

## Poetry, Disability and Metamodernism: Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic*

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### Abstract

Based on Ilya Kaminsky's poetry volume *Deaf Republic* (2019), this article aims at placing contemporary disability poetics at the crossroads of modernism and metamodernism. The first part makes an assessment of the modernist poetics of disability created against the background of the prevalent ableist ideology as it is found in the American and Romanian traditions, and examines the ways in which disabled poets react, creatively and politically, to the tradition of marginalization to which they were subjected. A particular place is given to Deaf poetry and to the limitations it had to surpass socially and creatively. In the second part of the essay, I introduce metamodern affect to sketch out a poetics of disability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which overcomes the predicaments of modernist writing and reading codes through a new way of conceiving corporeality, oppression, and relationality.

**Keywords:** *disability poetics, Deaf poetry, modernism, metamodernism, Ilya Kaminsky, Deaf Republic, Ukrainian-American poetry*

In this essay my aim is to bring into dialogue disability poetics and the theory of metamodernism, in order to assess the possibility of a poetic evolution beyond the space of modernism in terms of a politics of the disabled body. To this end, I will start by examining the modernist poetics of disability, as described by Michael Davidson and Lennard Davis, especially the premise that modernism is inextricably linked with the disabled body, both through its aesthetics and its politics. By discussing the modernist template of disability poetics as ableist ideology rooted in verbal cliché, and examining the ways in which disabled poets react, creatively and politically, to the tradition of marginalization to which they were subjected, I will explore the English language tradition of High Modernism, with several incursions in a semi-peripheral culture, Romania, which used modernism as both an aesthetic trampoline into the 20<sup>th</sup> century for artists, but also speculated its eugenic and ableist potential to reinforce a doctrine of the 'normal', canonical body with nationalist undertones. While Michael Davidson, the main proponent of a modernist poetics of disability, attributes to modernism a wide temporal range, making it debut with Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and going strong even today, I oppose to this, in my opinion, exaggerated longevity of modernism (which possibly conflates postmodernism too) the hypothesis of an aesthetic and political breakthrough coming at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century through a group of authors sometimes called metamodernists. In my view, metamodernism favours, in the realm of disabled poetics, a new type of affectivity, connected with the body and interpersonal relationality, at the same time building a sense of community

and engaging in a hermeneutics of the self. An analysis of Ilya Kaminsky's 2019 volume *Deaf Republic* is taken as an example of such a metamodern poetics of deafness that speaks out and conceals, assumes a political message, but one with an affiliative potential that makes it open to any body.

## Modernism and Disability Poetics

Aesthetics, Tobin Siebers reminds us, is from its beginnings linked to the body, both in terms of the physical craft needed to produce something beautiful, and in terms of the interpersonal emotion stimulated in another body by the perception of something done with artistry.<sup>1</sup> But while corporeality might be ingrained in the genetic composition of aesthetics, the efforts of idealist, 'disembodied', autonomist conceptions of art have done much to obscure this initial link. As a result, a big part of artistic productions focused on representations of normative 'perfection' and perpetuated an archaic cultural apprehension of the unconforming body. The roots of this apprehension go back millennia, to the birth of the formal elements of normative poetics in ancient Greece. Davidson invokes the etymological connection of poetic meter to walking in Greek poetics, and more specifically the inherent disregard of all ancient cultures for disability, clearly visible, for instance, in the name for the iambic meter, which comes from the Greek word for 'cripple'.<sup>2</sup> The cultivation of the canonical, 'perfect' body in the arts promoted by Renaissance humanism encouraged the bias against disability, with the well-known exceptions of Boccaccio's and Rabelais's celebration of popular 'vulgarity' or the Romantics' interest in the grotesque.

In this scenery, modernism brings a new perspective by 'making visible those bodies and minds that interrupt an ideal of bodily coherence and health'.<sup>3</sup> In turning to the 'alternative' body, modernism also creates a spectacular poetics of disability, echoed in the Freudian 'uncanny' and the Russian Formalists' 'defamiliarization'. Thus, the revelations of the non-conforming body are not only tackled head-on, as a literary theme, but are assimilated at the level of poetic form. The strangeness that makes poetic language 'visible' in modernism, Davidson claims, is homologous to the perceived strangeness of the disabled body, which helps people understand how 'sanity' works. This is one way in which disability inhabits modernism, the other being the unrestrained interest of modernist writers in the 'aesthetics of the ugly'. Modernist writers seek thus to expand the domain of the 'beautiful' to areas prohibited to their predecessors by popular prejudice and canonical limitations, but they also tend to casually return to disability as a form of cultural commentary. Davis considers this casualness to be ritualistic and to function as a yardstick that measures the sanity of culture in the readership and symbolically reinforces 'normalcy'.<sup>4</sup> An example ready to hand would be T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), a masterpiece that approximates the doom of contemporary culture through incessant focusing on various types of disease and

<sup>1</sup> Tobin Siebers, 'Disability Aesthetics', *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 7.2 (2006): 63.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Davidson, 'Disability Poetics', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 581.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Davidson, *Invalid Modernism: Disability and the Missing Body of the Aesthetic* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Lennard J. Davis, 'Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2017), 11.

disability.<sup>5</sup> Famously, the image of the blind seer and gender-changing Tiresias in the third part of the poem is linked on the one hand to the notion of a decaying civilization ('I who have sat by Thebes below the wall/ And walked among the lowest of the dead') and on the other to an indifferent sexual encounter between a typist and a clerk witnessed by the seer and interpreted as a sign of the times ('I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dug/ Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest').<sup>6</sup> The conjunction between disability, supernatural gifts, sexual promiscuousness and civilizational decadence sums up both the metaphoric aura by which modernism courts the trope of disability, and the prevailing ableist representations of the body that linger around it.

