COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE #72

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Transcripts formatted after those from Disability Visibility Project

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[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hello and welcome to episode 72 of Commonplace: Conversations with Poets (and Other People). I'm your host, Rachel Zucker. I recorded this conversation with poet, professor, translator and editor Ilya Kaminsky on April 26, 2019 at Sarah Lawrence College, where Ilya was getting ready to read as part of the 16th annual Sarah Lawrence Poetry Festival, which, by the way, is a terrific three-day festival of poetry readings and panels. Check it out if you're in the area next April!

It was raining the day I took the train from Manhattan to Bronxville and I was feeling poorly. I'd had increasingly serious anemia for several months. None of the medical or alternative solutions to stop the bleeding that was causing the anemia had worked, but I could not yet imagine I would end up needing or agreeing to the hysterectomy that doctors described to me as "the definitive solution."

I had no idea how I would continue to manage these health problems and if they got worse, would I be able to teach? Travel? Continue making this podcast? Would I be able to attend my son's graduation from high school? I was grateful to have been clear headed enough to prepare for my conversation with Ilya, but I wasn't sure how the recording would go. I was concerned about taking the train, concerned about getting dizzy and falling, concerned I'd forget to press record! I'd stopped driving a few months earlier, not trusting myself to be alert. Two weeks before recording this my son came home to discover I'd left the stove on for several hours -- thank goodness nothing caught fire! In retrospect, things were pretty dire for me, but at that point I was still trying to just go on with my life, trying to "take it easy," whatever that meant, and hoping to find a non-surgical solution to the problem.

I'd read and LOVED Ilya's book, *Deaf Republic*. I'd seen Ilya read with Erika Meitner at NYU a few weeks earlier and had been transported, truly, into another world only to realize this "other" world was and had always been *this world*. I did not want to miss the opportunity to speak with Ilya about his work and life.

Ilya Kaminsky was born in 1977 in Odessa, which at that time was part of the Soviet Union. He arrived in the United States in 1993 when his family was granted asylum by the American government. Ilya's beautiful piece "Searching for a Lost Odessa — and a Deaf Childhood" about returning to Odessa in 1993, was published in the New York Times Magazine in 2018. You can find a link to that article as well as links to the authors and texts Ilya and I discuss on our website Commonplace.today, where you can also sign up for our per-episode Newsletter that includes information about Commonplace and often suggestions for social action related to each episode.

In addition to his most recent, extraordinary book, *Deaf Republic*, Ilya Kaminsky is the author of the wonderful book *Dancing in Odessa*. He has co-edited several anthologies including *The Ecco Anthology of International Poetry* and *In the Shape of a Human I Am Visiting the Earth: Poems from Far and Wide*. He has translated the work of many poets including full-length translation volumes of Marina

Tsvetaeva, Polina Barskova, and Guy Jean. Ilya has won many prizes and fellowships including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Writer's Award, and an NEA Fellowship.

In addition to teaching, translating and writing, Ilya has edited the podcast series *International Poets in Conversation* at the Poetry Foundation, which we discuss in this episode. He has also worked as a law clerk for San Francisco Legal Aid and the National Immigration Law Center, and as a Court Appointed Special Advocate for Orphaned Children in Southern California. After living and teaching for several years in San Diego, Ilya currently teaches at Georgia Institute of Technology and lives in Atlanta.

I did not know Ilya very well before we sat and talked together for Commonplace. I'd followed Ilya's work with great admiration and been interested in the way he seems to move through the literary world with authenticity, kindness, curiosity and concern for others. After his reading with Erika I got to hang out with Ilya and a bunch of other writers at Sammy's Noodles, but that was the only time we'd interacted in person. Despite how little time I'd spent with Ilya in person, there is a warm-hearted openness to Ilya that made me feel, as soon as we sat down together, as if we were old friends. We care about and are curious about many of the same things and have a similar sense of humor. The conversation was intense and intimate from the beginning.

[5:19]

For most Commonplace conversations I prepare a list of 5-10 questions even though I often only get to the first few and then let the conversation meander as it will. Usually I jot these questions down informally, for my eyes only, but this conversation I typed up my questions word for word. Ilya is hard of hearing—having lost most of his hearing at age four after a case of the mumps—and I wanted to make sure that it was as easy as possible for Ilya to know what I was asking. It quickly became clear that Ilya was capable of understanding (and gently teasing me) for my long-winded, too-carefully worded questions, and I

was able to abandon the typed up questions about twenty minutes in. And thank goodness, because one of the delights of speaking with Ilya is the way his answers and arguments are beautifully unpredictable and lead me to new, unexpected territory. The difficulty understanding, when there was difficulty, was more on my side than on Ilya's.

The poet Sally Ball told me that she went to a reading of Ilya's a few years ago in which he arrived with a suitcase full of well-worn copies of his book that he distributed to the audience and collected afterwards. When I saw Ilya read, the audience was given xeroxed packets of the poems he was going to read. Ilya does this to enable deaf and hearing-impaired audience members to follow the work and folks who may have trouble with Ilya's Russian accent. Few writers address the accessibility needs of their audience when reading from their work, and I'd never been to a reading where everyone has the text in front of them. Ilya and I discuss accessibility, Ilya's reading style, translation, capitalism, teaching, the American obsession with newness and publishing as many books as possible, Russian fabulism, Isaac Babel, the meaning of life, and more.

At one point I mention that Ilya's reading style reminds me of leining or reading from the Torah, and I imagine writing poems with cantillation marks. In case you don't know what I'm talking about, cantillation marks, or tropes, as they are sometimes called, are marks that function a bit like musical notation in that they show the reader how to sing the Torah portion. Ilya responds saying that while other people have mentioned his reading style sounds like singing, he does not intend that. Ilya wonders if this sound—the sound of a person who cannot hear himself saying something urgent—is the most uncensored sound a person can make. He wonders if enacting the unknowable—as one does when reading from the Torah, especially if one does not understand Hebrew—calls for singing.

Ilya, at that point in the conversation, pronounces the word "singing" and I didn't know what he meant until he asks a series of questions that I entirely fail to respond to: Ilya asks me: "What is singing? At what moment are we compelled to sing? And why? And how is that related to speech?"

Reading Ilya's work, speaking with Ilya in person, and re-listening to Ilya while recovering from surgery made me think a lot about accessibility, clarity, transparency. Accessibility to spaces, power, meaning, clarity, politically, socially, physically and literarily. In every Commonplace conversation I hear the excitement and anxiety of two people, sitting face-to-face, understanding and misunderstanding each other in a particular moment in time. Two people reaching for each other, translating each other across a history of shared and disparate lived experiences, literary influences and ideas.

Ilya's Russian accent sometimes made it difficult for me to understand him immediately. Not understanding Ilya immediately and my concern that he would be able to understand me was an unexpected pleasure, and, like having the text in front of me at his reading, changed the experience or revealed elements of the experience I hadn't noticed before. At times I had to ask Ilya to repeat words or to clarify a comment, rather than to assume, as I often do with native English speakers, that I understand what they're saying. It can be frustrating not to have *immediate* access to meaning. As a hearing person with abundant confidence in my ability to understand anyone speaking in English, as someone with a relatively sophisticated vocabulary who is good at understanding accented-English, I expect to have immediate and relatively easy access to any and all speech.

[10:22]

Having to slow down, being more careful to be understood and to understand, was difficult but joyous work and reminded me, in a way, of reading. I don't expect or necessarily want immediate access when reading, especially when reading poems. The feeling of narrative or image or meaning coming into focus within a sea of language, the awareness of an idea or image or story taking shape rather than arriving fully formed, *watching* the inchoate become clear, is one of my favorite things that art does.

