

**OBSERVING THE HOURS: A CONVERSATION  
WITH ILYA KAMINSKY**

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**J. Marcus Weekley\***

I first “met” Ilya Kaminsky when I was soliciting places to submit book reviews and he was working as an editor at *In Posse Review*. Then, I saw that Tupelo Press had published his a collection of his poetry, *Dancing in Odessa*. I obtained a copy, read it, and loved it so much I decided to interview him. The following interview was conducted from September 2004 to January 2005 by way of email.

**J. Marcus Weekley:** This may seem like a strange place to start, but it’s one of the first things that intrigued me about *Dancing in Odessa*.

In the collection, you mingle prose with poetry, and the two seem to interact together, poetry commenting to prose, and vice versa. How do you see the relationship between prose and poetry in *Dancing in Odessa*, and more specifically, in general? What are some differences and similarities between prose and poetry, and what are the benefits of including both?

**Ilya Kaminsky:** Well, to begin with; both prose and poetry come from the same book—the English dictionary. I like using that book fully, not selectively.

I think it is a mistake that so many poets avoid prose. Because all great poetry attempts to place as much life on the page as possible, the narrative (prosaic) element is inescapable—even in the lyrical poetry of the very highest order (which, for me, is Dickinson, Celan, Mandelshtam, Tsvetaeva, Montale, etc.) we can get narrative structures and passages which are obviously connected to those poets’ understanding and obsessive reading of prose. Mandelshtam once said that all of Anna Akhmatova’s poetry deeply rooted in the tradition of 19th century Russian prose—i.e., she had no forebears in poetry, but all in prose. And that is a great statement, I think, and it is true. From the very beginning of our literary tradition, the necessity of collaboration between

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poetry and prose is quite obvious—just look at Shakespeare’s plays. Have you noticed that in most of *Hamlet*, the prince speaks to other people in prose and to himself in poetry?

I do not think that prose accesses more life than poetry. Absolutely not. There is nothing that can be said in prose that cannot be said in poetry. I do not always find prose necessary—the “Praise” and “Dancing in Odessa” sequences are examples of that. It may be just a personal preference. Or, maybe I am a fool. After all, there is G-d breath in poetry. But it is in Faulkner too, isn’t it? And in Babel, Singer, Nabokov, Woolf, and so on.

There are (very different) reasons why I like using prose in addition to poetry on my own pages. Such reasons vary. There may be a question of rhythm (quite obviously, prose offers different rhythm; the sequence works on different levels for the ear) or narrative (it is fun to use more than one approach to narration on the page—it is like turning the wheel 180 degrees while staying in the same vehicle) or there may be formal reasons (in “Natalia,” for instance, the prose is—supposedly—serving as a sort of rabbinical commentary). And lastly, life is not only made of poetry—I do not mean merely the art, or elitism—there is also quite a bit of the mundane, quite a bit of prosaic (even rhythmically prosaic) element in our daily existence, which I see no reason to exclude. Whether we like it or not, there is plenty of prose in our days. Well, I enjoy admitting that sort of thing directly on the page. I think it only makes the page’s grasp larger, more real. And, as I have said before, reality is what I am after.

**Weekley:** The point you make about accessing the mundane and the extraordinary through both prose and poetry brings up a further point about how the prose in *Dancing in Odessa* is working. In the “Natalia” section, you create a dialogue between poems and prose by situating poems above the prose on the page. The density of language in the prose works similarly to that in the poetry. In the following prose passage, the “I” speaks to his beloved: “In an empty store, dancing among stands with sugared walnuts, dried carnations, boxes upon boxes of mints and cherries dipped in honey, we will whisper to each other our truest stories.” You’re using commas and syntax, as well as sound devices, to establish a rhythm in much the same way that the poetry does. But in another prose passage, from “Paul Celan,” the prose has a looser rhythm, which allows more space between its words’ meanings: “He was a beautiful man with a slender body that moved with a mixture of grace and sharp geometrical precision.” The music in the second passage

moves in grand gestures, like an opera, whereas the music in the first passage seems like an intricate courtly dance. Both move, both dance, but in different ways. You mentioned several authors who have influenced you—Akhmatova, Mandelshtam, Tsvetaeva—can you comment more specifically about how those, and maybe others, have shaped the way you combine, or think about, prose and poetry, and the music of both?

