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In memoriam Daniel Weissbort

Many readers of this blog have no doubt already heard that Daniel Weissbort, the much loved and respected translator of Russian poetry who directed the MFA Program in Translation at the University of Iowa for over thirty years, passed away on November 8, 2013, at the age of 78. Since I had met him only in passing, I asked [Bill Martin](#), who was his student and knew him well, to write a few words in remembrance. This is what he wrote:



Something about Danny that always struck me was his exclamation marks. In the world—that is, the world of the English-Philosophy Building, the classroom, his office, and the International Writing Program lounge, and of Iowa City itself, where I would occasionally run into him walking home along Linn Street—he gave the impression of someone who was staid, absorbed in thought or slightly abashed, speaking quietly and to the point. The impression he made in writing, whether in published essays or private emails, was a bit different; there he was obviously more directly communicative, even gregarious, but he was always thoughtful, unpretentious, and clear, and the same sense of introvertedness pervaded. The one thing that stuck out, for me at any rate, was that occasionally, usually at the end of a parenthetical aside or assessment of some just-recounted anecdote, an exclamation mark would appear out of nowhere and for a moment disrupt the otherwise quiet, even economy of his voice. As a gesture, the exclamation mark—known colloquially by more expressive terms like “bang”, “screamer”, and “shriekmark”—was at odds with Danny’s diffidence. And although it occurred often enough and usually had the effect of a brief, bright laugh of astonishment (rather than of screaming or shrieking!), its every instance appeared anomalous, out of place.

Danny’s commentary and insights in the classroom and in conversation could be similarly startling. Suddenly, out of his seeming reverie at the other end of the table, as if produced there under the pressure of close, extended observation, would come a remark that shed new light on or reframed ever so slightly whatever it was that you or another student had just presented;

but he always spoke with a gentle authority—as if he were just another peer who had been listening especially carefully, never from on high. His lectures were a means for sharing information—holding forth was not his metier—and he seemed genuinely interested in what his students had to say. In the impresario culture of the American university this sort of pedagogy, which was grounded in listening above all else, may have seemed incongruous to some people. Maybe he learned it from his older brother, George, who passed away in July this year, a painter known for his capacity to spend hours studying a single work by Vermeer, Rembrandt, or Ingres, and whom Danny himself once described as being “fixated on what he was doing, i.e. looking, not daydreaming or speculating... looking as worship of the natural world, formerly known as God’s” (*PN Review* 33:2). Like his brother and the philosopher Malebranche, Danny cultivated an ethic of attentiveness in his work, as teacher and writer and certainly as translator. It occurs to me now that this commitment to listening could have had something to do with his unexpectedly performative exclamation marks—if understood as “bangs” of accumulated attention, or necessary discharges of an aliveness in reserve. Maybe I’ve latched onto this minor detail of Danny’s prose style because in fact, as much influence as he had on me, I don’t remember many interactions or situations that might provide a better point of entry into this memorial. Also, my copies of his books and email correspondence are out of reach at the moment, packed away in boxes and floppy disks in a storage unit in Cazenovia, New York, while here in Berlin I’m dependent on twenty-five-year-old remnant neurons and online academic databases for material. He passed away a month ago.

Daniel Weissbort, who passed away on November 18th, was my professor at the University of Iowa and a mentor. I took only two classes with him: “Postwar Central and Eastern European Poetry” my sophomore year, in which I first read poets such as Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska, Yehuda Amichai, and Paul Celan, and which inspired me to spend my junior year in Poland; and one graduate translation workshop that I took after returning from that year abroad, which he permitted me to participate in although I was still an undergraduate. But I also worked for three years as an office assistant for the International Writing Program, a residency program for writers through which Danny had first come to Iowa City almost two decades before and with which he continued to work closely in his capacity as Director of the MFA Program in Translation. And during my final semester at Iowa, Danny asked me to collaborate with him on editing and designing the fourth issue of the MFA student journal *Exchanges*. I think it was on his recommendation that I was accepted into the MA Programme in Translation Studies at the University of Warwick, where I planned to work with Susan Bassnett. I did not go, there being no scholarships for foreign students and not wanting to take out a loan, and applied instead to the University of Texas at Austin to study with another giant in the field of Translation Studies, André Lefevere, who sadly passed away shortly after I was accepted. In retrospect, now, I see that I could have returned to Iowa and resumed working with Danny in the years before he retired. The last time I saw him was at ALTA in New York in 1999. A few years later, I helped to initiate a visit for him and his widow, the scholar and translator Valentina Polukhina, in Kraków. After that, I fell out of touch.