The combination of the mental fog of anemia, Ilya's accent, my physical exhaustion, my anxiety about Ilya's hearing, made me feel a bit like we were reading each other or even dreaming each other rather than speaking. This might also have to do with the fact that the night after recording this conversation, my relief and elation that it had gone well, that I had ventured out and returned home safely, were overshadowed by the advent of excruciating pain, which was probably because one of the fibroids was degenerating. The night was full of fever dreams in which Ilya spoke and sang to me all night in Russian and English both of which made perfect sense to me and included detailed instructions on how to fly.

I know I'm eliding different kinds of accessibility and potentially metaphorizing physical differences in problematic ways. I'm trying to describe the physical, mental, magical experience of reading and speaking with Ilya, but not in any way suggesting anyone ever be purposefully denied access.

I'm thrilled to announce that a full transcript of this episode is available for download on our website. Many thanks to Aumaine Gruich and Justin Smith for carefully transcribing this conversation. They are hard at work on the other Commonplace conversations and we hope to have transcripts available of all Commonplace episodes within a year! I apologize to our deaf and hearing impaired audience that is has taken us this long to address this accessibility issue. We hope you will enjoy these transcripts and that they might also be of use to those of you who use these episodes in your classes, or want to write about them.

You can find the transcripts on our website Commonplace.today, and we will post, via social media and our Newsletter, as more of the episodes' transcripts become available. On our website you can of course sign up to become a patron of the show. Commonplace has no ads or corporate sponsorship and relies entirely on listener donations. If you enjoy Commonplace and can afford a small or large donation or monthly patron contribution, we'd be so grateful! If you are already a Commonplace patron, thank you, thank you, thank you!

For this episode a random selection of Commonplace book club members—those who support the show at a level of $10/or more a month—will receive copies of *Deaf Republic* by Ilya Kaminsky (thanks to Graywolf Press), *In the Shape of a Human Body I Am Visiting the Earth* co-edited by Ilya Kamkinsky, Dominic Luxford and Jesse Nathan (thanks to McSweeney's Press) and *The Great Enigma* by Tomas Tranströmer (thanks to NEW DIRECTIONS). All patrons will receive access to Ilya's NYU reading from April 11, 2019 and a list of 15+ books in translation recommended by Ilya Kaminsky and prepared specially for Commonplace patrons.

A quick note that there is one audio insertion within the conversation. When you hear Ilya read his poem "In a Time of Peace" please know that this audio was recorded at NYU as part of NYU's Creative Writing Reading Series. The rest of the audio was recorded by me at Sarah Lawrence.

I'd like to thank Jonathan Burkhalter and everyone at the Sarah Lawrence Poetry Festival for finding Ilya and myself a quiet space to record. Thank you to Soren Stockman and the Creative Writing Department at NYU for making the audio of Ilya Kaminsky's reading available to Commonplace. Finally, a great big welcome to Nathalie Boyd, newly hired Commonplace producer.

I also want to let you know that Commonplace will not release a new episode in August, and invite you to go back and listen to some of our previous episodes. I'm still recovering from my surgery, physically and emotionally. I can think much more clearly now and am gaining physical strength every day. But I feel a kind of emotional whiplash from being sick for so long, sadness and frustration as the loss of months of work and energy, and, still, anger at the state of our healthcare system and the dearth of knowledge and interest in women's health. Many, many thanks to listeners who sent me emails or tweets of concern and support for my health. I really, *deeply* appreciate it.
[15:35]

Commonplace is not taking the month off, even if we're not airing a new episode. We're rethinking and hopefully redesigning some elements of Commonplace and planning a terrific new season of intimate conversations. We're working on a 2-part episode about Taiwan, and an episode that will celebrate and investigate the release of my new book *SoundMachine* and my audio project of the same name.

If any of you listeners have questions you want to ask me about my new book, the audio project or about Commonplace, please email me or tweet them and I'll do my very best to answer!

So, until September, have a wonderful, healthy, safe, magical summer. And now, here's Ilya Kaminsky.

[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: You asked me why I do this--

ILYA KAMINSKY: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: No, you asked me, "Why do people say yes?"

ILYA KAMINSKY: Yeah, sure.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Why did you say yes?

ILYA KAMINSKY: Out of curiosity. And, I suppose, the same as what you said earlier, the desire for conversation.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. The other reason that I do this is, you know, when I teach, I have to decide who I teach, and read their books, and prepare, and it helps me, you know, make sure that I'm reading and reading and reading and thinking, in order to teach. But, this work is a different kind of preparation. And, you know, when I went to see you read, when I re-read your book, when I read some

interviews with you, knowing that I was going to speak with you, face to face, it's a different kind of responsibility, and like a different kind of pleasure. And I had all of these thoughts and ideas about my own work, frankly [laughs], that really surprised me. And I don't know if I would have had those thoughts if I was teaching your book.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Interesting, interesting. So you're saying that teaching is, in some ways, less introspective towards one's own work?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I think maybe I give myself more freedom to think about my own life in relation to the poet…

ILYA KAMINSKY: Well, just, to illustrate what you just said, I actually asked you this question out of my own experience, because when I teach I make notes in books like most of us do, and I do it with two different pencils, colored pencils, or on two different sides of the page, on one side the notes for the class and on another side, the notes to self.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Interesting.

ILYA KAMINSKY: So you have to, to my mind… because in our work we are grasping with specific questions of the moment whereas in teaching we need to give specific context for the work. And for our own work, sometimes, we could care less about the context, we just want to learn about good words!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah! And do you do anything with the notes that are just for you?

ILYA KAMINSKY: Yeah, I use them for me.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Obviously, oftentimes, things overlap, but I do find myself that when I am in the middle of writing, I grasp with big questions but also with technical questions. And the writer says “geesh! I have to do both! And I also have to keep in mind how much time I have and how many people are in the group and what level they are and I have to make sure that everybody learns something?” And that’s all great and wonderful and I love doing it but I do have to say that I catch myself making notes to self towards a particular project I am working on as well that might have nothing to do with teaching. And that is totally fine, I mean it should be a different job!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Otherwise it is probably is not a very good teaching.

RACHEL ZUCKER: The other thing is, there are books that I love and poets, and types of work, that make me write. You know, it’s like opening the door.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Who are they?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, one example is Leslie Scalapino.

[20:12]

ILYA KAMINSKY: Sure.

RACHEL ZUCKER ...who is a poet that whenever I read her, I start writing. But I’ve only taught her once. I don’t love teaching her. I don’t love to be responsible to make students understand her. And in the podcast, I don’t feel responsible for people listening to understand the work. I only talk to people whose work I love, so it’s not a review, it’s not criticism, it’s sharing, and listeners can understand or identify or reject whatever they want. I don’t feel responsible for their understanding the way I do with students.

ILYA KAMINSKY: So the moral of the story here is to notice if you have any complaints, our phone number is 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10; we are anxiously awaiting your call.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] You know, it's interesting too that you started out by asking me why I do this and why people say yes, because preparing for this with you was interesting for me because I didn't know how much to write down and how good your lip reading was. I mean, my experience of speaking with you the other day was that you understood everything.

ILYA KAMINSKY: I'm not deaf at all, I'm a Russian spy!

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] Okay. So, the first thing I was going to ask you is: your full length poetry collection, *Deaf Republic*, came out recently from Graywolf Press. The book is so powerful and unusual; it sort of reads like a lyrical play, in some ways. It has like a novelistic quality to it. It has a story; it has characters. A lot of contemporary poetry does not have those things, or not in this same way. There's a cast of characters that are listed in the beginning as if it were a play, including Alfonzo and Sonia, who are a husband and his pregnant wife, and Mama Galya, and the book also has this incredible cinematic quality. It's very visual. And, I guess I just wanted to start out by asking you about the process of writing the book. Like, when did you start writing it? When did these characters come into contact with you, or when did they announce themselves to you? Did you work on other things at the same time, or was this really consuming for you, from beginning to end?

