

P O E T R Y I N
R E V I E W



S T E P H E N Y E N S E R

As the engaged reader discovers gradually and with increasing pleasure, Robert Pinsky's new volume of poems, richly titled *At the Foundling Hospital*, delicately but persistently works in two ways at once. At the same time that it is a series of different kinds of what we casually call "lyric" poems, it is a constellation of musings on a number of subtly related motifs. Among these motifs are foundlings, slaves, ancestors, musical instruments, shells, threads and other filaments and filiations, names – all surprisingly reticulated terms, a little, ultimately uncontainable lexical tribe – and (almost inevitably) language itself, especially in its etymological dimension.

Pinsky is a master of his trade, one of the few living American poets who deserves that appellation. His individual compositions are prosodically firm and limber, whether in loose blank verse, longer six-to-seven-foot lines in distichs, tercets of four to five feet, or slant-rhymed couplets. He can craft a narrative, taut ("Radio-man") or vagarious ("The City"), invent a song ("The Orphan

At the Foundling Hospital: Poems, by Robert Pinsky (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 80 pp., \$23)

Quadrille,” “Genesis”), deftly translate a traditional sonnet (“Góngora: Life Is Brief,” after the Spanish poet’s “Menos solicitó veloz saeta”), make a mercurial dramatic monologue (“Mixed Chorus”), eulogize a kind of musician (“Horn”), relate local history (“The Foundling Tokens”), and noodle on locutions (“Improvisation on Yiddish”). His signature mode is meditation that incorporates thoughtful, often aphoristic, and sometimes humorous observation on matters of general interest, crisp description, and vivid anecdote – and conjures Horace in its perspicuity and geniality.

The result of the motifs binding this variety together is insistently a *text*, a term that stems from the Indo-European etymon *teks-*, which signified a fabrication, a thing made of fabric, specifically of wattle, comprising tree branches interlaced with boughs, tendrils, twigs, and the like (to be covered with clay and used as a shelter or domicile), fashioned in the first place by an ax. The first image of a fabric is on the dust jacket, a direful photograph comporting with the title, which shows, under a baby’s chubby, soiled hand, a coarsely woven cloth. The visual image of the fabric reappears as the frontispiece and then again at the other end of the book on a free rear endpaper (customarily blank), so that the connection with the traditional clothbound book and its relationship in turn to a shelter, the title’s *hospital*, are both reinforced.

A poem near the end of the volume wittily intimates that fabrication’s association with this particular poet. Pinsky, a noted jazz aficionado who has performed poems in concert with the musicians Vijay Ayer, Bobby Bradford, and others, used to play jazz saxophone, an instrument celebrated in detail in “Horn,” where it is given its sobriquet “axe.” The hardly noticeable little link is not coincidental. When in the same poem Pinsky speculates that the “hack journeyman hornman” he memorializes along with his instrument had been tutored by “righteous / Teachers, his dentist, optician,” he recalls the volume’s third poem, “Creole,” which informs us that as a young man his father applied for a position as “*apprentice optician*,” a designation he supposed at the time meant “a kind of dentistry,” and subsequently adapted and learned how to grind lenses and sell glasses. Milford Pinsky’s son’s vocation has also turned out to have to do with seeing, as well as with improvisation and music.

