

ROBERT PINSKY ON TEACHING AND CENSORING POETRY

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Introduction

Throughout his career, three-time US Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky has been the recipient of some of the country's most important poetry prizes. These include the William Carlos Williams Award, the PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry, and the Lenore Marshall Prize. He has also been awarded fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. His seminal translation of Dante's *Inferno* won the Los Angeles Times Book Award and the Howard Morton Landon Prize. His use of sound in that translation has been the subject of scholarly research,¹ which is no surprise given the strong emphasis he places on the auditory quality of poetry. As Pinsky says in an essay on becoming a poet, '*Writeis* not precise. I work to produce not marks on paper but something more like a song or a monologue, or both'.²

The prizes awarded to Pinsky have served to confirm the accolades showered upon him by poets and critics. Nobel Laureate Louise Glück said, 'Pinsky is, among poets singled out for the highest praise, the poet read most closely and most anxiously'.³ He has been described 'as a poet with a vision of (and for) the nation as a whole',⁴ someone who 'has used both critical and poetic lenses to craft and fictionalize a landscape of small town America in an act of investigation and documentation

1 Hanson, K. (2003) Formal Variation in the Rhymes of Robert Pinsky's the *Inferno* of Dante, *Language and Literature* 12, pp. 309–337.

2 Pinsky, R. (2022) Change Trains at Summit: Becoming a Poet, *The Yale Review* 110, p. 28.

3 Glück, L. (1997) Story Tellers, *The American Poetry Review* 26, p. 9.

4 Archambeau, R. (2010) *Laureates and Heretics: Six Careers in American Poetry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), p. 82.

of sociologic and cultural aspects of American community'.⁵ The fact that 'Pinsky has devoted his career to promoting the idea of poetry as a social presence'⁶ is linked to what is perhaps the greatest honour bestowed upon him to date.

In this brief interview conducted at his home in Cambridge (MA), Pinsky discusses the teaching of poetry, the way teachers position themselves when teaching it, and how poetry is at times a victim of censorship in the USA.

The Interview

Xerri: Billy Collins has this poem called 'Introduction to Poetry'. It describes this experience of someone teaching a poem, but at the same time the students want to know what it means. Is it something that you've come across?

Pinsky: I know what he's talking about, and his poem tells it well. Billy's a very dark writer— not very aspirational. There's a dismissive quality in that poem, a critical note that he strikes very well— the poem is funny, sharp and true. On the other hand, sometime analysis can be exhilarating. But it should not come first. Analysis is not primary. And Billy's poem, with its images of a police interrogation, makes that point.

Xerri: Especially for young people?

Pinsky: Not especially for young people, just in general. Young people like meaning a lot. I have kids, I have grandkids. To say 'especially young people' is condescending to young people and underestimates the capacity of old people like me to get bored. I get bored very, very easily. That is one of my main vanities: I get bored more easily than most people. The kind of relentless, logic-chopping, inquisitorial approach that Billy parodies leads to a general, metastasized boredom.

5 Van Alstyne, J. (2018) Long Branch, USA: Robert Pinsky's Extended Metaphor for Tenuous Social Capital in America, *The Midwest Quarterly* 59, p. 203.

6 Gwiazda, P. (2008) "Beyond My Outrage or My Admiration": Postnational Critique in Robert Pinsky's *An Explanation of America*, *College Literature*, 35, p. 86.

Xerri: In your opinion, both as an academic and a poet, what kind of support should teachers be provided with at pre- and in-service levels?

Pinsky: I think liberal arts education needs to find its way to art— its second name. Without art, education turns to obedience training or conditioning. Maybe the study of humanities has declined because the problem is in the actual practice: bad teaching, or weak faith in it. The pleasure of it. The Homeric epics, the poems of Horace, the plays of Shakespeare, the poems of John Keats, the novels of Charles Dickens and George Elliot and Jane Austen, the novels of William Faulkner and Willa Cather, and the poems of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. That kind of material, and the innate, human craving for pleasure— for the teacher who understands the pleasure of art, it's like having a liquor store on a busy corner.

The present generation of scholars, at their worst, can resemble people whose grandparents and great grandparents had that liquor store on a busy corner. After a couple of generations, the inheritors got ideas. They started doing yoga and skateboarding, or they got interested in boutiques and specialty stores, and they neglected the core business that made the family successful. That's my covert, retail, working class, and some would say out-of-date way of being reactionary about the most arcane literary thinking.

Xerri: Some research indicates that teachers should ideally position themselves as readers and writers of poetry. Where do you stand on this?

Pinsky: Whatever one is teaching, you should have at least tried it. If you're teaching film, you should like watching film. All the better if you make a storyboard or shoot a video scene. If you're teaching kids how to play soccer or basketball, then yes you probably should have tried playing. Not that you have to be great at it. Good listeners to music likely have a little experience at the keyboard or with a guitar.

Xerri: It seems common sense, doesn't it? If you enjoy reading poetry, you're going to position yourself as a role model. You're first a reader of poetry before being a teacher of poetry. Students might pick on that, and your passion for the subject might be communicated to them.

Pinsky: The curriculum should reflect what the teacher believes in passionately and enjoys. I don't advocate what may still be the more French approach of a standard universal curriculum. Teach a poem or book that the particular teacher loves, rather than something tailored to the students—their supposed pop culture heroes, or representatives of their ethnicity. I think the more intense the feeling for the teacher, the better for the students. Conviction should be the guide.

Xerri: In the past few years here in the United States, there have been a few cases of teachers being forced to resign or being sacked for reading poems in class that school boards or students or principals objected to. There was a case of a star teacher who was forced to resign because he read an Allen Ginsberg poem in class. What are your views on this?

Pinsky: Anger, revulsion. We have a terrible, awful, lamentable, anti-intellectual tradition in this country. When the Favorite Poem Project had a Favorite Poem reading at the Library of Congress in Washington, Dr. Harold Varmus, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist who was then the Director of the National Institute of Health, read a poem that he had first found exciting when he was in college: Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress.' Dr. Varmus spoke charmingly about how, as a virginal young man at a men's college, he found Marvell's poem quite hot. Then, he spoke about how a young teacher in North Carolina was fired for teaching that Andrew Marvell poem because a local radio disc jockey reported him. Apparently, a young woman in class was embarrassed by the poem. The young teacher was fired and the disc jockey who led the campaign against him later became a very powerful member of the United States

Senate, Jesse Helms. I'll try to use as polite an expression as I can. In this country, in this kind of subject, we have a lot of assholeification. The assholeification that fires this guy for teaching Ginsberg has a long history. The career of Jesse Helms, who was a very eminent and powerful asshole in the American Senate, was helped by getting this teacher fired for teaching Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress.' Helms didn't hurt Marvell's poem, or poetry, but he hurt that teacher and the students and the state of North Carolina. Similarly, modern day book-banners don't hurt Mark Twain or Tony Morrison . . . but they hurt teachers and students and schools and our culture. They hurt our country.