While there is a propensity to tropes of disability in other modernist poets who project a bleak vision of culture (Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, etc.), the same tropes may be used, in other cultural contexts, as means to re-establish a national community, albeit one that doesn't refrain from eugenic prejudice. This is the case with a large part of Romanian modernism in the 1920s and 1930s, when the country saw unprecedented political and economic thriving, while it processed its anxiety of 'synchronization' with the advanced West and the trouble of preserving its fragile territorial expansion after World War I. The herald of Romanian modernism in the interwar period was Tudor Arghezi (1880-1967), whose choice of subject in the volume *Flori de mucigai* [*Flowers of Mold*] (1931) was seen as aesthetically bold, primarily in terms of rejuvenation of the canonical vocabulary of poetry through elements of argot, terms referring to (non-canonical) sexuality and a preference for discomforting images of ailing bodies. His was also a radical and polemical choice of poetic space and social environment, as he referred to the population of prisons, hospitals, the class of the socially destitute and the universe of the disabled persons. However, the aesthetic boldness of Arghezi's poems does not amount to social criticism. Instead, the attention he gives to the marginal and to the forgotten is invested with tropes of the compassion and of the sublime, as it happens in the poem 'Sfântul' [The Saint], dedicated to a severely disabled man turned into a county fair attraction. As the title of the poem indicates, Arghezi's choice is to convert suffering into sainthood. The nonverbal appearance of the ailing man is likened to the unsettling presence of a lonely and clumsy God who has yet to create the world: 'In his voice of a mute / Mumbles the Word from the beginning of time / Stumbling cross-eyed above the water'.<sup>7</sup> The presence of disability is also relevant from a formal point of view, reflected in an idiosyncratic treatment of prosody. While retaining the convention of rhyme, Arghezi discards even measure and rhythmic symmetry and therefore renounces the traditional imperative of melodiousness. Shedding aside the myth of inspiration, Arghezi stresses instead the poet's hard work in crafting his lines and sees the poet's work as real, concrete, material.<sup>8</sup> The image of the disabled man whose suffering calls to mind a disabled divinity striving hard to create something out of nothing might also be a metaphoric image of the poet applying himself to his craft. But, while ennobling the image of the disabled people by comparing them either to a saint or to an artist, the trope of the sublime in the end of the poem also excludes the 'foreign'

<sup>5</sup> Davidson, 'Disability Poetics', 584.

<sup>6</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 146.

<sup>7</sup> Tudor Arghezi, *Cuvinte potrivite* [Matching Words], ed. Mitzura Arghezi and Traian Radu (Bucharest: Minerva, 1990), 131. The original reads: 'În glasul lui de mut/ Bombăne Cuvântul dintru început/ Ce se purta chiorâș pe ape.' Unless indicated otherwise, the translations are mine.

<sup>8</sup> Alexandru George, *Marele Alpha* [The Great Alpha] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2005), 142.

corporeal shape from the social body. The ‘national’ flavour is added through the reference to the county fair that parades ailing people for the entertainment of the crowds, a fixture in much of Romanian early modern literature. The community at the county fair celebrates its ‘sanity’ by exposing the ailing body (‘Hear him pass!’, the narrator calls out in Arghezi’s poem) as marginal, whose presence contributes to the consolidation of a ‘normal’ world, in which disability is by necessity something alien. In reading the poem as a representation of (national) community seen from its margins, one sees that modernism breeds community with the price of excluding the marginal.

The poetics of disability in modernism looks differently for the disabled poets themselves. For many of them, social stigma, conjugated with the imperative of disembodied aestheticism, meant that their disability would not be a topic of their poetry. Modernism was, however, challenged from within by disabled poets who sought to use the structural ambiguities of modernism to engage creatively their own bodily predicament. I will choose, again, two cases from two different cultural spaces, the United States and Romania, which complete each other through the various paths they take to construct an embodied poetics of disability: the first by using the poem as a corporeal map, the second by converting avant-garde radicalism into a visionary image of the aching body. An illuminating case is that of Larry Eigner (1927-1996), an important modernist poet from the Black Mountain School, who integrated his condition (he had been afflicted by cerebral palsy since birth) into his poetry. His poems are characterized by a striking economy and integrate seemingly anodyne observations and reflections on space and time, ‘defamiliarized’ through patterns of sequenced notation: ‘a finger / wet in the wind // clouds are // driven through ahead / changing figure // fragments distances slides’.<sup>9</sup> The sudden breaks between words and lines were graphically marked on the page with a mechanic typewriter that helped this severely tried poet, with the use of his right index, to type his poems, and this is why his poems may be described as ‘giv[ing] space a material aspect by creating a visual form’.<sup>10</sup> The poet’s limited mobility outside the house made him focus on a limited view of nature decomposed into shadow and light, form and movement, while the limited mobility of his fingers prompted him to produce his visually patterned texts arranged on the page like a ‘cognitive map of his relationship to space, phenomena, and physiology’.<sup>11</sup>

