

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT PINSKY



Justin Quinn

Robert Pinsky was born in Long Branch, New Jersey, in 1940. He attended Rutgers University, receiving his B.A. in 1962, and Stanford, where he studied under Yvor Winters, receiving his Ph.D. in 1966. He has taught at Berkeley and Wellesley and now is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Boston University. His books of poetry are: *Sadness and Happiness* (1975), *An Explanation of America* (1979), *History of My Heart* (1984), *The Want Bone* (1990) and in 1996, *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems*. That same year Pinsky became Poet Laureate of the United States. He is poetry editor of the Microsoft internet magazine, *Slate*, and also served for many years as poetry editor of *The New Republic*. His translation of Dante's *Inferno* was widely acclaimed, and in 1998 the dramatic version premiered in New York. He is the author of several critical works, among them *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (1977), a landmark in the criticism of American poetry, and most recently, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (1998).

The interview was conducted at Boston University on the morning of Monday, 14 December 1998.

JQ: *You have always been a poet aware of the civic valencies of poetry. Has becoming Poet Laureate changed the way you think about that?*

RP: Perhaps the appointment has enhanced a faith I have always had: that is, if I found something appealing or moving or amusing, I wrote with a certain faith that a sufficient number of readers would also find emotion and appeal in it. Partly through the Favourite Poem Project, I've become confident about poetry and Americans. Despite the stereotype of this country in relation to poetry, in any large American office building (I guarantee you) there'll be people on the board of directors of that corporation who have poems they love, and there will be management people who have poems they love, and there'll be people on the custodial staff who have a poem they love, and on the secretarial and office staff, as well. So that if we wanted to have a Favourite Poem reading in that building, I

know that we could have such a reading, at which we would hear poems, as is characteristic of this country, in more than one language. There would quite likely be poems in Spanish, Portuguese, or God knows, Navajo, Yiddish, Italian.

JQ: When you sit down to write a poem: has it changed the way you think about that? Has it changed your sense of audience at all?

RP: I don't think so. I have always assumed that part of my possibility as a writer is my awareness of American culture. That is, I have not had amazing experiences: I haven't been in a war or worked in the circus, I haven't seen a prison camp, I didn't grow up meeting the famous or powerful people of the earth. I had a rather ordinary lower middle-class childhood, an ordinary American youth. And, I'm not a great master of any area of knowledge: I'm not a scholar, and I don't have a great gift for dealing with abstract ideas. So I have had to think, what knowledge do I have, apart from any gift, that might let me make distinguished works of art? The answer I think is that I have a fairly deep, detailed understanding of this country: its clothes, its music, its history, its ethnic groups, its cars, its politicians, its newspapers, its rock'n'roll, its high-brow cultural institutions, its small towns, its drug-stores. I know something about American thought and something about American thinking, in some detail.

And so, as to subject matter, any public role wouldn't change things much. Has the Laureate position affected my sense of an audience? Possibly there have been moments when I've reminded myself not to worry about certain kinds of accessibility or clear sentiment. Certain politicians, government figures, people I admire, and whose positions I like, have begun asking me for quotations to use in speeches; usually what serves best is eighteenth-century or nineteenth-century rhetoric. The political figure is much more likely to find something to serve the purpose in Collins, or Tennyson, than in Elizabeth Bishop, who is an anti-heroic, an anti-rhetorical writer, or than in Wallace Stevens or William Carlos Williams. But there is not much temptation to begin writing like Collins or Tennyson!

To a much lesser extent something similar may be true of the poems I read on public television for the NewsHour: to some small degree, accessibility and a fairly direct rhetoric come into play there. And I suppose there may have been moments when in my own writing when I've thought to myself perhaps you should be supplying kind of borscht, or... processed cheese, or something... but it's not hard to decide no, I think this rather interesting goat cheese and wine I've been making all these years is fine. Nothing against borscht or processed cheese.

JQ: *And you're not tempted?*

RP: No, I really am not. The idea of becoming a propagandist or a rhetorician is not among the many temptations I'm liable to.