Names of vocations, instruments, people, and indeed peoples

are everywhere crucial. Throughout the poems, different kinds of foundlings, or orphans, those without or in need of proper names, turn up, as do words related to *hospital*. Today we (meaning philologists like Calvert Watkins, in his succinct yet prodigious *American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, perhaps the closest our age has come to *The Key to All Mythologies*) can deduce that the Indo-European root of that last word, which we might transcribe as *ghos-ti*, first meant, tellingly, both “host” and “guest,” each of which English words bears ghostly semantic traces of its origin (*ghostly* does *not*, alas – though Pinsky’s “Evolution of the Host” implies that it might as well). The Indo-European also meant “stranger,” which makes perfect paradoxical sense because the characteristic of *strangeness* is precisely what *host* and *guest* share. They are *strangers* to each other; they are each’s Other; and they are inseparable by the universally reciprocal obligations of hospitality. (Not for nothing does Pinsky assemble in “Procession,” in one unpunctuated line, “your ancestors the thief the prince the stranger.”) *Hospitality*, another word closely related to the etymon *ghos-ti*, returns us to the *hospital* of the title – at which point we might pause to ponder implications, in the course of which it would occur to us that the hospital is an old trope, which T. S. Eliot, striking a didactic note, appropriates in “East Coker”: “The whole earth is our hospital, / Endowed by the ruined millionaire.”

Whether or not Eliot’s charged, challenging phrasing – *endow*: “to enrich with property; to provide (by bequest or gift) a permanent income for”; *ruin*: “to reduce to a state of complete poverty” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) – might suggest an ironic latensification of the *ill* in *millionaire*, the metaphor makes Pinsky’s collection’s title, rather than provocatively specific, pointedly inclusive. If we are all ill, as the Bible and Freud and common sense variously propose, and in need of a *hospice*, we are in the same vein *foundlings*. (The vein runs through American literature. In Wallace Stevens’s “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Adam and Eve suddenly “found themselves,” estranged at the beginning, in Eden’s “very varnished green.”)

Alienation is at the heart of humanity. Pinsky broaches his subject by means of another iterated term, *slave*, which comes up in regard to Africans abducted to the New World and several other forms. One of these is *Slav*, the name for the inhabitants of a large

swath of eastern Europe, conquered so often by outsiders that the designation became an eponym for people in bondage. The poet puts a finer point on his theme when he reveals that his own last name means “someone from Pinsk,” an important Slavic city (southwest of Minsk) in what is now Belarus. So *Pinsky* (like *American*, in fact) is an intricate cognomen, since it denominates a slave, in effect a nameless foundling – and since the generic term, *slave*, connects the family from Belarus to all other families who have been enslaved, who have been the (unwilling) guests of diverse hosts. And we know that *guest* and *host* are different faces of a single concept. So it is that one could make the case that *At the Foundling Hospital* is one of the most “political” books of our time, in that it undermines hierarchy, but then that is because it is profoundly human.

Mind is another word that Pinsky brilliantly explicates, along parallel lines, in the opening poem, “Instrument.” The pertinent instrument is the Greek lyre, legendarily constructed by Hermes from tortoise shell and rabbit gut (Aesop’s pair are relevant as well), which when struck, plucked, or caressed vibrates and resonates and thus makes music. So string music has its origin in the blunt physicality of bone and intestine, a contrivance deriving from and adding up anew to a “humming network / of neurons.” But wait: in “Instrument” that latter phrase refers first not to the lyre but to the brain, in its own bony shell, with its humming, musical, always improvising *mind*.

If the lyre represents the strings in the ancient orchestral rivalry, the saxophone, the “Horn,” brings in the woodwinds. And if the first, combining shell and guts, houses the “mind” that is at once mental and corporeal (“cloven brainflesh / Contained in its helmet of bone” is the poet’s fine periphrasis), the latter is a point of convergence of the different parts of the world (its “hard case” is “contoured to cradle the engraved / Hook-shape of Normandy brass,” while its “keys [come] from seashells / In the Mekong” and its “reed from Belize”). As his description indirectly reminds us, the saxophone is a hybrid in its very nature, since its Belgian inventor wanted to devise an instrument that was more forceful than any of the existing winds and yet had affinities with the brass family. It has something in common, then, with the poet, Robert from Pinsk, who knows its elements intimately because he, a Slav by heritage, grew up in New Jersey playing African American

music on it. A “slave” from birth, and an “addict” to the art, he is a “Bondsman of the tool” that is the “axe,” he confesses. Or reveals. “Bondsman of the tool”: it could be a translation of *homo faber*, the (extremely variegated, even self-contradictory) being that fabricates.