**Kaminsky:** I think that in some way the prose writers have influenced me more than poets, e.g., Issak Babel, Vladimir Nabokov, Woolf, Faulkner. However, it is difficult for me to read their prose without calling it poetry because they catch life's music where we expect it least. In addition, almost every major poet in Russia in this century also happened to be a major prose writer, although not necessarily a "narrative" or fiction writer. For example, Tsvetaeva and Pasternak wrote some of the best prose in the language, and Mandelshtam's *The Noise of Time* is virtually inseparable from his poetry. Growing up in this tradition has helped me to look at the boundaries between prose and poetry as fluid. But one author to whose work I keep coming back to when I think about the music and rhythms in both poetry and prose is, of course, Shakespeare.

As I mentioned before, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the Prince often speaks to himself in poetry while addressing others in prose. (This has always reminded me of Yeats's belief that argument with someone else is rhetoric, while argument with one's self is poetry.) That—when I read the play out loud—always makes me think about tension. I mean how the rhythmical tension works in various ways within the text; how this tension can be psychological or make its own argument just by being in a particular breath—shorter or longer, breathing in or out.

**Weekley:** That's interesting that you point at breath as a means of determining rhythm in both prose and poetry. Staying with this idea of breath, in a way, I noticed that a lot of what attracted me to your poetry was a sense of celebration, the idea that life, in spite of, and in the midst of, sadness, can contain great joy. How does this sense of celebration, this sense of God breathing in words through the poet, as you mentioned previously, inform your work? In other words, how does the spiritual play itself out in your own poetry, and in the poetry of those writers you admire?

**Kaminsky:** Something in me refuses to give a response to this question. There is a sort of a refusal to speak like this over e-mail, about the spiritual, or, if you allow, the divine. Perhaps it is a very Jewish thing

in me, that unwillingness to say the G-d name out loud, the refusal to point. Why? Because I won't be able just to give another interview response but will need to explain something (to myself) about my life, which perhaps does not need to be explained at this moment. But let me struggle with it for a longer moment here: "how does the spiritual play itself out in my poetry?"

I really doubt that the "spiritual" needs words—in a way, words in a poem are only a means for transporting silence from one human body to another. I write in more than one language and I realize—and yes, I know this statement will sound strange to many people—that at a certain point our language matters very little. There is, of course, a magical gift that the words possess, a gift of play, a self-revealing moment. But we know there exists something else that poetry gives us. What is that "something"? How to grasp it with one's hands? What does human silence have to do with it? And, if we talk with words, then isn't it our silence that "moves" us to speak?

As for "the sense of celebration" that you mention—well, yes, we are on this planet only once; why not see the wonderment in each moment we are given? The philosophical minds among us seek "not to laugh, not to weep, not to hate, but to understand." But I want to scream and smile and protest and shout and laugh.

How does spirituality play out in the writers I admire? They are the people who say: "Do not compare, the living person is incomparable;" "I will tell how bodies change into other bodies;" "Let us live, Lesbia, let us love;" "Over O over / the thorn;" "Parting is all we know of heaven and all we need of hell;" "Nothing human is alien to me;" "And the spirit hovered above the waters."

**Weekley:** You say language is a means of transportation of silences, 'but it is the silence that moves us to speak.' It's almost like you're describing body and spirit—language being the body and silence being the spirit. Can words ever transport without containing/limiting? How?

**Kaminsky:** I believe that true understanding is always silence, and that, in the end, words are unnecessary. But to get there—and I am in no way claiming to speak from a standpoint of a person who got there, or is even fully aware of what "there" means—one must admit that the words are all we have. Are words limiting? But it is the limitation, in a way, that raises us above what we are.

In a way—for me personally, at least—that is what much in poetry is all about. A way for humans to show that words (communications?) are not enough. Celan, Mandelshtam, Dickinson—these folks understood it perhaps too well; it is apparent in their work—just look at their syntax.

Look at how Dickinson's famous dashes want to skip words, want to get someplace (where?), as if in a hurry, frequently missing the appropriate grammar structures of the time because they are, alas, irrelevant to what the poet is after. For instance, her repetitions in lines like "couldn't see to see," or "Because—because if I should die."

