

A Poetry Reading by Robert Pinsky

Introduction by Richard Wendorf

This presentation was given at the 1890th Stated Meeting of the Academy and Joint Meeting with the Boston Athenaeum, held at the House of the Academy on April 6, 2005. Two of the poems that Robert Pinsky read at the meeting are reprinted below.

Robert Pinsky is Professor of English at Boston University. He has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1993.

Richard Wendorf is Stanford Calderwood Director and Librarian of the Boston Athenaeum.

Richard Wendorf

I have often thought that the best way to introduce a truly distinguished poet would simply be to read from his or her work, but I'm not going to follow up on that line of thought today for three reasons. First, Robert Pinsky is a superb reader of his own poetry, and I'm sure you would rather hear him than hear me. Second, Robert Pinsky is also a distinguished literary and cultural critic. It's important for us to pay tribute to that critical voice, which has found articulation in a series of books ranging from *The Situation of Poetry*, published in 1977, to his most recent volume, *Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry*, published by Princeton University Press in 2002 and just issued as a paperback. Third, it is important for us to acknowledge the role that Robert Pinsky has played in championing the relevance and importance of poetry in everyday life. In his three years as Poet Laureate, he changed the nature of what is often viewed as an honorific post to that of cultural activism, especially through his creation of The Favorite Poem Project. His goal has been to "make a record establishing the place of poetry in the United States, outside of the professional microcosm of poetry itself." The participants in this audio and video archive range from laborers to congressional representatives, from the woman who runs a cor-

poration to local parole officers. Robert Pinsky's anthology of these poems, coedited with Maggie Dietz, was published by Norton in 1999.

Robert Pinsky has received or has been a finalist for virtually every prize that can be bestowed upon a poet, translator, or critic. As fellow poet Louise Glück has said of him, "Robert Pinsky is one of the few literary artists working in our language whose work is unquestionably major work. The genius for public forms, lucidity and succinctness of the critical prose, the reinventions that are his amazing translations – these exist because of the kind of poet he is: restless, daring, endlessly curious."

Robert Pinsky

Book

Its leaves flutter, they thrive or wither, its outspread
Signatures like wings open to form the gutter.

The pages riffling brush my fingertips with their edges:
Whispering, erotic touch this hand knows from ages back.

What progress we have made, they are burning my books, not
Me, as once they would have done, said Freud in 1933.

A little later, the laugh was on him, on the Jews,
On his sisters. O people of the book, wanderers, *anderes*.

When we have wandered all our ways, said Raleigh, Time
Shuts up the story of our days – beheaded, his life like a book.

The sound *bk*: lips then palate, outward plosive to interior stop.
Bk, bch: the beech tree, pale wood incised with Germanic runes.

Enchanted wood. Glyphs and characters between boards.
The reader's dread of finishing a book, that loss of a world,

And also the reader's dread of beginning a book, becoming
Hostage to a new world, to some spirit or spirits unknown.

Look! What thy mind cannot contain you can commit
To these waste blanks. The jacket ripped, the spine cracked,

Still it arouses me, torn crippled god like Loki the schemer
As the book of Lancelot aroused Paolo and Francesca

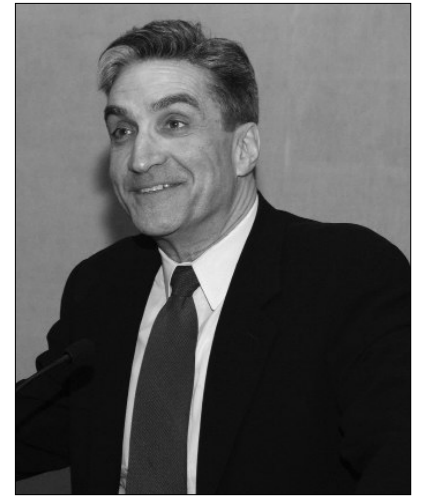
Who cling together even in Hell, O passionate, so we read.
Love that turns or torments or comforts me, love of the need

Of love, need for need, columns of characters that sting
Sometimes deeper than any music or movie or picture,

Deeper sometimes even than a body touching another.
And the passion to make a book – passion of the writer

Smelling glue and ink, sensuous. The writer's dread of making
Another tombstone, my marker orderly in its place in the stacks.

Or to infiltrate and inhabit another soul, as a splinter of spirit
Pressed between pages like a wildflower, odorless, brittle.



Immature Song

I have heard that adolescence is a recent invention,
A by-product of progress, one of Capitalism's
Suspended transitions between one state and another,
Like refugee camps, internment camps, like the Fields
Of Concentration in a campus catalogue. Summer
Camps for teenagers. When I was quite young
My miscomprehension was that "Concentration Camp"
Meant where the scorned were admonished to concentrate,
Humiliated: forbidden to let the mind wander away.
"Concentration" seemed just the kind of punitive euphemism
The adult world used to coerce, like the word "Citizenship"
On the report cards, graded along with disciplines like History,
English, Mathematics. Citizenship was a field or
Discipline in which for certain years I was awarded every
Marking period a "D" meaning Poor. Possibly my first political
Emotion was wishing they would call it Conduct, or Department.
The indefinitely suspended transition of the refugee camps
Must be a poor kind of refuge – subjected to capricious
Kindness and requirements and brutality, the unchampioned
Refugees kept between childhood and adulthood, having neither.
In the Holy Land for example, or in Mother Africa.
At that same time of my life when I heard the abbreviation
"DP" for Displaced Person I somehow mixed it up with
"DT"s" for Delirium Tremens, both a kind of stumbling called
By a childish nickname. And you my poem, you are like
An adolescent: confused, awkward, self-preoccupied, vaguely
Rebellious in a way that lacks practical focus, moving without
Discipline from thing to thing. Do you disrespect Authority merely
Because it speaks so badly, because it deploys the lethal bromides
With a clumsy conviction that offends your delicate senses? – but if
Called on to argue such matters as the refugees you mumble and
Stammer, poor citizen, you get sullen, you sigh and you look away.

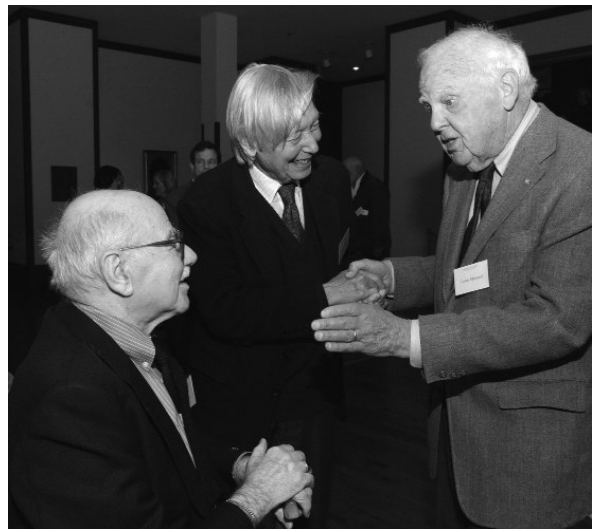
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