

INTRODUCTION for ROBERT PINSKY's Plenary Speech "THE FATE of THE MODERN" APsaA Jan 18th 2008 Waldorf Astoria, NYC.

By Rosemary Balsam

It is with great pleasure I undertake the honor of introducing our plenary speaker for this morning, the eminent poet and literary critic, Robert Pinsky.

Most will know who he is, recognize him from knowledge of his brilliant body of work and his publications in countless anthologies and magazines such as the *New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* or *The Harvard Book of Contemporary Poetry*. He currently teaches at Boston University, was poetry editor for *The New Republic* (1979–1986) and now for the online magazine *Slate*.

Robert Pinsky appears regularly on TV on NPR, and the internet being interviewed and talking about his own and others' poetry and writing. His occasional indulgence in wordsmithery antics may also be familiar, as when he grandly moderated the classic Comedy Central "Meta-Phor-Off" between Sean Penn and Stephen Colbert, the subtitle of which was: "Shall I nail thee to a summer's day." In this role, heavily taunted by Colbert, he pronounced of a rival whose first name is also Robert, "Frost you're toast!"

Robert Pinsky was born in Long Branch, New Jersey. He attended Rutgers University, and in 1966 received his Ph.D from Stanford University. Of his first book of poetry in 1975, *Sadness and Happiness* William Pritchard declared in the *TLS* that it was "the best work by any younger poet within recent memory". This book has his seventeen-page discursive poem, "Essay on Psychiatrists." (Little did he know then that he was already

qualifying to be our plenary speaker to-day!) Hugh Kenner has described Pinsky's ambition as "nothing less than the recovery for language of a whole domain of mute and familiar experience." Countless prizes and awards, membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and world wide recognition have poured in for works in each decade: such as The Explanation of America, 1980, (which contains the poet's life lessons to his daughter about past, present and a future in creation); or his History of My Heart 1985, (whose title poem speaks to his childhood); or his critical essays and his 1994 translation of Dante's Inferno. Notable collections of his poetry such as The Figured Wheel (1996) or Jersey Rain (2000) have been followed most recently by Gulf Music (2007). His pen is rarely still. This national public acclaim resulted in his being chosen as the 39th Poet Laureate of the United States for 1997–2000.

Through his "Favorite Poem Project" launched in 1997, the poet's democratic advocacy of others' interests in poetry and his generativity towards others in whom his invitation to read favorite poems aloud ignited the flames of their passion, confidence and reflected their deep enjoyment in poetry is a gift to the country and indeed to the world. There he helped create a national treasure in a Website and video archive where 1000s of everyday Americans explained their connections to their own favorite poems. When Pinsky writes about and speaks about his own and other people's experience of poetry his intense pleasure is infectious. He says; "Attention is rare and precious, and will always be in short supply, especially in its higher grades. The greatest reward for art may be not applause but genuine, unforced attention." He conveys an unbridled adolescent first love affair with Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium." He recites aloud:

"O sages standing in God's holy fire

*As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre
And be the singing-masters of my soul.”*

He says he didn't care less than at 18 what 'perne in a gyre' meant – it just sounded wonderful. One of his Favorite Poem subjects, a handsome well-muscled Bostonian construction worker says he thought poetry a collection of words all out of order till he discovered meaning through reading and re-reading, Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." His responses evolve through his discovery forever to relish:

*“Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.”*

Pinsky talks in a 1997 interview about “the emphasis on reading aloud, on the pleasure of hearing the words of a poem . . . an emphasis on what athletes call ‘body knowledge.’ Poetry” he says,” has to do with two simultaneous kinds of knowing: through the vocal reality that comes out of the body and through a more abstract or disembodied kind of cognition.” Were he a psychoanalyst and one of our own guild, wouldn't we thrill to his art of listening and comprehension to his analysand's free associations?

I think that we are an apt audience for Robert Pinsky: not necessarily because of our scholarly connections to the world of literature, criticism or poetry. But like the ordinary Americans of Pinsky's Favorite Poem Project, we too labor in the fields of emotional experience, digging the earth, searching for words, sounds, rhythms to reverberate to and echo faint or thunderous emotions of our patients and our own to connect, to make sense of experience, to reach and to grasp. And there is always more that waits. Freud knew

that “The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious.”¹ He looked to the Greek poets to find fit metaphors for the center of the emotional world as he saw it. He also knew moments of mystery. Midway through his interpretation of the Irma dream, the foundational dream of his self-analysis and of his psychoanalytic theory, he adds a footnote about our limits: “...There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable -- the navel [Nabel], as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown” (p.111). I think that we share with this poet his own restless quest for understanding life itself, the navel, the life of the mind and its powerful interactional and expressional contents, and that this also opens us as an audience to appreciate this true master at work. Robert Pinsky’s writing for me is captured by the last lines of a poem called “Song” by my countryman Seamus Heaney, where he muses on nature’s search for just-right melodies and airs including the “mud-flowers of dialect” and the “immortelles” (or everlasting flowers) of “perfect pitch”:

*“And that moment when the bird sings very close
To the music of what happens.”*

Thank you, Robert Pinsky, for being here with us this morning.

¹ [... What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied."] Cited at the Freud Museum: “ This was first quoted by Philip R. Lehrman in "Freud's Contributions to Science" (in the journal *Harofe Haivri* Vol.1 (1940) and then cited by Lionel Trilling in "Freud and Literature" (in *The Liberal Imagination* [1940]). Credit for tracking this...goes to Jeffrey Berman. He believes the remark was made in 1928 to Professor Becker in Berlin.

