers with. I want to leave my readers laughing in a poem about death and crying in the poem about weddings. Why? Because we do so constantly in our daily experience. This is the ultimate act of witnessing. If a writer is unable to witness the joy of being on this third planet of the sun, I doubt that he or she has found his or her truest vocation.

**Ryor:** Tough question—how would you describe your own work, your style, your sensibilities?

**Kaminsky:** Well, how about this—my old poems are boring, my new poems are fun. Really. No, not really. Well, maybe. I’ll have a little

argument with myself here. Am I a poet? Yes, I am a poet. But I am first of all a human being—and if I fail to acknowledge that in my poetry, I fail my poetry. What are my subjects? They are the same that had been around for thousands of years: elegy, praise, joy, playfulness, desire, a joke, a tear. I tend to like working with large pieces—five, ten, twenty or so pages poems. But at the same time attention to detail is instrumental in my work. As Paul Celan (whose birthday was yesterday, by the way) says, somewhere: “attention is the natural prayer of the soul.” And, about my new poems, since they’re more fun to speak about: I am working on a long piece about the country where everyone is deaf. It is, in the long run, the poem about silence. I am myself deaf. And I speak against silence, and again, against silence, knowing that silence *moves* me to speak. Is it a human dilemma? You bet. So there is quite a bit of questioning going on there (as my Jewish mother says: “he answers a question with a question”) in the new piece, some thinking. But there is also quite a bit of longing, cursing, fucking, dying, being adored and badly hurt, and even talking to kids about it.

**Ryor:** You co-founded the organization Poets For Peace. Tell us about that.

**Kaminsky:** You can find a wealth of information about Poets For Peace at our new web-page, [www.unitedpoets.org](http://www.unitedpoets.org), which was recently created by Los Angeles poet Larry Jaffe. I co-founded the organization with attorney Paloma Capanna back in 1990s during the on-going crisis in the former Yugoslavia. But the organization really picked up the speed after 9/11. We have more than a 100 poetry readings in different countries and in almost all major cities in the United States. The idea is to invite poets to read for free and to ask audiences for donations to such relief organizations as Doctors Without Borders, Survivors International, Red Cross and so forth. Many well known poets have read for us for free. Many grassroots poets and organizations has also supported us and, thankfully, continue to do so. It is wonderful thing to offer poets to read their work and by doing so to help relief organizations, I think. We have also founded an award for younger poets. We are collaborating with a number of other organizations, such as United Nation’s “Dialogue Through Poetry Among Civilizations” project. We are always open to new collaborations.