Another example of disability poetics, coming from Romania, would be Max Blecher’s (1909-1938), a novelist and poet who wrote in the 1930s and was afflicted by tuberculosis of the spine. His only volume of poetry is called *Corp transparent* [*Transparent Body*] (1934), which may be an allusion to the X-ray images of the torso that a TB patient was required to make, but which may also be referring to the condition of the medicalized body, perfectly available for all to see, open and vulnerable. An earlier poem, ‘L’inextricable position’ [The Inextricable Position] (1933),<sup>12</sup> describes in the associative, oneiric manner of the surrealists a scene filled with many of the disabled person’s anxieties. For those unfamiliar with Blecher’s medical history (especially his medical sojourn in a resort where patients could drive alone their horse-drawn carriages, Berck, in Northern France), the central image of a horse looking back at an invalid may

<sup>9</sup> Larry Eigner, *The World and Its Streets, Places* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1977), 18.

<sup>10</sup> George Hart, *Finding the Weight of Things: Larry Eigner’s Ecrippoeitics* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2022), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Davidson, ‘Disability Poetics’, 597.

<sup>12</sup> The poem was first published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* 2.6 (June 1933), 25. The magazine directed by André Breton hosted the production of the surrealist movement since 1930.

appear enigmatic. But the poem is merely a veiled projection of life in Berck,<sup>13</sup> where Blecher spent three years: a horse turns its head and the eye reflects paleness and sufferance (of the sick person holding its reins), while a bout of pain pierces the chest, reminding one that 'I myself was tied to the flesh by new aches and various forms of ugliness'.<sup>14</sup> This meaning remained probably obscure to his initial readers, who recognized the obvious marks of surrealism: narration of random episodes, seemingly free association of words, oneiric scenario. But the poem only gains its meaning when the avant-gardist tropes appear as a front for a concealed story of illness, exposure and discomfort. The poem 'The Inextricable Position' hijacks the poetics of surrealism for its own purposes. Just as with Eigner, Blecher's poetry represents a return of embodiment in modernism, but without actually embracing a militant position toward the acceptance of disabled people. It may be because of the prevalent autonomy of the aesthetic in modernism, or simply because the disability rights movement had not matured enough in the 1930s in Romania. However, disability poetics grew as a form of political protest throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Deaf Poetry and Its Challenges

The history of the Deaf<sup>15</sup> movement is instructive on how the marginalized community of the deaf people has had to fight for generations to overcome systemic and personal prejudice and to achieve recognition for their culture in its various forms of expression. The struggle for recognition had to be fought in the name of communities of deaf persons such as Martha's Vineyard, a thriving community where deaf and hearing people together, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 19<sup>th</sup>, created a local culture in sign language.<sup>16</sup> From early educators and promoters of Deaf culture such as Pedro Ponce de León in the 16<sup>th</sup> and Charles-Michel de l'Épée in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to the educator activism of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the argument expanded for a Deaf culture that was striving towards more public and sophisticated ways of self-affirmation.<sup>17</sup> It was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the most intense and successful activism for Deaf culture took place, when not only were laws written to protect against discrimination, but the take on disability was reversed by noted theorists and the idea of 'Deaf gain' came to replace the 'invalidity model' of representing the experience of disabled people.<sup>18</sup>

The Deaf artistic movement went hand in hand with the educational and political activism to protect this community model, facing the same challenges and fighting with specific means to overcome them. For centuries, the Deaf poets' challenge was to prove

<sup>13</sup> Doris Mironescu, *Viata lui M. Blecher. Împotriva biografiei* [Life of M. Blecher: Against Biography] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2018), 134-5.

<sup>14</sup> M. Blecher, *Opere* [Works], ed. Doris Mironescu (Bucharest: Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2017), 543. The original French reads: 'moi-même j'étais lié à la chair par des douleurs et des laideurs nouvelles'.

<sup>15</sup> The use of the capital 'D' in 'Deaf poetry' or 'Deaf culture' refers to the cultural autonomy reclaimed by persons whose first or primary language is a sign language.

<sup>16</sup> See Edmund West, 'Martha's Vineyard', *British Deaf News*, 20 December 2019; available at <https://www.britishdeafnews.co.uk/marthas-vineyard/> [accessed 15 October 2022].

<sup>17</sup> See *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship*, ed. John Vickrey van Cleve (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> For more on the concept of 'deaf gain', first elaborated by H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph Murray to combat the pejorative implications of the medical reference to 'hearing loss' and others, see Janelle Legg and Sophie Sok, 'From "Hearing Loss" to Deaf Gain', *ASL News* 14.1 (Fall 2012): 1-8.

that their impairment does not preclude them from writing poetry just as good as any other hearing poet's. Writing inside an 'audist' tradition, they had to assert their right to cultural existence and compete with hearing poets on their turf. Their struggle referred to the limitations imposed on them not so much by their disabilities, but by 'the obstacles and barriers that are created by society itself' that are described in Mike Oliver's 'social model' of understanding disability.<sup>19</sup> As Davis puts it, the division between normalcy and disability 'is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology or thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances'.<sup>20</sup> Deaf poets set out to challenge the contemporary 'cultural definition of poetry that was inextricably linked to orality',<sup>21</sup> since much of the traditional language of poetry relied on metaphors of 'voice', 'hearing', 'sonorous harmony', and worked with notions like rhythm, metric foot, full-sounding rhyme and so on. The tensions were already present in the work of Deaf poets from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as John Carlin, Amos J. Draper, and Laura C. Redden,<sup>22</sup> who polemically engaged with the not-so-tacit reproach directed at them for venturing into a realm belonging to the 'fully sentient'. But they could only resort to conforming to already existing norms and achieving a 'competitive' mastery of the modernist form already elaborated by hearing poets.

