

AT LANGUAGE'S EDGE—Daniel Weissbort (1935-2013)
Mary Jane White, MFA Poetry 1978

Daniel Weissbort gave 30 years of his 78 years of life to Iowa's MFA Program in Translation. Danny, as we knew him, as I knew him, was a translator of Russian, one of Pushkin's "carthorses of civilization."

Here are some words of mine, and some which I echo from Bill Martin, who, like me, and like Marilyn Chin, as young poets and translators, spent 3 years as an office assistant to the International Writing Program—a program with which Danny was always quietly collaborating, and nearly always to some point of publication:

To us, Danny seemed:
Absorbed in thought, in reverie
Slightly abashed
Unpretentious and clear
Diffident
Intermittently astonished
Capable of close, extended observation in reading, of listening especially carefully, and never from on high
Gentle in slightly reframing
Sharing—holding forth was not his *métier*
By choice, no administrative heavyweight
One who gave opportunity, and credit, to his graduate students, which others, who shall remain nameless here, most decidedly, did not
Other-directed, committed to the practical and the collaborative
Translation was a part of him as a poet, a part of his ethic of attentiveness to the world
Translation was "just his way of reading,"
With which I would agree: Translation is "just my residue of reading."
As his student I would never know, or hear, much less guess that it was at a launch party for one of his earliest little magazines that Ted Hughes first met Sylvia Plath--because Danny was above all excessively modest.

From 1965 to 2003 Danny edited and saw to the publication of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, which he began with Ted Hughes, his classmate at Cambridge. Its first issue included translations into English of Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Miroslav Holub, Iva Lalic and Vasko Popa in an effort to make "as many literal translations as possible," and to allow foreignness to come into a then-rather-staid English poetry, in Hughes' view, and because as Danny believed: "Poetry happens everywhere, but sometimes, often, it happens in languages that do not attract attention. We are the poorer for not experiencing it, at least to the extent it can be experienced in translation."

Danny never committed his voice as a translator to only 1 or 2 great names (although he certainly made a heroic effort, with Joseph Brodsky—then alive, and very difficult!).

Danny understood the impact of the anthology and the periodical.
Give it a chance, listen, was his continuing invitation.

Danny was also a fine poet of his generation, in his chosen language of English, the language he used in responding to his Polish parents' use of French at home in England.

Here's a passage from Danny's "Letters to Ted" from August 20, 1999:

Do I preserve what I know by not transcribing you,
not finding a form of words for you—
the look of you and your way of looking?
Do I keep you in the original,
untranslated?

With his Russian language collaborator here at Iowa, John Glad, Danny helped prepare me, give me the confidence to ask Joseph Brodsky, whom he invited here to Iowa in 1978, for an assignment—as a young poet with some Russian, I was, despite Danny's teaching, looking for one great name, as yet untranslated, and Brodsky's answer to me—published in *The Iowa Review* by David Hamilton--assured me on Brodsky's authority and Akhmatova's--"In comparison with Pushkin and Tsvetaeva I am just a little cow. I am a cow," that if I "were asking about the twentieth century, Marina Tsvetaeva was the greatest in his view and that the greatest poet in the twentieth century was a woman."

I recognized the name, Marina Tsvetaeva, from a flash in a passage of a poor literal anthology translation of her poem "An Attempt at Jealousy" I'd encountered as an undergraduate—a flash that has become something to set with care and with fire into English.

My relationship in translation with Tsvetaeva has outlasted a marriage, the raising of children, and every other passing affair of my heart—Tsvetaeva has become a tight-fitting mask behind which and through which I continue to sing in my translations of her which have brought her to the cover of *The American Poetry Review*, and the pages of *The New England Review* and *The Hudson Review*, and anthologies published in New York and in her beloved city of exile, Prague.

On July 6, 1926 Tsvetaeva wrote to Rilke:

"Writing poetry is in itself translating, from the mother tongue into another, whether French or German should make no difference. No language is the mother tongue. Writing poetry is rewriting it. That's why it puzzles me when people speak of French or Russian, etc., poets. A poet may write in French; he cannot be a French poet. That's ludicrous. . . . Orpheus bursts nationality, or he extends it to such breadth and width that everyone (bygone and in being) is included."