Maybe this autobiographical excursus is excessive? But I think Danny would not have minded. He was interested not only in the practice of translation as an embodied activity, involving any number of decisions and material and intellectual influences, but in the lives of translators themselves, who were as much “carthorses of civilization” (as Pushkin put it, a phrase he liked to quote) as they were subjects of “chance or hazard.” For this reason he recommended, as an endeavor of Translation Studies, the collection of data not just on the process of translating but on the development of professional translators, writing about his own experience “as one case history out of many.” He presented this in a lovely essay published in 1981 in *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* titled “Who Would Be a Translator?” And most of his later publications, I would argue, constitute parts of the coherent, empirical project laid out there. *Translating Poetry: The Double Labyrinth* (1989), for instance, is a collection of superb essays by practitioners on specific experiences of translation. *Survival: An Experience and an Experiment in Translating Modern Hindi Poetry*, co-edited with Giradhara Rāṭhī (1994), reconstructs a somewhat controversial translation workshop that Danny undertook in India in 1990 with Hindi poets and English-language translators. *From Russian With Love* (2004), is a personal meditation on his friendship with and experience translating Joseph Brodsky. And his edition of Ted Hughes’ *Selected Translations* (2007) contains both an essay on the theory and practice of translation of his lifelong friend and collaborator, and a selection of work that is itself an argument for the centrality of translation for a generation of postwar British poets (of whom Danny himself was one).

Two key anthologies should also be mentioned as taking part in this practical, historically oriented, and pedagogical enterprise: *The Poetry of Survival: Postwar Poets of Central and Eastern Europe* (1991), which grew out of Danny’s experiences as the editor of *Modern Poetry in Translation* and as a teacher (the selection is almost identical with the course packet for the poetry course I took with him); and *Translation—Theory and Practice: A Historical Reader*, co-edited with Ástráður Eysteinnsson (2007), which is a comprehensive selection of writings on translation that he began compiling in the early 1970s—there being no such anthology at the time—shortly after taking on the directorship of the newly minted MFA Program in Translation at Iowa. Which texts those early students of translation ought to read was not at all self-evident, and apparently the curriculum was developed in favor of “solidly historical” texts as opposed to “French critical theory”—since it had to be one or the other—a difference represented by Paul Engle, the program’s founder and an administrative heavyweight at Iowa,

and Gayatri Spivak, then Chair of Comparative Literature, who was in the process of translating Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. In a short essay published in 2007 in the *PN Review*, Danny mentions that he "went along" with Engle in this because he was "ignorant of critical theory"; but I suspect that his own preference for the "solidly historical" was due less to a lack of interest in some other methodology (after all, as his experience with Brodsky shows, Danny was remarkably open to revising his own views), than to a primary fascination for history as such, something he experienced immediately in the vagaries of his own life and, especially, in the phantoms of his parents' experiences.

Danny's profound sense of and commitment to history informs all areas of his work, not only as a scholar and teacher, but as a poet and as a translator and editor as well. In a 1991 interview with the Polish writer Grzegorz Musiał (which was conducted in English and translated into Polish for the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, and which Danny commissioned me to translate back into English, my first paid gig), Danny recalls spending many hours tape-recording conversations with his mother a decade or so earlier, at the end of her life, conversations that inspired poems in his book *Inscription*. Prompted to discuss the "brutal openness with which [he] approach[ed] the delicate material of the Polish-Jewish relationship," he responded: "I'm not interested in poetry written in the service of a pedagogical or sociological or any other kind of manifesto, especially when it concerns the fate of the Jews. I was more interested in the voice of my own mother, I wanted to live in that voice; that voice is a part of me, and her life is a part of my own." He doesn't mention what language he and his mother spoke during these conversations, but elsewhere he has described the curious linguistic circumstances of his upbringing: "while my parents would address me in French, I would respond in English, the point being that I was unconscious (or had repressed the consciousness) that two languages were being used. The net result of this was that English, though it had become effectively my only literary tongue, the only one in which I might myself aspire to write, was also experienced as foreign" ("Who Would Be a Translator").