ILYA KAMINSKY: Thank you for your kind words and this wonderful question. I came to U.S. in '93, and *Dancing in Odessa*, my first book, came out in 2004. So I had been in the country for about eleven years. The project of writing *Dancing in Odessa* was different because I didn't really want or have any ambition at that time to write in English. I wrote in English for personal reasons, but I thought of writing poetry in the language of images because I felt that particular device—the image—spoke both to who I was at that time and where I was as well. But *Dancing*

in Odessa is very much a book that tries to build a dwelling of Russian or Ukrainian or Soviet Jewish dwelling in English, and so I felt like I made myself a little home in English. But by the time I was done, I had already lived in America for eleven years, and I was already dating the woman I would marry, who is American, so we spoke in English to each other. So, doing another book where I would be writing in the same kind of a Soviet Jewish, Russian, Ukrainian theme, just felt a little false, I felt like I would be playing a Russian.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mmm…

[24:30]

ILYA KAMINSKY: And I just wasn't interested. I felt like I was more in transition, and I couldn't quite figure out in the beginning what that might be, what that book might be. Because we all write out of almost a pre-language, the situations that we have, and childhood is important, at least for [inaudible] poet in my experience, so I knew also that I was a fabulist. Coming from Eastern Europe, at least, fabulism is a main tradition, so I knew those parts would be there inevitably, but I was also living in this country. I just, um, about moved to San Diego, which is a border town, and I lived there for twelve years, nine miles from a border, so that was very much a daily part of my life.

And *Deaf Republic* is a book that is… the process was really trying to find the images and music the characters if you will that would speak to both the United States, and Ukraine. And yes I had quote unquote finished draft for probably ten years. But was it the same? No it wasn't the same. Um… I published in magazines sequences of ten pages or longer, that um… tried to do a version of this book. But to my mind, it either felt too Ukrainian or American in a way that didn't feel right. And after a while, I found the arc which to my mind would speak to both United States and where I come from.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm…

ILYA KAMINSKY: And then I thought, okay, the book is done. Having said that, of course, I don't really think of myself as a novelist. I do write prose, I write essays, but essay is a far more closer form to lyric than a novel, in my experience. And so anytime I had to change plot, I had to change the poems, which was a big pain in the neck.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs]

ILYA KAMINSKY: Everytime I wrote a new poem I had to kill a character or something like that, which was also not very healthy. And so that was a ping-pong kind of experience. But I enjoyed it. I have to say, I come from a background where publishing is not as important as it is in this country. You know, America is a capitalist country from the very beginning, and Protestant is most [inaudible] work ethic. And I think sometimes we confuse work ethics with the frequency of output in published form. Write every year, but why do we need to have a book every year and have this be out... And my immediate experience was the generation of my parents or my grandparents, when people simply were not allowed to publish, for decades. And so after thirty years somebody would come out with a book of forty pages, and the book would be incredible, but forgive me of course it's incredible, it's thirty years of work!

RACHEL ZUCKER: [laughs] Right…

ILYA KAMINSKY: And, so, that was immediate daily discovery in the 1990s and 1980s, we were flooded by these newfound classics. Everybody knew the name but nobody read the work because it was not allowed to read but suddenly we were flooded by these relatively slim books by writers who really changed twentieth-century Russian literature. And so you felt, not necessary to publish a book immediately.

I do realize that when I say that I speak from a very privileged position. A lot of people are very kind to me and are willing to read my work in a manuscript form, and a lot of those people just happen to be talented writers in their own right, so in

a way, I have ten or so readers who I can just share my work with. And for America, ten readers of poetry might not be a lot, but if you think of most countries in the world, um, most countries in the world are much smaller. Let's say, I was recently in Lithuania. Lithuania has about 2 or 3 million speakers of Lithuianian language. So you imagine out of 2 or 3 million--how many poets is that?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right…

ILYA KAMINSKY: So that's probably ten poets that are published and well-known poets in the country, and that's it, right? So you imagine all the poets in the country are your readers. So from that perspective, why do you need more than ten best poets you can find?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Can I ask you a question about fabulism?

ILYA KAMINSKY: Yeah, of course.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Um, because obviously you have a relationship, a cultural relationship to the history of fabulism in Eastern Eurpoean writing. But I was thinking about… everything is running together in my mind between your essay that you wrote for the New York TImes and interviews I read, so forgive me, I can't remember. But you said, in part because in Odessa, the language went from Russian to Ukrainian, that the town of your childhood didn't exist anymore. And, you also wrote that part of the reason you chose to write in English, initially, was because your family initially did not understand English, and that you, in a way, barely understood English when you first, first started writing. And that's a kind of interesting relationship to fabulism because the imagination, the way that the town in *Deaf Republic* is real and not real, exists, but we don't know when and we don't know exactly where, people can't understand each other sometimes, or they choose not to—to me this seemed both connected to fabulism as a type of literature but also to your own personal experience of in a way of having grown up in a place that doesn't exist anymore and moving between languages in a way that feels very unique to who you are.

[31:00]

To what extent if you're aware of it was the decision to place these characters in an imaginary and yet real landscape come out of your own experience of not being able to go back to your childhood? I mean, Russian is there for you, it still exists, but to have kind of traversed, place and time and language in ways that most people don't quite experience?

ILYA KAMINSKY: I will try to answer the question and then give some context because there are a lot of wonderful and kind things that you said, but it might be useful to have context. Um, personally, well of course, most of what we write is connected to us, whether or not it's imaginary. One could go from biographical perspective, and that would be, my grandfather was killed by Stalin's regime and all that, and my grandmother went to Siberia, and my father was adopted, so in some ways the book is pretty closely related to that story. Soviet Union was falling apart in the late 80's early 90's, so there would be civil unrest, not in Odessa proper, but nearby Odessa, in Moldova. So that would also give context.

As far as language is concerned, and as far as fabulism in language, Odessa is a really strange place for Russian literature. In Russian literature, you can write literature if you live in Moscow or Saint Petersburg. If you don't, you're an amateur. And that's been like that for 200 years, pretty much.

Even Gogol, the great Ukrainian-born writer, who is the father of Russian prose, really, became nationally known after his Saint Petersburg stories, even though he wrote about Ukraine before, and all that. But Odessa was the first city in the empire, the huge empire, where writers from that city got recognized. And they all went to Moscow and Saint Petersburg too, but they were known as the Odessa school. And they got recognized because they didn't quite write in a language that was proper Russian language. It was very much Yiddish-Ukrainian-Greek-Bulgarian-Polish-Russian mixed up together. Yiddish was probably the majority of influence, simply because it was the largest Jewish population in a

specific city in the empire, but it was also an open city, in terms of, it was a seaport, and so it didn't quite have as much central control as other places in the empire had, and even after Soviets took over, there was still a seaport, meaning foreign ships come in. It was also a tourist town and a party town. So everybody came there for vacation.

And then finally, when it got up to the most Soviet point in the 70s and 90s when it was kind of an important Soviet town, something really curious happened. They adopted April 1st, the Fool's Day as the national holiday. And it was huge. Maybe not in the Soviet Union proper but in Odessa, it was bigger than, say, Christmas. Millions of people would be in the streets, celebrating the Fool's day. So Odessa kind of because what they call "Soviet Union capital of laughter."

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm…

ILYA KAMINSKY: And it is a town of a pretty tragic history, because there are pogroms and all that German-occupied, and all that. So that mix of a tragedy and laughter of not-quite Russian language really is a fabulist mix, a make-believe kind of world, embodied in language. It's not just narrative, not just stories. The story is there of course, I just told you a story. But um, one could say, just a sentence, and the rest of your society would know where one comes from. Just by the tonality of language, just by the velocity of language.