JQ: *I was amazed when I came here in August to see you on the Lehrer NewsHour. In Ireland, while the poet is a respected figure, he doesn't come on the news to read poems.*

RP: It is surprising. I like the way it's all taken for granted. I like the way Jim Lehrer will say, "Now, Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, with some stock-market poetry." And then I look at the camera and recite Frost's "Provide, Provide". When Frank Sinatra died, I read some lines from a Virgil eclogue about what happens when a great singer dies. And when the little robot was on Mars—what's the name, the Pathfinder?—I read from the Proem to Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, where Spenser talks about exploration and he says, in effect: "Who could have imagined Virginia before we saw Virginia?—There might be new worlds out there." The incongruity and surprise of the poem one comes up with for a given event is part of the pleasure. I do have certain scouts, friends like Steve Greenblatt or John Hollander, who help me to come up with poems; I can't always do it on my own.

JQ: *Could we talk about the role that religion plays in your poetry? There's a preoccupation with it, but it seems part of a larger preoccupation with more secular ideas, for instance, the possibilities of America.*

RP: In an idiosyncratic way, I'm a believer. I was raised in a nominally orthodox Jewish household. I say nominal, because my parents were rather secularized people. My dad was a well known local athlete, voted best-looking boy in his graduating class. His father owned a very prominent bar and happened to have been a bootlegger in the '20s. So it was not a family that was solemnly orthodox—very much the contrary.

Though I am very interested by religious ideas, I've never been drawn to religious practice in any ritual or communal way. My favourite god is probably Shiva, who holds a hammer as he dances. He is the god of creation and of destruction: I find this an extremely powerful notion of God as I have experienced him—he is indeed given to destruction and creation in ways that are pretty much inextricable and impenetrable. And creation as an ongoing flux, the endless creation and dismantling of culture as well as the physical world, seems quite miraculous, and quite frighten-

ing as well; and religion is an amazing episode in the history of creation.

JQ: *How does this fit with more secular ideas? The way you think about politics or American history? Or is there a connection?*

RP: Oh very much. I assume as part of my way of working that the sacred is going to appear in unexpected and profane places. Wherever history seems most profane or worldly, that is where one must seek the divine, or such is my inclination. Otherwise one risks being swayed by mere pious décor. Anyway, my way is to look to the unexpected parts of the world for the sacred—an appealing principle of Jesus'. You could almost look at the history of literature and say there are good boys and girls who find the sacred where the sacred is supposed to be, and there are bad boys and girls who find the sacred where it's not supposed to be. And I suppose I'm one of the bad boys.

JQ: *It seems to me that the important turn in your career is between *An Explanation of America* and *History of My Heart*, as you moved from, in your own words, a discursive poetry to something a bit more improvisatory and chancy. What was happening in those years that brought the change about?*

RP: Perhaps that's true, but to a certain extent when one looks at a literary career it's easy to overlook the possibility that on this occasion one was writing a sonata in a minor key and on this occasion one was writing a symphony. Or, to change metaphor a bit, one happened to cut an album that was Latin and Afro-Cuban, and it didn't mean a development, it meant you were doing something different, as a craftsman. Or put it this way: I'm not sure that I couldn't have written some of the poems in *History of My Heart* and *The Want Bone* before *Explanation of America*. What appears to be development may be a sequence.

In a way, *Explanation of America* for me is the craziest thing I've ever written. From the title onward the deadpan discursiveness seems quite strange to me. It's more of a demented lecturer than an urbane well-organised orator. Although that book did well, and people said nice things about it, the reception was somewhat off-centre in my opinion. It always made me slightly nervous (and slightly amused) that people would talk about the book's "urbanity" and "rationality". I thought of it as a rather more bizarre animal than that. I'm trembling on the lip of being perverse enough to say that the later poems became more conventional, less experimental—less chancy—than *Explanation*. It might be shrewd for me to accept that I just flowered and went beyond the boundaries, but that isn't

the way it felt. If anything it felt that in *An Explanation of America* I pushed a certain kind of unconventionally discursive and sort of mock-organised, mock-analytical, mock-editorial style as far as it could possibly go. And one had to do something else after that. I mean, you couldn't follow *An Explanation of America* with a book called (my wife and friends used to make up these titles) *The Real Truth About Everything Else* or *The Nature of the Universe*. That was done, so one had to do something else.

JQ: *Was there anything happening around you at the time? In society or culture in general that made you turn in that particular direction?*

RP: I think the *An Explanation of America* came very much out of the Vietnam war period when many people of my generation were appalled by the war, and we felt deeply frustrated about not knowing what to do. It was a time when people were incinerating themselves, which seemed a measure of that tremendous frustration in trying to move the body politic. The country itself was clearly disgusted and regretful but didn't seem to have a way to find the political will or political means to get out of what it was doing. And there were "teach-ins" and speeches and one read magazine articles of a special kind, a sort of moral-political journalism; literary journals devoted a lot of pages to foreign policy discourse and political analysis.