History and translation were inextricably linked for Weissbort even before he was born. While his parents spoke French, they had had to 'translate' themselves into it, having both grown up far away, in the Russian partition of Poland. "Especially my mother was proud of the fact that she remembered Polish so well," he mentions, and elsewhere in the interview with Musiał recounts how his mother left Warsaw with her family in 1916, when the Germans invaded, and joined his father, who had already departed the Tsar's empire some time before, in Belgium. They lived together in Brussels, where Danny's brother was born, before emigrating to London at the beginning of the 1930s. Danny describes a letter written to his mother a decade earlier by his father, who was a businessman, then on an extended visit to Germany: "Germany is no place for a Jew'," his father wrote, and "hinted at an incipient interest in England." Their move there was both pragmatic and existential: "Although according to his letter, my father's interest in England was one of business, I understood from his mood that he very acutely felt the tragedy approaching. Even then, at the beginning of the 1920s, he didn't trust the Germans, and I don't have the slightest doubt that it is to his uncanny intuition that I owe my life." Danny's sense of the contingency of his life is referred to again in a rejoinder to Donald Davie's malicious review of *The Poetry of Witness*: "Of course, nobody who was not actually there [in

the Holocaust or the War] can know how he or she would have performed, not even Davie. But as a Jew, the only member of my family to have been born in England, many of whose maternal and paternal relatives were deported to Bergen-Belsen and lived to tell the tale, I am not as remote from the whole affair as Davie imagines me to be.”

The plainspokenness and clarity of Danny’s own poetry, its focus on everyday life, the refusal in it of any kind of rhetorical or poetical artificiality, and his commitment to his own voice and to recognizing and articulating truth, all bespeak, I would argue, this existential position of being “not... remote from the whole affair,” a position he found operative in the work of other poets from Central and Eastern Europe, such as Tadeusz Różewicz and János Pilinszky, who had survived the Shoah directly, and that I also find resonant with the work of the American poet Charles Reznikoff. This position certainly informed his work as an editor: combined with his frustration with what he viewed as the sterility of British poetry in the fifties and sixties, it is what motivated his and Ted Hughes’s founding of *Modern Poetry in Translation*. And his work as a translator was equally inflected by it, inasmuch as it involves the desire for freedom, such as that expressed with such eloquent irony in Aleksandr Kushner’s lines, translated by Danny, about the totalitarian falseness and *bad music* of Stalinist ideology during a mandatory concert: “And, oh god, how we longed to be free, / How we craved for light and air, / For there not to be dancing or singing, / And above all, no band up there!” (“I Sat on the Edge of My Seat”). A whole generation of poets who grew up and worked in the Soviet Union, such as Kushner or Natalya Gorbanevskaya, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Yevgeny Vinokurov, Regina Derieva, or Viktor Sosnora, who aspired under oppressive circumstances to locate the true music, all found their English voices in Danny Weissbort.

It is a sign of Danny’s genius as a translator and editor, and of his invaluable contribution to the Russian subcanon of English literature, that he did not commit his voice to only one or two great names—such as Brodsky or Voznesensky, both of whom he translated early on—but understood the importance of rendering a literary or poetic context or community, of shaping a target reader’s understanding of a source culture and its writers through instruments such as the anthology and the periodical in addition to the single-author volume. The space of twentieth-century Russian poetry in English today owes everything to the shape given it by Danny’s anthologies from the 1970s on, which include *Post-War Russian Poetry* (1974), *Russian Poetry: The Modern Period*, co-edited with John Glad (1978), and *An Anthology of Contemporary Russian Women Poets*, co-edited with Valentina Polukhina (2005). An assessment of his contributions to world literature as editor, for four decades, of *Modern Poetry in Translation* would take far more space and time than is available here. I wish, for myself, that I would have thought of these things while Danny was still alive, and expressed then my admiration to him. If only the present could be translated into a past present! But we were lucky! Hopefully the legacy of his multifarious work and genius and the qualities he enacted—attentiveness, the understanding of his own embodied history and contingency, a committed other-directedness—as well as his practical vision, collaborative spirit, and openness to a variety of approaches, will live on as models for future translators.

—Bill Martin