[35:30]

And um, for me, I think, really the breaking point when I got interested in literature, was, I came home, I was like, you know, like most years eleven, twelve, curious about books, but not really caring because there's so much world outside, plus the country is falling apart, plus you're learning to smoke for the first time, plus you are thinking about dating, you know, the books are somehow somewhere else in your mind. And yet I came home and there was a book on the kitchen table. It was open, and it was Isaac Babel's short stories. I think Babel is a brilliant short story writer and all that. But what really captured my attention was that Babel was

writing in a language that my parents still spoke. It was not the language that I saw on national television.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm…

ILYA KAMINSKY: It was not the language that officials at my school speak. It was not a party speak, it was not even Tolstoy's speak. It was very much private language, but I saw it in a book. And then I thought "oh, books can do that." I came home and there was a book on the kitchen table. It was open, and it was Isaac Babel short stories. I think Babel is a really interesting writer and all that. But what really captured my attention was that Babel was writing in a language that my parents still spoke. And that private relationship to literature for me is very lyrical. **And in fact Isaac Babel, his books were published in my lifetime, in Russia, in the 80s, but they were not really available because they were so popular and so few were published, and so people would memorize them by heart, the whole short story of five pages or more. And that shows you the lyricism of language, how it lends itself to memory. And that also shows you the kind of intimacy of being able to carry the whole thing in your body and tell it to another human. So, in that way fabulism is interesting to me not just as, "oh here is a story, my friends," but what does it do to our speech? And what is the relationship between our speech and our language? Because for my mind, poetry is most interesting when speech is liberated from language.**

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, I have a selfish question. So, *Deaf Republic* has moments of joy, and pleasure, and humor, but it is ultimately a very dark book, filled with despair. And my next book, which is coming out, is a dark book filled with despair, mostly personal… you know, my sense is that you and I are both very funny people who like to laugh and find humor in the darkest things. But the work--what is that like for you? You know, reading after reading to get up and have these poems which are extraordinary and audiences are responding very positively, but, do you feel like, "I wish I had something a little funny to read, or lighter, or optimistic," or, do you feel like, "this is what I have"? And do you have to enter into the world of the book and the mindset of that place?

ILYA KAMINSKY: It's very much on-point, this question. The only thing I would probably slightly change is I would change the word "despair" to the word "anger." Because here I am for better or worse a refugee coming to America, and watching America pretty much becoming the place I came from. And the response is anger, whether or not America will stay the way it is now. And now it is pretty much in a downward spiral, or maybe it is just a temporary thing and tomorrow we will vote all the bastards out. That is the positive hope. But whether or not we adopt a positive outcome, we are still in a very dark hole right now. The fact that we have what we have is cause for concern, to put it lightly. So the emotion is not despair, but more active, which is, to my mind, anger.

[40:14]

Having said that, reading from this book is more of a physical labor I would say, simply because I'm pretty conscious of the fact that when I get up and read, just by the virtue of being an awkward hard-of-hearing person who doesn't speak English very well, I am perceived as someone who might be exotic to an American audience, so when I talk about things I talk about, people actually relax and imagine Ukraine, and it is a very American thing to do, to relax and imagine problems elsewhere. And my job for better or worse is to show the music of our times, which is here now, and yes, it is pretty much a mirror of Ukraine. We are not at war the way Ukraine is, and yet people are literally in camps on American soil. And that is the time in which we live, and the emotion that I have toward that time is anger.

And am I comfortable having that emotion? No. Would I be able to live with myself not having emotion? No. That is the answer. To go one step further, it would be very easy to put myself in a victimized position and to challenge a vocation that I'm supposed to have. As far as I'm concerned, it's not to do that, simply because I am a part of the majority. I'm a White man in America. By virtue of that, I am one of the guilty, and that is the other conflict that, for better or worse, the book should show, and I think on the page, hopefully, it does show that.

It's probably a good thing for me to be challenged and to be uncomfortable, because that's how a White man in America right now should feel, because this is the world we created and it's not a good one.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I want to ask you more about reading, but I'm curious about the first poem and the last poem in the book, which really locate the author or the speaker as an American in the United States and make that connection between this imagined place being a mirror to the United States, and very fiercely and movingly. At what point did you decide to put those end pieces around the central text? Because in the main part of the book, you are not the "I" anywhere of the book. You are in some ways—

ILYA KAMINSKY: Yeah, but I am the "we."

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes, yes. You are. Did you feel pressure to make the connection between present day America and the rest of the book, or were you worried that American audiences would miss it?

ILYA KAMINSKY: You know, honestly, looking back on that, one would think that I would feel the pressure, but I really didn't from the outside. I think American audiences are really comfortable with my being Russian. Actually, the first and the last poem in the book chronologically were really–-I admired the first and the last poem of the book. I wrote "We Lived Happily During the War" at the very start of Bush's presidency. I was visiting a poet, Eleanor Wilner, when she lived in Massachusetts for a year, and it was a huge snowstorm. It took a while to drive to get to see her. And Bush either was already preparing for war or it was already happening–-I don't remember, it was so many years ago–-but she was really furious. And that fury was so contagious that I just sat down and wrote a poem, and obviously I don't really write poems from first drafts at all, I'm not that kind of writer ever, but that was the case with that poem.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I was hoping maybe you could read the first poem, because I want to ask you some questions about reading.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Yeah, sure.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Great.

[44:55]

ILYA KAMINSKY: [reads "We Lived Happily During the War"]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Thank you.

ILYA KAMINSKY: The last poem in the book which is also an American poem happened in a similar way. I was not in America. I was in the UK, but two poets, Patricia Smith and Carolyn Forché were doing a presentation in UK, and it was already Trump's presidency. Carolyn was asking Patricia questions in a public forum, and Patricia just stood back and told the story of how her relatively not-fully-adult but grown up children come to her in the middle of the night and tell her that they are afraid to be in this country. That was a very moving experience to hear her speak about that. The poem was a response to that conversation.

ILYA KAMINSKY: [Reads from "In a Time of Peace"]

So, I didn't really have pressure… what I did want to have was a kind of fable that would be true to who I am, and I am a person who is in transit, is both here and there, for better or worse, so the image of a boy lying in the middle of the street is a very American image, and yet it is a very Urkranian image, so I don't really see any need to push it one way or another. It is unfortunately already there.

ILYA KAMINSKY: [continues to read from "In a Time of Peace"]

[49:55]

RACHEL ZUCKER: So, when you read, you often or always hand out the text of what you're going to read so that people can read along as you're reading out loud, and I found it such an interesting experience, and very powerful and unsettling, because there were certain things that I noticed that changed for me. I liked having the text in front of me, but it also, having the text in front of me and knowing that everyone around me had the text in front of me–-what I started to notice, that I'd never felt at a poetry reading, was that when I would look up at you and take my eyes off the text, it felt so intimate, and almost forbidden, and I thought "this is so interesting," because normally at a poetry reading, I just *stare* at the poet and I don't feel that I'm doing something inappropriate. I'm just looking at the person who's speaking.

But because I was looking down, there was this charged kind of–-I don't know how to describe it. Has anyone mentioned this to you before–-of how the process of having the text changes one's expectations of what the live poetry reading is about?

ILYA KAMINSKY: This is interesting. I never had that experience personally, so I don't really know how to respond, other than speaking from the disability community–-it's a pure question of access, because many people may not have an interpreter or may not understand ASL and may still need an interpreter of some kind. So from that perspective, having a text is useful. I'm just trying to provide a public service, because of accent, but it is interesting to see what you say.

Personally, I always struggle with an idea of a poetry reading as such or rather what most people call a poetry performance, because I don't really understand why it is necessary. It often feels like poets are on the road trying to sell their books, which is fine, but I could read the book at home. What I am interested in when I am reading a poem is trying to revise it again. I am an obsessive reviser, obsessive writer. We write out of our deepest obsessions and what some call a muse might be,

really this drive to write. Of course once the book is published, you can't really change that much unless you're Robert Lowell or something like that [laughs].

So I try to write it again by the voice, which I do with different tonalities, different syntax. Syntax in a way are like traffic laws, you know? You tell the reader when to stop, when to speed up, when to go sixty miles per hour, when to go five miles per hour. And voice is useful because of that.