And while participating in all this in a mild, passive way, I was very aware as a poet of the language of argument and persuasion, the language of emotional political rhetoric. I was trying to fit my passionate and complete devotion to the art of poetry together with all these public uses of language. And I wanted to get beyond what seems to me the received ideas on the subject of eloquence and politics, wanted something different even from the direction of the people who were trying to write poems of advocacy or different again from the people who maintained that advocacy was completely separate from poetry. I was trying—and not particularly succeeding—to find a way to avoid fairly predictable channels.

In retrospect I think *An Explanation of America* is a bit like an immense platform on which to write the Vietnam sections of it. The poem is addressed to child who would go to anti-war demonstrations riding in a backpack, and something about the experience of being a parent was mixed in with the exasperation and sense of political immobility in the country, in those years when I was conceiving and writing the poem. It's hard to remember now the kind of silence after we finally withdrew from Southeast Asia, a kind of artistic and literary silence on the subject that preceded the Vietnam novels and films. They had not yet appeared,

in 1979. This strange silence was one of the reasons why the Vietnam Wall is such a tremendously powerful work of art. It is reticent and taciturn, but it's not silent.

JQ: *Often when commentators are characterizing the generation before yours they invoke Vietnam since for so many American poets it was the moment which defined their anti-Establishment politics and also left its mark on their art. How would you define the politics of your own poetic in contrast to theirs?*

RP: It was also defining for people of my generation as well.

JQ: *But in a different way. You were thinking about poetry and politics in a different way to the preceding generation. They obviously hoped for a different kind of engagement with their society than you would.*

RP: The poems that people read at anti-war rallies served the purpose of the occasion very well: people wept or applauded, crowds were moved. In retrospect or even at the time few people, perhaps even the authors, felt that these were wonderful works of art. I could not at this moment, give you a balanced and secure appraisal of how those moments or those poems affected writing by me or anyone in my generation. I can remember two or three times reading poems at such rallies, usually poems by other people. I wasn't old enough and didn't have the kind of literary reputation to be much called upon or expected to do that, and in a way that was a boon or luxury.

Perhaps there was a false sense of reaching a popular audience, which some of those people may have experienced. That is, they reached an audience of aroused students who were looking for a certain kind of rhetoric. I have always had, as I've said, a desire to make the living history, the present history, of this country material for my work but I have not felt tempted to supply a certain kind of rhetoric or eloquence. My taste and inclination is for something more complicated and cussed than sheer eloquence.

JQ: *What about the social and political background to History of My Heart and The Want Bone. Would you see any connections or were you reacting to things that were happening at the time?*

RP: That's not really the way I think. But I'll try to accept the invitation of the question. For me this would involve less history than geography. A lot of *History of My Heart*, as its title suggests, is retrospective, a lot of it

written after my return to California in 1980. It coincided somewhat with my writing a text adventure for computers and a heightened notion of culture as very fluid, not static, quite impure, certainly the culture of this country as quite impure. And a kind of patriotism about that flux or impurity, although with reservations, may characterize that book. I remember being very pleased when Thom Gunn one evening in San Francisco said that he thought the poem, "The Changes", from *History of My Heart*, was a science-fiction poem. The poem thinks about one geographical spot and all the various events that happen on that spot over the centuries, including the fact that all of this happens at different geological layers of elevation. The Indians who may have come here to where this building stands, where we are talking, on their regular springtime or summertime visit to this area, the Wampanoags or whatever who may have had a fishing and hunting camp here, maybe at this time of year, they might have been down in the basement of this building, below us. Or if there's been a lot of excavation their feet may be floating right above our heads. Anyway, I liked Thom's association of the poem with a popular, somewhat unanchored genre.