Or, look at Celan's often-cited fight with the German language's "ash-glory" of "speech-grille," trying to find in those "shaken-knotted" "pain-knots" and "lung-branchings" what he is looking for, perhaps that "seed of the black-blossomed male."

I think it is because of these poets' wish to skip over language's formalities that their work on the page ends up being so striking—their play with (or, disregard of?) language has a deep spiritual struggle behind it.

**Weekley:** To an extent, you disregard poetic formalities similarly, in how you mix poetry and prose. As you mentioned, all three poets—Dickinson, Mandelshtam, and Celan—use syntax to achieve some of their goals, but in the process, work against norms. What are your own aims in regards to working against norms, and how does your use of syntax help you achieve that?

**Kaminsky:** Allow me to have some distance here. I have no claim that my work follows the work of these poets. That I love them does not mean I do the same thing.

My understanding of norms is somewhat confused, really, since I come from literature which is younger than English (Pushkin, the father of Russian lit, was writing in 1824, but what is 1824 for English poetry? There were Milton and Shakespeare and Chaucer way before that date.) So, as you see, the Russian poetic tradition is much younger; and not surprisingly, the norms and formal expectations are very different. Everything in contemporary English poetry—from diction to syntax to formal possibilities—is hundreds of years away from what I am accustomed to in my daily life. So, there is an obvious conflict already established in my mind, whether I want it or not, when I write in English.

So much for working against the norms. As for grasping at something larger in the combination of poetry and prose that you find in *Dancing in Odessa*, that is not for me to talk about. Let the critics discuss it.

**Weekley:** Do you see the role of a writer in terms of the universal, or how is the role of a writer from the U.S. different than the role of a writer from Russia?

**Kaminsky:** What do you mean by “in terms of the universal?” I don’t see any reason for taking writers seriously, particularly the ones who claim to be an authority in their field. But, on the other side, when someone like Chekhov says “my job is literature,” his point is well taken. I think every writer is a human being first of all—perhaps a human being who thinks more deeply about some things, but not necessarily so. Essentially, we all live in moments. Seemingly a great moment of understanding is here, and then it is gone. If one is lucky enough to put it on the page in words that make it clear—then one is lucky enough to be a writer in that moment. But then again, since I don’t write very often but keep writing-in-my-mind as I live along, I suspect there is something to be said in favor of Chekhov’s position. But then, perhaps your question has to do more with a public position of a writer.

In Russia, for a number of reasons—often not necessarily good ones—the poets were a bit more respected, more well known by the public at large. But if you are the real thing, you don’t really need that sort of recognition, I suspect. Happily or unhappily, you will keep writing anyway, because it is your way of making sense of how to live. So, no, I don’t think there is any difference in what a writer means in Eastern Europe and the United States. Some people may disagree with me, citing things as various as the “public role of the poet” in Eastern Europe as compared to the “institutionalization of art by the MFA programs” in the United States. But that sort of argument is shallow. Yes, MFA programs are sometimes problematic—the unnecessary competition, the careerism, the money that comes with jobs and the pressing need to produce (hasty, not very good) books every couple of years to keep that money. But those same MFA programs also provide some sort of a reading community which is not otherwise available in many places in Europe at this time. Yes, there is a public role for the poet as a spokesperson of the people in times of trouble, and the recent situation in Eastern Europe is a good example of that—but who in her or his right mind wants that role? Let’s not fool ourselves, a writer is a private person, in this country and elsewhere.

**Weekley:** So, who do you see your audience as?

**Kaminsky:** I don't really view my audience as anyone in particular—my readers, if I am lucky to have any, will be human beings, and that is one characteristic which makes them very similar to myself. All other characteristics pale in comparison, yes? Although, frankly, my two cats tend to gather around me very worried as soon as I start reading a poem out loud—which I do quite often, at least while I am writing that poem. And, my sleepy wife (I mostly write at night) yells from the other room, “Kaminsky, shut up!”

**Weekley:** In what part of the writing process do you think about your audience, if at all?

**Kaminsky:** I am not thinking about the audiences when I am writing. Forgive me for being so selfish, at that moment—but I am too busy thinking about the poem!