So for myself, I'm trying to learn more about syntax when I read poems out loud, and maybe the charge that you notice, as you describe it, simply comes from watching a person trying to write out loud. That is one explanation I might have. Who knows? I don't do it in the mirror so I don't really know how to respond.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I understand that the practice of providing the text is an accessibility question, but it also has these perhaps unintended effects, and—

ILYA KAMINSKY: Wonderful! Everybody should do it!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes, no. I think that's right. Also one of the effects, for me, was that you read almost like singing. And to me the most similar thing in my experience is to hear someone reading from the Torah. And I know you're not religious, so I'm not assuming that this is intentional, or that this connection might even be meaningful to you, but I started to think about what it would mean to have–-I think they're called cantillation marks–-the marks that are in the Torah that tell the reader how to sing the words.

[55:00]

And I don't know a lot about this, but what I know is that they're not just how to sing. They also have meaning, and particularly syntactical meaning. And, I think I've always kind of struggled with how the poem looks on the page, and whether in my own writing I'm using the line break and the way the poem is laid out of the page to teach the reader how to hear it, or how to read it out loud, either in the

mind or in a space, or whether the way it looks on the page is visual. I think it's both, for me, but hearing you read and imagining other kinds of line breaks or these invisible cantillation marks or tropes in the rise and fall of your singing, really, was so interesting to me.

Now to hear you say that it's like watching a person try to write aloud is deeply fascinating to me. Once you have had the experience of performing the book, do you think, if you could, you would change the line breaks, or you would change the way it looks on the page based on the experience of reading it over and over again to the audience?

ILYA KAMINSKY: Thank you. You ask these wonderful questions. It's like they are five questions in one [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] I'm sorry!

ILYA KAMINSKY: No, no. Don't be sorry. Be happy. I'm happy. I'll just try to unpack it a little bit. **P**eople say that, other people say that–-that it's like singing. I don't really intend it to be like singing at all. I think for better or worse what you might think of is singing is really a person who doesn't hear what they say–-say something that's meaningful to them. In some ways, it is probably the most uncensored sound that the human body can make, is the sound that they do not hear even though it is urgent. So that might be one response.

From the perspective of Judaism, I'm definitely a Soviet Jew. Whether or not such things exist is an open question [laughs], but that's how I grew up, but it also means that I did not go to synagogue very often, except to buy matzah, simply because it was not a culture that encouraged that at all. I'm a cultural Jew, meaning one learns that one is Jewish when one is stopped in the street and called a dirty Jew, but with that comes a certain urgency as well.

From an American perspective–-since you spoke from that–-I wonder, simply because so many Americans Jews in fact don't know Hebrew, they are enacting

something that's unknowable. And it is interesting to me that it is done in the process of singing. You are enacting something that's unknowable calls for singing. That is curious then. I'll ask a follow-up question: what is singing? At what moment are we compelled to sing? And why? And how is that related to speech, or situation?

What was the final part of the question?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I guess–-would you change the way the poems look on the page after performing them?

ILYA KAMINSKY: I certainly often want to do that, yes. I got to do it a couple of times with *Dancing in Odessa*. Some poems, at least in *Dancing in Odessa*, is that after reading them I wanted to change, but thought okay, we should have changed it in the publisher's book, I just don't read them anymore, because I feel compelled to read them radically different than they are on the page.

But yeah, I suppose nothing is unusual with that. Many, many writers want to change their books after their books are published. One poet I know said that she actually wanted to buy every single copy so it's not in the stores anymore! But that is a natural human reaction to hearing one's voice on the answering machine and asking "Who is that?"

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean I understand what you're saying about the way that you read has to do with many things, including being hard of hearing and the sound of somebody speaking who can't hear in the same way, but you don't speak the way you read, and most—

[1:00:08]

ILYA KAMINSKY: But I don't speak poetry right now. I speak about it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, and most poets don't speak—

ILYA KAMINSKY: Poetry is an urgent speech, to my mind. The lyric impulse is called “impulse” for a reason. A poem is not about an event. It’s not merely information. It *is* an event. So when you are *enacting* the event, what happens to your voice?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm-hmm. This isn’t a question, but I’m thinking about the practice, I don’t know if you do this in your classes, but sometimes I’ll have a student read someone else’s poem out loud, and it’s always very uncomfortable, but also, in a strange way, liberating to hear your poem in someone else’s voice. I wish there were a way to hear what someone else hears when they read.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Yeah I once in a while–-not often, but one in awhile—I ask them to read a poem instead of writing comments right away, the way we do in workshops. I just have people raise their hands at the lines when they’re moved, and it’s very interesting reaction. I think in a workshop people are often compelled to say, “This is what I would do in a poem.” I think, in my experience, what might be most useful for a writer is to know what it is that they’ve put out–-what it is that they can build on, and knowing what is working really allows one to think creatively about what is not working, as opposed to learning what is not working right away and then feeling like one is standing under a waterfall that is somewhat close to Niagara Falls in its force.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Also, in my experience, there’s so much pressure to fix someone’s poem, or to fix people, right? To make people write in a way that seems normal, or that seems usual, and—

ILYA KAMINSKY: That is where the question of–-two things: number one poetry being too close to academia, but number two, and probably more tragically, academia being way too close to a corporation, and so you find poetry in the middle of a corporation that pretends not to be a corporation. That is very often an American phenomenon, and a little scary to me.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, and it brings us back to something you were talking about earlier, which is–-I think there's many ways of thinking about what makes something poetry, but two competing ideas would be one, that poetry is sort of like the most beautiful, most concise, most careful language, and the other, which I think is what you and I respond much more to, is that poetry is language that is urgent, that is uncensored in certain ways, and that is full of mistakes and usages that are, in a way, not literary. It's very hard to have students, or even myself, trust enough that maybe what is going to be most interesting in their work is if they can go toward the place in themself that is most unusual, that is most broken, that is most full of real, urgent desire and confusion and doubt and mistakes.

But it's hard because if you're teaching poetry in a university, these are usually students who have been praised for doing it right or doing it a certain way, and then the university is absolutely a business in which we have this transactional relationship of grades and salaries and we are, then, encouraged to do teaching "right," you know?--in a certain way.

What I respond to as a reader is the places where someone is doing something in language and I just think "I didn't know you could do that!" or "This is so wild!" You know? I almost feel like, "Is this happening?" You know "this is breaking the rules." That's I think what drew me to poetry and what I respond to most in writing. It doesn't necessarily have to be experimental–-the way we talk about experimental–-but that feeling, that the poet is really out there–-it's hard to get that in the classroom. Or it's hard for me. I don't know if it's hard for you, but—

[1:05:21]

ILYA KAMINSKY: Thank you, that was very beautifully put. I would make a few additions, maybe.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

ILYA KAMINSKY: To my mind, she's not really one way over another in terms of making something very beautiful or making something very not beautiful but urgent… I think in literary history, we always had two parallel worlds, and one would be the outsider and another would be a classicist. And a classicist would go toward the beauty and order and outsider would go toward an alternative way of seeing things. But I think what in America we sometimes forget is that these responses are both often outsider responses.

Classicism in literary history usually happens in a moment of absolute chaos. Just to think about poets who are very classical, say, Horace, happened not too long before the fall of the empire. So Horace had a reason to be classical. And you could already see that breaking up in work of contemporaries, like Cattalus, or another contemporray like Propertius, who was already breaking with classicism by combining the erotic and elegy, which was unthinkable for the time.

Or, in our more-or-less times, when you see a classicist such as Akhmatova, writing a really broken-up sequence called "Requiem," but in a way a classical language of Russian liturgy, as a response to the horror of Stalin and trying to make sense of it in a very much a system of requiem, a classical requiem. Or you see somebody like Milosz, who is very much a classical poet, a translator of the Bible into Polish, a translator of many world classics into Polish, trying to make sense out of the complete destruction of the city of Warsaw in World War II. So this impulse to make things beautiful in the face of destruction is really a kind of standing-up to that destruction.