The triumph of free-verse poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century notably reduced much of these apprehensions, but the autonomist, disembodied poetics of the ruling modernism meant that the questions related to the limitations of the ailing body or the perceptions of the differently-abled were still marginalized. The task for a consciousness of disability that the Deaf poets felt compelled to adopt was 'to reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal'.<sup>23</sup> One solution for Deaf poets was found, toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in poetry written or rather performed in sign language, and especially, given the progresses of technology, in renderings of poetry that had not very much to do with voice, without lacking, for that reason, originality, complexity or authenticity. The work and performances of Ella Mae Lentz, Clayton Valli, Peter Cook, Debbie Rennie and other Deaf poets demonstrate how poetry created in sign language may accommodate not just the requirements of figural speech, but also the bold proposition of a 'visual-kinetic' poetic experience<sup>24</sup> and the nuances of dialect<sup>25</sup>. Signed poetry greatly enhances the role of the body in communication, as a form of 'writing with the body',<sup>26</sup> and at the same time questions the idea that the voice is the seat of one's identity. An important ally here was French philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose critique of phonocentrism, a

<sup>19</sup> Arleen Ionescu and Anne-Marie Callus, 'Encounters between Disability Studies and Critical Trauma Studies: Introduction', *Word and Text – A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 8 (2018): 5.

<sup>20</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Esmail, *Reading Victorian Deafness: Signs and Sounds in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2013), 23.

<sup>22</sup> John Lee Clark, 'Melodies Unheard: Deaf Poets and Their Subversion of the "Sound" Theory of Poetry', *Sign Language Studies* 7.1 (2006): 4.

<sup>23</sup> Lennard J. Davis, 'Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2017), 12.

<sup>24</sup> H-Dirksen L. Bauman, 'Getting out of Line: Toward a Visual and Cinematic Poetics of ASL', in *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson and Heidi M. Rose (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 95-117.

<sup>25</sup> Davidson, 'Disability Poetics', 594.

<sup>26</sup> Jessica White, 'Can I Do My Words? On the Poetics of Deafness', *Cordite Poetry Review* 50 (2015); available at <http://cordite.org.au/essays/on-the-poetics-of-deafness/> [accessed 10 August 2022].

deconstruction of the auraticism of voice in the 'oralist' tradition,<sup>27</sup> gave Deaf poets an impetus for a cognitive as well as a political thrust forward. Since Deaf poetry cultivates its own language and media for communication, this means that, with all its considerable stylistic variety and capacity for innovation, it embraces a political vocation, concentrating on resistance and community formation. This kind of response is reflective of a widespread dissatisfaction with the modernist project in disability writing, particularly with its non-political commitment. If postmodernism represented for a while a hope for a recalibration of modernism, the expectations attached to it weren't met, and one major charge against the cultural dominance of postmodernism came from feminist and postcolonial studies, queer theory, and identity politics in general.<sup>28</sup> Postmodern theory appears to share the same ableist prejudice as modernism, if one is to look only at the career of the 'schizophrenia' metaphor in Ihab Hassan, Fredric Jameson or Jean Baudrillard.<sup>29</sup> This is why, around the year 2010, calls for a new language of critique and a new start to literary periodization brought about metamodernism.

## Metamodernist Poetics and Disability

Intensely theorized since 2010, metamodernism has been proposed as the codename for an array of aesthetic manifestations in literature, visual arts, architecture, film, etc. sharing the same 'structure of feeling' that interacts in various ways with the formal and political legacy of modernism and postmodernism, respectively.<sup>30</sup> The corollary to this proposition has been a need to return to literary periodization and to an understanding of modernism as form tied to a specific cultural moment rather than to any type of modernity spanning deep time. In James and Seshagiri, a dehistoricised modernism 'threatens to betray its own need to be replaced'.<sup>31</sup> Following this prospective vision of metamodernism as something urgently in the making, settling beyond, against and in between the historicized cultural models of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modernism and postmodernism, it is important not to attribute it a much too fluid and imprecise aspect. The initial theorists who set out to describe metamodernism were keen to claim that they did not support a new philosophy or aesthetic programme, but that the distinctive 'notes' of metamodernism could be found in various places in 21<sup>st</sup> century culture and that they could be discussed as revolving around a newfound historicity, quest for affect and for depth in a post-cynical epistemological frame of thought.

Among these three, the one that interests me in this essay is the one most connected to the body and therefore to disability, that is metamodern affect. The dimension of affect is described by Alison Gibbons by turning on its head Fredric Jameson's famous phrase about 'the waning of affect' in postmodernism. To quote

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<sup>27</sup> Jennifer L. Nelson, 'Textual Bodies, Bodily Texts', in *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson and Heidi M. Rose (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 120.