**Weekley:** Your new work, in the vein of fairytales, is it geared towards adults or children, or both? Tell us a little more about it, please.

**Kaminsky:** The new poem is a fairytale about a country where everyone is deaf and deafness is (sometimes) sexually transmitted—it is spoken in the voices of a pregnant woman and her husband, who in a time of troubles, whisper stories to the child the wife carries. So, I am afraid it is not for very young children. Although, as someone said, we never stop being children. Or, do we?

**Weekley:** It sounds darkly hilarious. What kinds of challenges, if any, do you face in your own writing, as a result of your hearing loss? Has your loss in any way helped your writing?

**Kaminsky:** People often ask me what does it mean to be “deaf” or “hard of hearing,” and the truth is—I don't know. Because I don't know what it means to fully hear. Does anyone fully hear? What is hearing? Because I don't know, “deafness” for me is an imaginary condition. As for challenges of hearing loss as related to my writing—there are none. There are more benefits I think—either to writing as such, or at least to writing as a part of a human position. Because I did not wear hearing aids back in Russia (in the provinces, deafness is considered something quite close to mental illness, a thing one wanted to hide), my childhood was somewhat lonely, even if I was surrounded by others. There was, inevitably, a made-up world, “made up,” yes, but also quite truly

separate on a biological, hearing-loss, level. That sort of alienation carries a gift of one's becoming an attentive observer of the hours. And attention, after all (to quote Paul Celan here), is a natural prayer of the soul.

**Weekley:** You published a chapbook—*Musica Humana*—before publishing *Dancing In Odessa*; was that helpful?

**Kaminsky:** I found that having a chapbook published first was a great aid to completing a manuscript—since one is able to see the part of the book as totally outside, being able to judge it a bit better, and thus more able to add different things to the manuscript, both tonally and formally.

It also gives you distance, an ease in knowing what you did and haven't done yet, a wish for variation. And that is good knowledge to have in writing a book, since a good book has a need for both unity and variation.

**Weekley:** You mention how important it is for a poet to be in the world; I'm thinking of recent tragic events in the East, and I question the validity of my own writing, of its usefulness in light of starving, dying, or lost people. You mentioned before how words fail us, but still we insist on trying to use them to get us closer to whatever it is we're aiming for. Do you have anything further to say about the relation between poetry and tragedies such as the devastation caused by the tsunamis?

**Kaminsky:** Yes, we already know from the likes of Milosz and Auden, two great masters, that poetry makes nothing happen and that poetry does not save nations or people. We already know that poetry is not a psychological treatment. Poetry has only one responsibility, and that is to be well written; it has no other civic or therapeutic duties. But, wait a second! Poetry does not save people? It saved me. And I am fully aware that I can only speak for myself in this regard, first of all as a private person, not a public instrument. But it does save me. It saves me each day, over and over again.

Validity of my *own* poetry? I don't necessarily read or write poems in order for them to be *valid*—I do so because something in me needs it, a human voice needs to speak out, to breathe. In a time of grief just as in a time of joy, one needs to understand oneself or others, to touch something we label (but do not fully understand) 'human' in one's body—and poetry does that for me. Of course, it could have been anything



else—opera or wood-cutting or washing the floor. Whatever works for you. And, I can speak only for myself, which I do.

**Weekley:** But do you believe there are those who don't know they need poetry, but still do need it? Then what role do you have publicly as a poet, and what public role does poetry serve in this country?

**Kaminsky:** A poet's only public role is to be a human being who writes well. If a good poem transforms just one person—even if it's the author herself—it is already a great triumph.

You ask, "are there those who don't know they need poetry, but still need it." Perhaps the answer is "yes"—in my own understanding of it, poetry is a human art which makes humanity—in some way at least—more transparent to itself; poems like Bishop's "One Art" or Milton's "When I consider how my light is spent" or Hardy's "Voice" or much of Shakespeare, etc., teaches me how to love life.

But the answer is also "No"—I refuse to answer for any other human being except for myself. Because, if I did so, I would lie to you. The role of a poet is to tell others what that poet knows about the human condition, not what others *should* know. A poet is not a public figure, s/he is an intensely private person. Her or his art becomes public only because it is good enough to find a voice that speaks privately to many people.