What is on the other side of what you said, closer to what you said, would be in fact the very heart of American tradition. Whitman and Dickinson. Dickinson probably couldn't write a properly English sentence for the life of her, but she wrote sentences that are so much more beautiful. They're completely outside the box. And of course she lived in a very Protestant environment, so she would have every reason on earth to not give us rhyme when we expect rhyme, at the end of a stanza, or to make a complete new meaning of simple literary device we know of

as dash. To make music of dashes according to Emily Dickinson, not according to expected English syntax.

So I think in some ways they are really the same thing; it's a question of what time period one lives in. And poets of your and my generation, poets of the 90s in the United States, the Clinton age, really, which followed kind of George H. Bush's age, those were the pretension of normality which people knew wasn't there. So the desire to find the brokenness since that generation makes complete sense.

I wonder what will happen in the age of Trump, when the mask is taken off the American normality and we see the complete barbarian. And the mask is taken off with the skin, so I'm sure it hurts. But I wonder if it will be beauty or brokenness that will come out of that heart that we see right now. I don't have an answer for that, just a curiosity.

[1:10:53]

But I do want to also point out that there is a deep joy of writing. For me, writing is an ecstatic experience. And I'm looking for language that does that. It is also an erotic experience; it is physical experience. Lorca says poet is a professor of five senses, not professor of creative writing. But professor of five senses… so what is it that senses do on the page, what parts of speech, for a given time period, bust open our senses to us, make them available to us. The commitment of any state, be it the Roman Empire, German Empire, Russian Empire, Chinese Empire, American, and so forth, the project of the Empire always is to dull the senses. And the project of the poet always is to wake up the senses.

So there might be different ways of doing it depending on it but what are the options of one. For example, a poet, somebody, say, like Tranströmer, did not need to break the grammar in order to write moving poetry because Tranströmer did not live in the Empire, so it was a different dynamic. However, Tranströmer did live in Italy in a very mild version of capitalist/socialist environment. So Tranströmer went for a kind of non-religious religious experience, which his poems are a

transcendental experience. You couldn't really imagine a religious poet in Sweden in the 1980s, but you could easily imagine somebody like Tranströmer, and that's exactly what we got.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Have you written about this? You just so beautifully and brilliantly revealed to me how American my question was that to have a binary between the outsider and the classicist--

ILYA KAMINSKY: For better or worse--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes. Now that you talked about this, I can see that it's part of this like, very, sort of, a-historical, short-sighted American obsession with innovation, right? Without understanding the way in which beauty and finding beauty can be a response to devastation and destruction. If you haven't already written this essay, I hope you will.

ILYA KAMINSKY: [Laughs] You're kind. Who knows, maybe. I am writing essays, but they usually come as surprise, not as a project. But I think it is interesting that you mentioned the word innovation. Another word that is often popular—innovation was popular again in the nineties—the word that is popular in the 2000s—now I don't know what's right now in our decade, but in the 2000s, a big word was surprise, also. And what is the danger of surprise? Second reading, second time it's no longer a surprise. So when you hear surprise, my impulse is always to ask surprise to what? To my mind or to my teeth? If the poem is surprising to my teeth or to my nose, then it's probably an interesting surprise that will survive reading number fifty-five. But if it is just to my mind, my mind will probably be bored by the reading one-and-a-half. Because I already know the answer.

As far as innovation goes, that is interesting because there is real pressure on most of our friends, really, to write books that is different than the books that people just published a year and half ago. Number one, why number two, how number three, what for? And number four, who is asking? Because frankly, if you look at any

poet, well, after we just talked about Whitman and Dickinson, those people don't change. They don't change, at all. Other people, I mentioned Horace and Akhmatova, don't change. William Shakespeare, don't change. Instead, they go deeper. They try to enlarge the possibility.

It is almost like we are really, in America, doing exact replica of... right now, we are in Sarah Lawrence College, which is right next to the mall. So I just came from the mall. In the mall, they were in the process of changing winter clothes to spring clothes. And that's exactly what seems to be the pressure, to be the next book and the next book. Oh it's a new season! We are putting new clothes on sale. And all the old clothes go away. But what did you learn from that previous experience? Why do we have to discard what we learned instead of growing deeper with it?

[1:15:20]

I mean, we don't know why we're here on this planet. We don't know where we are going. We don't know what happened before we were born, after we die, and we don't know what happens tomorrow. So why don't we try to dig deeper and dissect this question, instead of just trying to creating an artificial new project. Life will provide us with projects. We don't need to provide life with projects.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You asked me why I do this, and this is why.

ILYA KAMINSKY: You're too kind, stop.

RACHEL ZUCKER: No [laughs]. Let's talk a little bit about translation. There's so many important reasons to read work that was written in a language other than your own or your primary language, and there's so many important reasons to engage in the act of translation. One of them is to make visible some of our cultural assumptions about what makes writing good. What is writing for? Who are we writing for? Why are we writing? Things like this question of, "'make it new'--why?" Why?

And so I wanted to just ask you--I know that you've translated, you've done single-volume translations of several incredible poets, also you've done work to support the translation work of others, and you've been the editor of the *Ecco Anthology of International Poetry*, *Gossip and Metaphysics*, *Russian Modernist Poems and Prose*, and then we were talking about this just briefly, *A God in the House: Poets Talk about Faith*, and *Homage to Paul Celan*. And then also you were the director of the Poetry Foundation's Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute for two years, or three years. So I just wanted to ask you, both as a poet for whom Russian is your first language but now you live in the United States and you are mostly writing for an American audience, but also just as a poet, can you talk about the importance to you in translation in all of these different ways? And you can pick one; I know I keep asking you twenty questions in one.

ILYA KAMINSKY: There really is a danger of reading too much translation. And of course there is a danger of not reading translation as well. So I don't want to do a party line here. The danger of reading too much is losing the music of your native language. And that arguably happened to mid-century generation (I won't name names) who got really drunk and translated literature they discovered. Neruda, Vallejo, and so forth and so on. French poets, Chinese poets, Russian poets, Polish poets… but of course, Akhmatova in Russian, is a highly formal poet whose literally trying to make a liturgy with her rhymes. And what we got in English is a blank verse and if you imitate that blank verse then good for you but it's not really what Akhmatova is doing at all. So the danger of that is what I call cross-cultural shopping, a little bit of this, a little bit of that and you move your shopping cart to the check-out line.

But on the other side, of course, you have sincere danger when poets are just reading their friends and we end up having like in Alice in Wonderland, a hall of mirrors, where all we see is ourselves. And then we start thinking that our empire is at the center of the universe. But everybody in the world, especially now with the internet, knows who American poets are. If you go to Denmark they know who American poets are. If you go to Chile, they know who American poets are. Do American poets know poets from Bolivia? Probably not so much. So this kind of

absence of conversation in the world that is full of conversation puts us at a disadvantage. We end up looking in the mirror instead of looking out the window. And translation opens up a window, instead of a mirror. So that is an argument for translation. And of course I believe in translation.

Even though as a practicing translator, I would have to tell you the truth that the concept of translation is a complete and absolute fairy tale. It is absolutely impossible to translate one text into another and say "I did exactly the same thing," because of course I didn't. Just to speak for the language that is my native mother [tongue], Russian literature, begun, let's say for the sake of a number, 1824, when Alexander Pushkin was writing his novel-in-verse, his epic, *Eugene Onegin* which was very much at the heart of Russian culture. What is 1824 for English literature—Byron was dead by 1824 and who the heck is Byron? You know, there were at least a dozen writers of world magnitude in the English tradition before Byron, so that tells you how anthropologically different Russian and American and English literatures are.

[1:21:08]

How is it possible, who is qualified to translate Tsvetaeva… Blake? I mean, who would be at the same chronological age of the language? Russian literature, if you start counting from 1824, and that's an arbitrary number, but still to give you a context, it's less than 200 years old! How do you translate literature in the English which had been around since the 11th century? And of course there were some church chronicles, some, very very few epics, in Russian literature, but nothing compared to the magnitude of *Green Knight* or *Pearl* or many other texts. Definitely nothing can be compared *Canterbury Tales*.