<sup>28</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 166.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Prendergast, 'The Unexceptional Schizophrenic: A Post-Postmodern Introduction', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davies (New York: Routledge, 2017), 234.

<sup>30</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2 (2010): 2.

<sup>31</sup> David James and Urmila Seshagiri, 'Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution', *PMLA* 129.1 (2014): 90.

Gibbons, ‘the return of affect’ in the last decades refers not to a sentimentalizing disposition or a renunciation to the critical distance toward one’s emotions, but instead to ‘a will and ability to process intensities so that we can articulate meaningful emotional reactions or cognitive responses to today’s social situation’ amounting to a re-modernizing ‘hermeneutics of the self’.<sup>32</sup> Between (postmodern) irony and (modernist) authenticity, Gibbons advocates for ‘with-ness’ and relationality toward one’s feelings and toward others.<sup>33</sup> There are similarities between this post-positivist model of identity and the one envisaged by the poetics of disability in recent Deaf poets like Richard Antrobus or Jessica White, especially in what constitutes the outspoken authenticity and sense of community. A metamodern literature of disability, therefore, should be both engaged, supportive of the plight of a community, and at the same time aesthetically detached through techniques such as allegory, metaphor and play upon multiple languages.<sup>34</sup> In order to assess the potential of a metamodern literature of disability, I now turn to Ilya Kaminsky and his poetry volume *Deaf Republic*.

### Disability, Political Allegory, and Affect

Kaminsky is a hard-of-hearing American poet coming from the Jewish community of Ukraine. Born in Odessa, in 1977, he became a political refugee to the U.S. in 1993, and afterwards established himself as a strikingly original poet following the publishing of *Dancing in Odessa* (2004). There, he creates for himself a lively, colourful family mythology and invokes an East European literary genealogy that includes Isaac Babel, Osip Mandelstam, and Paul Celan. His poems of love, anguish and exile are told in a style characterized by an original associative imagery, a preoccupation with rhythm, expressed either in jubilant or mournful cadences, the intermittent recourse to East European folk traditions, and a vivid memory of Jewish ritual and antisemitic persecution, a bold choice of metaphor which makes the poems sometimes difficult, toying with the incomprehensible. Deafness and especially silence were the main themes of Kaminsky’s volume, as they came to express the strangeness of losing his hearing at four, the trauma of departure, the increased intimacy with one’s own body associated with disability. The idea of deafness was mobilized in various metaphoric ways, not least by seeing his native city as a ‘country where everyone was deaf’, since ‘[i]n Odessa, language always involved gestures’.<sup>35</sup> It was a metaphor of the expanded self, reaching the dimensions of a country, which fit very well in a volume of self-discovery, set to transform the shattered identity of an exile into a worlded picture of the self. This kind of search for identity and earnest return to history takes part in what Vermeulen and van den Akker call the ‘structure of feeling’ of metamodernism.<sup>36</sup> A form of non-cynical reconsideration of the past, a use of myth at the same time

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<sup>32</sup> Alison Gibbons, ‘Metamodern Affect’, in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*, ed. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 85.

<sup>33</sup> Gibbons, ‘Metamodern Affect’, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Antony Rowland discusses these relations in terms of ‘committed and autonomous art’. Antony Rowland, *Metamodernism and Contemporary British Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 59-68.

<sup>35</sup> Ilya Kaminsky, *Dancing in Odessa* (North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2004), 68-9.

<sup>36</sup> Vermeulen, van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, 2.

committed and detached are to be found in *Dancing in Odessa*, helping the case for considering Kaminsky a metamodernist author.

Thirteen years later, in 2019, Kaminsky published his second full volume, *Deaf Republic*, a book that may be presented as a political allegory of war, oppression and resistance, but also a meditation on deafness, self-expression and the body. The texts are articulated in the shape of a theatrical play, with a prologue and an epilogue that highlight the contemporary relevance of the story. The poems that begin and end the volume bring the story closer to the American reader by referring, in unmistakable allusions, to 'the house of money / in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money'<sup>37</sup> and its culpable indifference to foreign wars or to tragedies that happen closer to home, such as the killing of unarmed Black young men by the American police. The core story of *Deaf Republic* speaks about the military occupation of a town with a Slavic-sounding name, Vasenka, by foreign soldiers, seemingly a veiled reference to the prolonged conflict in the Donbas region, which took a more dramatic turn in February 2022, with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.<sup>38</sup> This goes to confirm the volume's use of Michael Rothberg's 'multidirectional memory'<sup>39</sup> by connecting tales of injustice from Eastern Europe and the United States, a connection similarly suggested by the Slavic, respectively Hispanic-sounding names (echoing the languages spoken in places where Kaminsky lived or lives) of the protagonists of the tragic story in Act One, Sonya and Alphonso Barabinski<sup>40</sup>.