But then who among us is not such a creature? These poems vary this theme in a dozen ways. “What is someone?”: the volume’s epigraph from Pindar (it is spoken, notably, by the chorus in the tenth Olympian Ode, line 72) is one such, and the response must surely be “Anyone.” (At the same time, the response could be the matching rhetorical question in Pinsky’s poem, after Pindar’s ode, called “Glory” – “*What is a nobody?*” – which might well make us think of the widely traveled Odysseus’s allonym, *Outis*.) Someone, anyone, no one: everyone?

Individuals are the products of relationships, and it is they in those relationships who create “Culture,” the title of an ingeniously composed poem beginning with a catalogue in long lines (7–8 feet) that positively command attention:

Bewildered, bewildering ape. Absinthe. Circumcision.

Couplets.

Grudges, beliefs. War of my childhood, Europe tearing at itself.

Scarification. Conceptual art. Celebrated scholarly papers

On Trobriand Islanders, more fiction or poetry than science.

Whitman himself – to whom Pinsky has invited comparison, by virtue of his public stance and ambition, ever since his second volume, *An Explanation of America* – would admire the catenation, with its elements reflecting facets of one another. (Ponder the selection and the order. Any workshop student would profit from being asked to write a poem with commensurable grouping and juxtaposition.) The rhetorical device recurs with equally bracing components –

Charlie Chan. Life with Luigi. The Goldbergs. The Japanese Sleuth Mr. Moto played by a Jew, Peter Lorre, who fled the Nazis.

Der Stürmer, lynchings, enclosures. T. S. Eliot’s vicious lectures On Culture, delivered in Virginia

– and meanwhile the poem somehow builds a frame that relies on Maggie and Jiggs from the venerable newspaper comic strip “Bringing Up Father.”

“Culture,” epitomized here by North American culture, is macaronic and multifarious, the ongoing outcome of millennia of hosts and guests, civilizations and barbarians messily cycling in the manner discerned seven centuries before ISIS by Ibn Khaldun, descendant of Andalusians and Yemenite Arabs, and snowballing all the while. Pinsky’s poem about his father – which sweeps up all kinds of “immigration,” “colonizing and mixing,” “enslaving and freeing,” “the inevitable / Fucking in all senses of the word,” opticians and “developers and barbers, scribes and thugs mingled and coupled / With the native people and peoples” – reserves its reverence not for the mythological and religious figures that inform the preceding poem, “Procession,” but for his human progenitors. “I’m tired of the gods. I’m pious about the ancestors: afloat in / The wake widening behind me in time, those restive devisers.” The apt title of this poem is “Creole,” which he defines in his last line as coming “from a word meaning to breed or create, in a place”; Watkins’s *Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* tells us that the fecund etymon is *ker-3*, “to grow,” which sensibly yields *cereal* and *increase*, and somewhat more deviously *griot* and *sincere*, along with *create* – so those “restive devisers” or *creators* are equally *creatures*.

To creolize has of course come to mean “to provide with any of various attributes . . . esp. by a process of naturalization or hybridization” (*OED*). For Pinsky, it would overlap with “to civilize” – just as for Chateaubriand, when he reflected on American English, it meant “to barbarize.” The two infinitives are not necessarily antonyms, a proposition that shadows Cavafy’s grandly ironic “Waiting for the Barbarians” and Ibn Khaldun’s percipient theory alike. The barbaric can be rebarbative (if that red herring is pardonable), but by the same token it can be stimulating, and the one can bleed into the other, like *host* into *guest*. “The stuff of civilization,” as Pinsky refers to it in “The City,” while it includes “games and verses,” seems distinct from “the village” of youth with its “parades” – but how distinct is it really, since those “parades” lead after all to “the circus” (consider the congeries compacted there) and then to “the nearby fort.” Word by word, inch by inch, he takes us “across the street” where we find “spices” like “Anise and

marjoram,” familiar from life in the village, now used for “preserving and enhancing food and drink” in the “great metropolis” – and “for embalming corpses.”