Which can be a great advantage for Russian literature if you look at it from a modern perspective. I mean, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky were writing great epic novels when Russian literature was less than 100 years old. So it was completely natural for them to write great epic novels. But no one of the contemporaries in Russian countries could possibly equal the magnitude of that because we already

had epic novels! So Tolstoy could read Homer and then write *War and Peace* in Russian. And that allowed him to do what would be unthinkable. So there is a great advantage to this, too, not only a disadvantage.

So for me, translation is interesting, not because it answers questions, but because it allows us to ask more questions. Which is why we have a different translation of Dante, probably, three or four different translations of Dante, every single year. Because we are never satisfied by translations. There is always a new fantasia, a new dream, that can come from the expected text. And most translators will tell you that a great poet deserves many translators. And you know that a poet is great not just because the culture is pushing for more translations but because so many interesting minds are fascinated by going back to that text and really discovering it anew.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You know, John Keene, in our translation episode, talks about one of the things that is so important about translation is that, especially, he was talking about for African American people, to have no access to the history of Black and brown people writing in a diaspora in other languages about the Black experience, is so limiting. So you think that, for example, your racialized experience is only in the context of the American experience, is so limiting. And I think on a very deep level we have the idea that - it's not very American maybe but it's very important - to have access and understanding to other peoples' culture, history, daily lived experience. And you're talking about some of the ways in which the language, and, from an anthropological perspective, it's impossible to really translate that accurately.

This little thing here was something that Clare Cavanagh said in that podcast, and here she's talking about some of the dangers of translation, not linguistically, but culturally or content. Can I just read this one little quote?

[1:25:01]

So Clare Cavanagh was speaking with you and Adam Zagajewski and she said, "So much of the myth of Polish poetry in the states, or in English-language poetry, has been about the poetry that survives and triumphs over oppression. Sometimes, that would really irritate me because it struck me that American poets were, I called it, "borrowed martyrology." You don't suffer that way in capitalism. You suffer from different things. You suffer from not having an audience. You suffer from having to figure out a way to be oppressed that other people will even care about. There are poets that really drove me crazy because they would be doing persona poems from every place in the third world because just being an American poet teaching at a university in the United States, and being frustrated and feeling other people's pain, it's--how do you do it? I'm curious but I'm also a little frightened. It's a new phase."

And I'm interested in the way she brings up a potential problem of reading poetry in translation or immersing yourself in the texts of another culture or another time. And you're saying first of all that you can lose the music of your own language but also you can start to imagine that the only justification for writing a poem is this other experience which is not your experience. So mostly I feel like we have so little poetry and literature in translation in the United States that the dangers are irrelevant compared to the benefits of translation and we just don't have enough. But every once in a while I think about some of the dangers or some of the complications, I think is maybe a better…

ILYA KAMINSKY: I think she's responding as an American. I might have a slightly different response. But I do want to follow up on what you said a little earlier about what John Keene said about just different experiences in diaspora and how they relate to American experiences.

When I edited that anthology of international poetry I was looking for poems from all over the world to put into the book to have a representative book. And I was struck over, and over, and over again, how really talented brilliant poets who happened to translate from other languages into English, some of these poets are classics really, let's say from French, they probably, every fifth American poet born

between 1901 and 1945 or 1965 even, every fifth would probably be translated from French. And they would all go translate a poet from Paris and re-represent, if you look at high profile poets would translate poets from francophone Africa, even though all translated poets are from a central western perspective. That does show you're American. So it's not just translation, but what has been translated, and in putting together an anthology, that was extremely frustrating, because you know the work exists, but it is just not available to you, or it's available, but in a more scholarly translations and you know that if you put it in a book, you will also misrepresent the work because it would be next to a translation done by a truly talented poet, so it will be vastly undervalued because it's just not the same quality as a work in English.

So there's all those kinds, and that is the brilliance of John Keene, himself is here he is a supremely gifted poet and fiction writer, translating the work that is otherwise not available in English from talented writers to talented translators. As far as what Clare Cavanagh has said, I think this is very interesting, because I agree with you. I don't really think that we have nearly enough translations to worry about the danger, but I think the romantic need of being a larger than life poetic figure and so appropriating that in one way or another or 50/50 way is probably on the minds of many folks living under a capitalist system, because frankly, I was born under Brezhnev and I was sixteen when the USSR fell apart, so a lot of that was very exciting! The right and wrong was so, so clear.

[1:30:22]

You would never think about, "Oh, I'm not sure." Capitalist system is designed by definition to make a person living in it unsure. Most of our liberals in this country are unsure, and when somebody becomes a little more sure of their convictions, people say that they're radical. Then on the right side, people are very, very sure, but mostly vastly misinformed, and that is by design of the system, as such. I think also people are unsure because, even taking a loan from a bank, that might be mostly mining diamonds in African continent is vastly ethically wrong, and yet

you might not even know it is the case, so buying a t-shirt or a sweatshirt from a discount store can be very, very ethically grave, and yet you're just buying a t-shirt.

And most people–-even most informed people–-feel uneasy, or sometimes we pretend not to feel because there are so many feelings, but that is also very much the design of the system.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wait–-how does capitalism benefit from making people so unsure?

ILYA KAMINSKY: Well, then you fight little battles. You fight very, very small battles.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You fight small battles, instead of—

ILYA KAMINSKY: And nobody questions the system. Like just as when we talked about universities, when we both agreed that university becomes too much like a corporation, but on the day-to-day level we don't really talk about that, we don't question that. We question a thousand and one other smaller things, and that is the design of the system, and that is just–-I'm talking about one example that we both worry about because we work in it, but you can talk about elections. You can talk about–-I don't know–-most recent election, we had the difference between Bernie Sanders and Hilary Clinton, or even the difference between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump, which you and I would probably instantly agree is a vast difference, and yet really? Really, they're both paid by exactly the same corporations–-exactly the same twenty corporations are running every single politician in this country, but do we see a lot of people protesting in front of the White House? I don't.

So there are all this myriad of little details that are really flawed in our daily lives, and that is the design of the system. That is what the system wants to do, whereas in Soviet system, a repressive regime, you don't have this illusion of partial

freedom. You don't have this illusion of partial choice. You have very, very clear chance to lose. It's absolute clarity.

But I find this challenge of living under capitalism and responding to it as a living poet far more interesting than being this romantic figure of standing up to oppression under Hitler and so forth, simply because it's so much more nuanced. There's so many intricacies. I'm not saying it is more fun! I'm saying it is interesting, and it is very, very new in the history of humankind. This is the first time the human brain has to deal with really a computerized system, which is designed technologically and socially to disarm us.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. I'm going to listen to this conversation over and over and hear something new each time, but this complexity of how to write in resistance to capitalism, also acknowledging the freedoms that we have to write in resistance to capitalism, and how it is—

ILYA KAMINSKY: Well this is exactly the question. You say it exactly right, and let's dwell on it a little bit. How do we write against capitalism, acknowledging that we have kind of freedom of doing so? But let's stop for a moment.

[1:35:10]

I'm going to try to not talk so much about politics so much anymore–-probably do too much–-but just to give a little bit of an illustration. So we have this illusion right now that we have this freedom–-and I'm going to speak from disability perspective. Disabled body in this country, you place it in a hospital. It is not a political body. What if it becomes a political body? Meaning you all don't have national healthcare in this country. By demanding one, every single body in this country is suddenly political. Now, in America, to say that we want national healthcare is a radical, leftist statement to make, which is absurd if you go to any other industrialized country in the world. It is a conservative statement to make. Most conservative people in industrialized countries in the world believe in nationalized healthcare.