While the poetic impetus and metaphorical prowess are the same in this book as in *Dancing in Odessa*, the volume is organized according to a coherent dramatic script, making good use of character interaction, moral conflict and emotional intensity. The starting event of the insurgency in *Deaf Republic* is the violent death of a deaf boy, Petya, shot and killed at a puppet show in the central square of the town, after he imprudently assumed the irreverence of the characters on the stage in confronting the real-life sergeant of the invading troops. The puppeteers, Sonya and Alphonso, probably feel responsible for his death and enact a poetic form of revolt inspired directly from their work: they incite the audience to act as if they were all deaf and refuse to hear anything the foreign soldiers say. Led by the pregnant Sonya, disobedience spreads across town, with people communicating in sign language among themselves and displaying puppets on the doorknobs and porches of those arrested. As the resistance movement she initiated grows, Sonya gives birth to a little girl, Anushka, and is afterwards killed by the soldiers for her insubordination, while her story and her fight are continued by her husband, grieving for his dead wife and caring for the child in his arms. After Alfonso himself, killing a soldier in revenge for his loss, is arrested and hanged by the soldiers, his daughter and the insurgency are taken over by Momma

<sup>37</sup> Ilya Kaminsky, *Deaf Republic* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2019), 3. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *DR*, with page numbers in the text.

<sup>38</sup> The timeliness of the volume was sensed by many readers, with at least one theatre, the National Theatre of Craiova, Romania, presenting the volume in a play reading in March of 2022: <https://tncms.ro/en/2022/03/22/adunarea-poetilor-poveste-de-dragoste-si-razboi-din-tara-surda/>. However, when considering the direct connection of *Deaf Republic* to the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, still in progress in 2022, it should be noted that the book had been in the works since at least 2007, with extracts from it published in magazines in 2009, 2013, and 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>40</sup> The observation was communicated to me in private conversation by the translator of the Romanian version of the volume, Gabriel Daliş.

Galya Armolinskaya, a master puppeteer and brothel matron. Her staff at the puppet theatre double as prostitutes, luring foreign soldiers in unguarded places to assassinate them. Galya's protest is more effective, vivid and easy-going than that of the Barabinskis, for she is a character larger than life, cursing her townsfolk for their cowardice and exuberantly expressing her love for Anushka, from whom she draws her fighting strength. But the active resistance hardens the aggressiveness of the soldiers, who start detaining and killing more people and bombing a new store each morning. When the soldiers come for her, Galya herself is abandoned by the increasingly fearful townspeople who think that the troubles of resistance are too much to bear and want quietness. The occupation is set to continue, without a clear indication of how it is going to unfold. After she is killed by the soldiers, Galya is denied the common acts of courtesy to the dead by the citizens. The majority of the people become passive and compliant. Others teach their children, at night, to sign, which the children then expand limitlessly: '*Don't be afraid, a child signs to a tree, a door*' (DR, 71).

As indicated by its title, *Deaf Republic* is deeply concerned with the idea of disability, which occupies a central place in the book, as the essential metaphor for resistance to oppression. By imagining a place where voluntary deafness could be seen as an act of insurgency, Kaminsky speculates on the political dimension which is indissociable from the poetics of disability. One has to wonder whether this political value given to deafness (resistance to occupation of one's country by an invading force) does not actually amount to a diminution of the truly political gains that Deaf poets have for decades struggled to obtain in their fight against a discriminating ideology of normalcy. In my interpretation, Kaminsky aims to discuss together the politics of Deaf culture and the overall question of moral responsibility in front of violence, cruelty, oppression, without limiting himself either to a political allegory of war, or to a minority culture plight. Deafness has two competing meanings in his book, a political and an affective one, both presented in coherent series of metaphors and both participating in the similarly political fight of the deaf persons against ableist ideology. The presence of these two different meanings together is part of a poetic strategy that sees deafness not as disability, nor as privilege, but as a chance among others to have a fuller experience of the world.

The first and most obvious sense given in the book to deafness is that of a difference which may be weaponized for a just cause. In sign of protest to an abject act of violence, the people of Vasenka declare themselves deaf so as to no longer hear what the invading army is telling them. This 'meaning-rich, power-filled refusal of sound',<sup>41</sup> might be considered empowering as a gesture of affirmation of a minority culture, but it is probably more accurate to decipher here a willed ambiguity, a desire to destabilize speech habits and to display the creative freedom of poetic language when describing disability. The idea of disability as agency is at the center of *Deaf Republic*, echoed by the disputes between the occupiers and the insurgents. While the foreign soldiers decree that deafness is 'a contagious disease' (DR, 22), the more exuberant rebels such as Momma Galya claim that 'deafness isn't an illness! It's a sexual position!' (DR, 52), thus emphasizing the element of choice involved and the positivity of deafness. In considering deafness, metaphorically, a preference, the author implicitly describes disability as a form of standing up to ableist symbolic violence. Deafness is then

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<sup>41</sup> Emily Kidd White, 'Images of Reach, Range, and Recognition: Thinking about emotions in the study of international law', in *Research Handbook on Law and Emotions*, ed. Susan L. Bandes, Jody L. Madeira, Kathryn D. Temple, and Emily Kidd White (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2021), 493.

invested with actual power, which is the power to create community. The citizens of Vasenka have a concrete indicator of their togetherness in front of the threat, the option of not hearing, which some of them come to celebrate effusively: 'thank you for deafness, / Lord, such fire / from a match you never lit' (*DR*, 15).