If it is in the City that one “can hope / To glimpse great spirits as they cross the street,” it is there also that we realize that those spirits are “Souls durable as the cockroach and the lungfish.” The founder of cities was of course Cain, who turns up in “Procession” along with his brother Abel, the prototypical villager. Both hover over the other poems and emerge as their avatars Uriah Heep and David Copperfield in “Cunning and Greed,” a poem in part about apiculture and ecology.

It’s not

Exactly our fungicides killing the world’s bees.
The theory is, rather, the fungicides make the bees
Die from our pesticides, otherwise harmless. Or,
Maybe it’s the other way around, who knows?

Heep and Copperfield are brothers under the skin, no less than Cain and Abel, offspring of the original strangers. It is Pinsky’s Heep who answers Copperfield’s assertion that “*greed and cunning*” always “*do too much and overreach themselves, / It’s as certain as death!*”:

Or, says Heep, as certain
As that school that taught me from 9 to 11, that labour
Was a blessing. From 11 to 1, that labour was a curse.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Nay, what hope? What future? When he was in school, or so we hear in a poem near the beginning of the book titled “Mixed Chorus” (but *nota bene*: the chorus here is always mixed, the individual always polyvocal), our poet, or rather his persona (whose “real name is Israel Beilin” – Irving Berlin’s birth name – and whose father was “a Roman slave who gained his freedom”), “wrote an essay / On the theme You Must Choose Your Ancestors.” He picks up the thread in an ambiguous temporal frame:

It won’t be on any feeble, conventional wings
I’ll rise on – not I, born of poor parents. Look:
My ankles are changed already, new white feathers
Are sprouting on my shoulders: these are my wings.

In an extraordinary poem near the end of the volume Pinsky returns, at first invisibly, to the same “theme.” Because in the interest of demonstrating the integrity of *At the Foundling Hospital* I have flitted across its particular contents, and at the risk of attracting the jaundiced eye of the permissions department of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, I quote the whole of “The Robots.”

When they choose to take material form they will resemble
Dragonflies, not machines. Their wings will shimmer.

Like the chorus of Greek drama they will speak
As many, but in the first-person singular.

(Since in Greek drama the chorus sometimes interrupts the proceedings to address the audience directly, we might interject here that this polyvocal singular is anticipated in “Culture” when the various figures merge in the person of Jiggs, “as if it’s all self-portrait.” Someone, anyone, no one: everyone.)

Their colors in the sky will canopy the surface of the earth.
In varying unison and diapason they will dance the forgotten.

Their judgment in its pure accuracy will resemble grace and
in

Their circuits the one form of action will be understanding.

Their exquisite sensors will comprehend our very dust,
And re-create the best and the worst of us, as though in art.

If we are the evidence and very substance of evolution, and if we create our future selves, we must at the same time choose our own ancestors, who will have contained in embryo the gods (so to speak) to come. Of course they must be “robots,” creatures in progress even now as we enter the so-called post-human era. And what is a “robot”? Well, Watkins’s *Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* traces the word to the etymon *orbh-*. It meant and means “to turn,” and its derivatives include the Greek *orphanos*, or foundling, hence the English *orphan*, one who is reduced to labor – i.e., turning the earth in and around the village, turning the lathe and the trick in the city – and the Old Church Slavonic *rabota*, from *rabu*, or *slave*, and the Latin *orbita*. The concluding lines in this volume’s first stanza go as follows: “Mind, mind, mind / Enclosed in its orbit.”

Like that of others of his day, if more immediately, convincingly, colorfully, and memorably than most, Pinsky's poetry situates us in the cosmos as in language. Language is probably the best metaphor – synecdoche, to be precise – that we have for what we creatures have. It might be all we have. In any event, it is not clear that we can step outside its orbit. Inside it, Anglophones can turn to recent guides like Eliot, Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, and Robert Pinsky.