If you are in UK–-pretty conservative country considering Brexit–-most conservatives in UK would say, “Yeah, sure, we have to have national healthcare.” I’m not even talking about Sweden or Norway and so forth, which are slightly more liberal or a lot more liberal than UK. Say France is not exactly a liberal country right now, but definitely national healthcare. Canada same thing. In America, it is very, very not a centrist view, so what kind of freedoms are we talking about? Are we talking about illusions of freedom? I mean, the word “freedom” is so relative. For such an abstract word, when we try to put it on a particular perspective of our moment in time, we realize, “Well, maybe we just have a fiction of freedom.” We’re only free as far as we are not precluding corporations from making their buck. As soon as there is a whistleblower who says something that’s not supposed to be said, as we have seen in recent years, they immediately go to prison.

You and I talking on a poetry podcast about this probably doesn’t hurt in a real way any corporation, but if we were revealing things that are not supposed to be revealed, we would not be having this podcast right now.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, and Julianna Spahr talks about this a lot–-about the way in which, in some ways the arts has been used by the government to give people a sense of cultural freedom and intellectual freedom—

ILYA KAMINSKY: White noise.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. And that it’s distracting us from the ways in which we are not free, or different people have completely different access to freedom and opportunity and–-we’re not incarcerated right now, neither of us, and nobody cares what we say in our poems, or if you get up on stage now at Sarah Lawerence and say–-I don’t even know what the most radical, damaging thing you could say would be–-but you’re probably not going to lose your job, and I’m not trying to get you riled up [laughs]—

ILYA KAMINSKY: Why not?

RACHEL ZUCKER: –-but part of why you're probably not going to lose your job, and probably why I'm not going to get arrested for this podcast is I'm not disrupting the economy. I don't have enough power, and nothing I'm going to say or do is going to create a movement that would destabilize in a real way some of the things that we're talking about.

ILYA KAMINSKY: And yet, one thing that art can do, that we have observed in the last fifty years is wake up the senses. And waking up the sense is one of the true dangers, to my mind, to a capitalist system. Capitalism dulls senses. When senses are dull, people buy tomatoes in the supermarket that don't smell or taste. That's just a metaphor for everything else that's happening around us. When people have no taste, they buy what they're told to buy, both politically and in a day-to-day level. The purpose of art is to wake us up.

[1:39:45]

We notice in many arts, how dull ours are. Not just poetry–-we both agree probably it's pretty dull these days–-but in so many others. In architecture–-how dull it is, often. And I'm not here to seem gloomy. I know that. I'm just here to make a call for living through our senses, because that, in more ways than one, is the true vocation of an artist. Artist is not a saint. Artist is not supposed to give you a mystical–-if artist does that, great, but that is just one of many variations of what art can do, whereas all artists, including those who give you a sacred calling, are by definition creatures of senses, and that is probably something that we can do, and that is something that would make a difference.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I want to make sure to ask you if you have any questions for me, and I know we have to end soon, but I think the idea of the artist and their vocation being to wake up the senses and what would happen if human beings were living more in their senses is so profound–-and it strikes me also that we have a very American fantasy–-and I think this comes from certain kinds of

Christianity–-any time we get in touch with our senses, that way lies sin. You know? That way, we have to work, we have to be productive, we have to live in our mind, we have to separate our spirit from the body, and this has gotten us into such a terrible living dead quality. I'm just making a speech now, which is not good.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Carry on! Carry on!

RACHEL ZUCKER: No. I mean—

ILYA KAMINSKY: Rachel Zucker for President!

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] I would be very bad at that. Anyway, Ilya, I'm so lucky to get to be here with you right now.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Come on. I'm lucky as well. Come on.

RACHEL ZUCKER: No, it's really–-it's amazing. You know, I'm not asking for sympathy, but I've been basically at home for weeks, and I haven't gone out very much except to doctors appointments and whatever and you know, there was a part of me that thought, "Oh, should I really push myself to come and talk to you?" And it's no small thing to be able to talk very deeply and openly about something that I care so deeply about, and then other times I think it's totally irrelevant and "Who cares?" and anyway—

ILYA KAMINSKY: Well, we can talk about this in more than one way. Yes, of course, it would be really rare for one person to change a nation. But you could say that two people sitting at a kitchen table and talking about what matters pretty much makes up a church. That is what a church is, in one way or another. We have to believe that.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Okay. Last question, unless you have questions for me: what are you working on now?

ILYA KAMINSKY: I do have new poems, and I'm trying to finish the book of essays.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Beautiful. Do you have any questions for me?

ILYA KAMINSKY: Yeah, sure. What is the purpose of life?

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] I don't know.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Okay. Let me modify it. What makes a good life?

RACHEL ZUCKER: You know, it's interesting. Lately, my three sons have been asking me this question—"What is the purpose of life?" and "What makes a good life?"

ILYA KAMINSKY: Now you have four sons!

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] I mean, I think that this question is so difficult. It's so painful, especially when it's your child, and you feel like you should have an answer—like, my youngest son is very afraid of death, and being with him in this fear, which can be very consuming, feels a little bit like being with someone who's ill, or who's dying, and you can't change it, you can't fix it, you can't take the pain away, you can't take the existential despair away, but it is different to be alone with that than to be with another person, even if your primary feeling is anger that your mother is a human being, or that your friend doesn't know the answer, or that there is no answer. I still think that, I guess, a good life is to find people who will be with you in those questions.

[1:45:06]

ILYA KAMINSKY: Perfect blurb for your podcast!

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean I've had this weird thought lately which I have never said out loud to anyone until right now, but there's this assumption that–-and you see it everywhere–-on TV, in books, everywhere–-that family comes first, you know? Or that what it means to be a parent or a spouse is to put this person above all others and that you would do anything for them, you know? That you would give up your life for them, that you would–-and there is a part of me that is actually recently thinking that this is the root of all human oppression, and that it's very unpopular, I feel, intuitively, that I would do anything to protect my children, but intellectually, ethically, this is the root of all prejudice and all bias and all hatred, because I should not actually treat my own children or my loved ones any differently than I would treat someone else–-a stranger, and—

ILYA KAMINSKY: What a very Buddhist thing to say.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] Yeah, maybe.

ILYA KAMINSKY: You know, in a very, very simple, 30-second definition of Buddhism, is all suffering comes from attachment.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. I think it's profound only because I was raised an American Jew. Maybe it would be just normal to me if I were raised a Buddhist.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Well, I wasn't raised a Buddhist [laughs],–-but I wonder if that, in some ways, is an illustration of indifference that we see, even now in America, towards others, because people are focusing on providing for those who are very near and dear to them, and that's probably the same and difference to what happened in Poland, to Germany, or Ukraine, in the middle of the twentieth century, or pretty much everywhere in the world. I mean, same and different, that which Native Americans wiped out from the nation, for the most part–-people were just focusing on providing for their families, I suppose.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, and then we have, especially as American Jews, but most people have their own version of this, that the justification for doing so is having been historically victimized, and—

ILYA KAMINSKY: Well, I would argue as a Jew of diaspora, as a Jew that does not live in Israel, I would argue that there is also very much a drive for justice that comes from Jewish experience, and that is all you know, Torah. The Torah is in many ways a book that strived for justice, but of course that's a very optimistic way of looking at this.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs]. Should we end? Do you want to read—

ILYA KAMINSKY: Yeah, I just want to end, once again stating that–-not necessarily the word "joy," but the word "senses," and joy comes from that. The word "experience"—the delight of experience. I mean, we even love our families because we laugh with our families, or we cry with our families–-those things that are very much a part of literature. They are the stuff of literature, and that is a privilege–-to be in touch with those things on a daily basis, and to be bringing those things to others on a daily basis, and I would want to end on that as a way to go forward, because I simply don't know any other way to go forward.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Thank you.

ILYA KAMINSKY: Thank you.

[Music]

[1:49:``]

RACHEL ZUCKER: You have been listening to episode 72 of Commonplace with Ilya Kaminsky. This episode was produced by myself, Rachel Zucker, and by Nicholas Fuenzalida, Christine Larusso, Doreen Wang and Nathalie Boyd. The episode was sound edited and mixed by Becca DiGreggorio and Nathalie Boyd.

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