There is a strong component of disability politics in this volume, and it intermingles with the insurrectional politics of the town of Vasenka. For instance, deafness is strongly dissociated from silence, while other concepts, like voice, or listening, that are traditionally seen as incompatible with deafness, sometimes berated in Deaf literature, are reclaimed, polemically, for deaf people. For the first, there is the powerful dictum of the author in the Notes: 'The deaf don't believe in silence. Silence is the invention of the hearing' (*DR*, 77). The sentences articulate a refusal, made from the cultural position of the deaf community, to be silenced or associated with lack of will, of aspirations, or of message. They also speak of the legitimate affirmation by deaf persons of their particular, but full experience of the world, which includes various degrees of interaction with sound, rhythm, or vibration. There is a history of coercion endured by deaf people in their quest for autonomy and language rights, especially visible in the anti-sign language, 'oralist' ideology advocated, among others, by Alexander Graham Bell in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>42</sup> In a short poem that condenses this idea, Kaminsky defines silence as 'a stick I beat you with, I beat you with a stick, voice, beat you/ until you speak, until you/ speak right' (*DR*, 61), thus alluding to the historic misconception of deaf people as 'not speaking right', when in effect theirs is a 'history of the hearing not listening right'.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, in his allegory of deafness, the author uses intentionally an 'insensitive' ableist vocabulary to refer to moral attributes such as answerability or self-affirmation, speculating on the paradoxes that emerge: for instance, 'you are alive/ therefore something in you listens' (*DR*, 13). In this way, Kaminsky destabilizes hurtful clichés of common speech and showcases the freedom of poetry to perform metaphorical slight-of-hands that transform disability into plentifulness.

While the first meaning of deafness in Kaminsky's volume is political, the second is related to affect, as it refers to the enhanced awareness of one's body permitted by deafness and the resulting enhanced awareness of the body's place in the world. On the one hand, disability commands a different kind of relationship with the body than in the case of the 'normal' body, and the very fact that the disabled persons can often compare both experiences is revealing. On the other hand, in communicating through sign language, deaf persons involve their bodies in a larger proportion than the speaking when using their voice, an argument often made by critics who discuss Deaf literature.<sup>44</sup> In any event, Kaminsky also links disability to a heightened consciousness of corporeality: 'Deafness nails us into our bodies' (*DR*, 63), claims Galya. The idea that deafness may be a weapon, that it may be more than a whimsical, symbolical and inefficient form of protest in the face of a concrete threat comes from the possibility that

<sup>42</sup> Esmail, *Reading Victorian*, 49.

<sup>43</sup> Raymond Antrobus, 'Deaf Republic by Ilya Kaminsky Review: How to Defy a Dictatorship without Saying a Word', *The Telegraph*, 11 July 2019; available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/deaf-republic-ilya-kaminsky-review-love-war-puppeteers/> [accessed 20 August 2022].

<sup>44</sup> For instance, 'in sign literature, the same hands, face and whole body used for everyday eating, sneezing, and lifting are transformed into the kinetic shape and skin of the poem'. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson and Heidi M. Rose, 'Introduction', in *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson and Heidi M. Rose (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 2.

being more present in one's own body leads to an emboldened, empowered humanity. Galya is a well-suited character to operate this empowerment. As I already mentioned, she is a brothel matron and a puppeteer turned resistance fighter, therefore a woman with an intimate knowledge of love and death. To her, the body, while fragile and vulnerable, is an instrument for pleasure and death, as she is repeatedly described having eroticized and menacing attributes ('we try not to look at her breasts – / they are everywhere, / nipples like bullets' – *DR*, 51), a goddess Gaya-like figure giving life to some, while killing others. Consumed with love for the infant Anushka, she comes to see knowledge as something that comes from the senses and to understand superior knowledge as having a corporeal nature: 'a child learns the world by putting it in her mouth' (*DR*, 65). Galya's cult of the body is so extreme that she prefers to reverse classic ableist imagery in order to scorn the ideology of the superiority of the spirit over the body. The instinctive truth that children can easily see is that people are not just the result of an uneasy encounter between a soul and a body: 'Anushka / speaks to homeless dogs as if they are men, / speaks to men / as if they are men / and not just souls on crutches of bone' (*DR*, 63). The canonical personhood defined as body-plus-soul becomes here an image of disability, since the 'soul' uses the 'body' as a prop and hides behind it to excuse its own cowardice. The body which idealizes its own soul, i.e., its reason, intelligence, spirit, etc., neglects its most intimate component, corporeality, and its ties to the world. The 'soul on crutches of bone' designates an ideology that does not perform the necessary connection between the two, letting the spirit be dependent on the body and neglecting the body's capacity for sensing, reacting, and performing a moral function. To further highlight this disparity, Galya repeatedly calls out the body as if it were a character in itself: 'Body, they blame you for all things and they/ seek in the body what does not live in the body' (*DR*, 65). Indeed, Galya plays with grammar and artificially detaches the body from personhood, or rather prefers to see the locutory subject (the 'I') as an other: 'Yet, I am. I exists. I has / a body' (*DR*, 67). The aim of this grammatical severance of the 'I' from the body is to underline the necessity to account for corporeality when referring to personhood. It is suggestive that, prior to that, another character, Alphonso, discovered his own bodily identity and reiterated it exactly at the moment when he declared his answerability to the crimes and violence in his town. Being subject to the threat of death in bombardments, he is aware of his vulnerable corporeality and suddenly resorts to the same uneasy grammar of the foreign 'I': 'I, a body, adult male, awaits to / explode like a hand grenade' (*DR*, 25). The choice to represent the self as, primarily, a body is also an ethical one, as it highlights the solidarity felt in the presence of other bodies vulnerable to the same threat. The injured body discovers 'with-ness' by acknowledging its own perishable nature. Just as disability breeds community, the corporeal conscience rediscovered under bombardment is at the same time the conscience of being one among others. And just as the townspeople of Vasenka declare themselves deaf in defiance of the enemy, so does Alphonso choose to identify himself as 'a body', defiantly refusing the 'camouflage of speech' (*DR*, 20).

Another important way to explore corporeality is by making his characters puppeteers and having the deaf boy that is killed at the beginning of his book a spectator at a puppet show. At the scene of the crime, 'a puppet lies on the cement, mouth filling with snow' (*DR*, 17). Puppets are seen as inert bodies, vulnerable or wounded. They function as symbols of protest, crying out without a voice against murder and injustice. As already mentioned, puppets are displayed at the doorknobs and on the porches of

those killed or arrested. At night, and even after the revolt is crushed, puppets emit warnings with 'the squeak of strings and the *tap tap* of the wooden fists against the wall' (*DR*, 71). And hanged people resemble puppets on strings, which means that they participate, even in death, at the collective protest: 'The puppet of his hand dances' (*DR*, 44). Their symbolic value is underlined by the fact that puppets are meant to be exposed, both at the theatre and on the streets of the occupied town. As such, they represent the subversive body, demonstrating against oppression even as it lies still.

But probably the most compelling argument for the relationality of bodies and puppets is the fact that, in sign language, the body is showcased and as such evokes, with several important differences, the theatrical presence of the puppet on a stage. Essentially, the body is heavily invested in sign language, with the hands gesturing to other parts of the body and thus creating visual images of actions and notions. In the process of creating meaning, the signing body is made to theatrically perform symbolic actions. Sign language involves the body in 'citable moves'<sup>45</sup> which function detached from one another and from the continuum of everyday activities.

In *Deaf Republic* a characteristic mix of American, Ukrainian, Russian and Byelorussian Sign Language is present,<sup>46</sup> featuring as a visual backdrop to some of the main dramatic episodes. They function as replicas to the events narrated, singling out their essential element or summarizing them metaphorically, for instance when representing new life, starting a revolution and dying through the same sign of the flickering match. Sign language is then meant to bring forth, by bodily gestures, a capacity for polysemantic representation that remakes the relationship between the body and the world, 'precisely by restaging the relation between words and deeds, words and things'.<sup>47</sup> The inconvenience is, in this case, that puppetry uses inert instruments, while the signing body is an autonomous entity, actively performing its relationship with the world. But for Kaminsky the puppet itself is alive in some of the poems in *Deaf Republic*. The 'dance' of the 'wordless' puppet at the end of a rope is equated, in the most emotionally charged poem in the book, with the last breath drawn by those condemned to die, which goes to say that the generally human struggle for one more breath of air, for the continuation of life, is at the same time a desperate drive for self-expression. The signing body of man before God and the signs made by a puppet on a stage amount to a pathetic reaffirmation of life, communication and meaning: 'Such is the story made of stubbornness and a little air – / a story signed by those who danced wordless before God. / Who whirled and leapt. / Giving voice to consonants that rise / with no protection but each other's ears' (*DR*, 47). The significance of the puppets in *Deaf Republic*, therefore, is to strengthen the centrality of the body in Deaf literature, both existentially and for poetic communication, reenforcing a metamodern commitment through affect. The oppressed signing body becomes a stand-in for all bodies, and the vulnerability of disability underlines the human tragedy in front of military and symbolic violence and therefore commands an increased affective responsivity from the part of the reader, both in the face of systemic oppression and discrimination, and in the presence of ongoing wars around the globe.

<sup>45</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Preface: Utopian Gestures', in *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson and Heidi M. Rose (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), xx.

<sup>46</sup> Antrobus, 'Deaf Republic'.

<sup>47</sup> Mitchell, 'Preface: Utopian Gestures', xxi.

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## **Poezie, dizabilitate și metamodernism. Volumul *Republica surdă* al lui Ilya Kaminsky**

Concentrându-se pe volumul de poezie al lui Ilya Kaminsky intitulat *Deaf Republic* (2019), tradus în limba română ca *Republica surdă* (2021), acest articol plasează poetica contemporană a dizabilității la intersecția dintre modernism și metamodernism. Prima parte face o evaluare a poeziei moderniste a dizabilității create pe fundalul unei ideologii abiliste prevalente, așa cum s-a regăsit aceasta în tradiția americană și cea românească și examinează modul în care poezii cu dizabilități reacționează în mod creativ sau politic la tradiția de marginalizare la care au fost supuși. Un loc special este acordat poeziei surde/ surzilor și limitelor pe care trebuie să le depășească atât la nivel creativ cât și social. Cea de-a doua parte a eseului introduce conceptul de afect metamodern pentru a configura o poetică a dizabilității în secolul XXI care depășește dificultățile scriiturii moderniste și codurile de lectură printr-o nouă modalitate de a concepe corporalitatea, opresiunea și relaționalitatea.