I think the experience not simply of California but of moving about this very large country may have affected the books. I started in New Jersey on the east coast and then went to Stanford for three years, my first time on the West Coast then went back to East for ten or twelve years in Massachusetts and then I went back to California, to Berkeley, again in the '80s. More than most Americans, I've oscillated between the two coasts and, accepting the invitation of your question to think about culture in relation to *History of My Heart*, some of the fluidity and images like that image of the oil tanker floating over a prehistoric village, or the priests' heads bobbing at one's feet, that sense of layered and somewhat comic or surreal, laminae of history and culture, at different elevations, some of that may have arisen from my sense of the terrific size of the country. Whenever you move across that vastness there's a little pain of disjuncture, of dislocation and also the excitement and the ambition to, well, to emulate Odysseus. We learn at the very beginning of the *Odyssey* that he went to many places and learned the various ways of different peoples, which I associate with his resourcefulness. I take that as a model for the artist, perhaps the American artist in particular: always looking around the corner, or at the horizon, where there's going to be another surprise—there's always going to be a Costa Rican or Hmong district in a city or there's going to be an eighteenth-century building hidden among the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Or, as I learned recently, and you might be amused to know, that in the base of the White House they have exposed and pre-

served one arch in the basement which has black scorch marks on it: the one place where they can find physical evidence of the occasion when the British burnt the place down.

JQ: *You often use autobiographical detail in your poetry, but in a very different way from the Confessionals.*

RP: I've always been impatient with autobiography: I suppose I'm an impatient person in general. I think that's one of the notable characteristics and perhaps limitations of my writing and of me. I get bored easily. There are not many poems of mine that tell any story straight ahead. I think "From the Childhood of Jesus" is rather unusual. It's got a story—straight ahead. I love the experience of the phrase, "to change the subject", in both senses: the subject is transformed, or, you change the topic. I like both of those movements and I like the sense of them happening simultaneously: new topic, and transformation of the old topic, or of the old subjectivity. So it's probably on aesthetic grounds, in part, that I resist the kind of autobiography where the pay-off is a revelation of the story of one life, or one psyche. I like when the story of a life is braided in with, say, a principle of physics or evolution, and with social history. If I'm going to tell you something about my life, I want it to feel created, manifoldly imagined, even if it really happened. I'm not merely disclosing it to you, I hope: I want to have a little of the ineffable charm of creation. That it's going to have at least a little of the marvellous in it, like the stories in the Bible or the Mabinogion or the Bhagavadgîtâ, the enigmatic or startling quality that pulls one into a narrative. And if it doesn't have that... sod it. Just because it happened to happen to me doesn't make it interesting. Frank O'Hara says—I admire Robert Lowell but O'Hara does take the mickey out of him elegantly—something like this: "He explains that he's so upset and so everybody's supposed to feel that that's important."

JQ: *The social conscience that appears occasionally in the poems and the panoramic means of expressing it reminded me of E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime.*

RP: I see what you mean. Doctorow's one of the people whom I hope we invite to the Favourite Poem Reading at the Academy of American Poets in April: about a dozen American fiction writers will read aloud their favourite poems. There'll be some interesting selections and terrific performances, I know. I do admire *Ragtime*, that synoptic quick-cutting and the weaving in of historical threads. Although he's older than me, we are both descendants of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Those people

came to this culture with a tremendous appetite and a kind of wilful syncretism. They were willing to slam things together and it's a genius that probably has a lot to do with the American film industry: "Well, we'll just tell this story and we'll put this set into it and that star and we'll get some good-looking girls and some colonial costumes and a shoot-'em-up scene. We're not going to be pedantic about accuracy, except in odd spurts, when it tickles us. We're going to make an interesting texture out of the discrepancies and necessities." And maybe that improvising, synthesizing spirit has something to do with fiction and poetry as well. As before, I'm taking your question as an invitation to speculate a bit. Anyway, I love a parade, as the song says. I like a pageant, a masque, a panorama, a notion related to getting bored easily. I think that if the reader feels variety in texture, feels gravel, then feels cool silk, then warm sand, then wet ice, that's to the good if you can make it hold together, if it's not just a raree show. And there's the hope or requirement that in the course of feeling different textures, or the parade of images, you also feel movement and direction. That you are arriving at something. The sense of movement, as well as the sense of change or variety, that's at the centre of what a work of art should do.

JQ: I admired The Sounds of Poetry very much. It made me go back to poems I've known for years just to savour their acoustic effects afresh. But it's a very different book from your previous critical works in that there is no critical discussion and the stress is on one sensual aspect of poetry. Have your own ideas of the best ways to talk about poetry been changing over the years?

RP: For The Sounds of Poetry, the circumstances of composition were unusual. The book was written almost entirely in airports and aeroplanes. I had undertaken rather a lot of travel as part of the Poet Laureate position, and I had always had the notion of writing a book about the vocal, physical nature of poetry. At some point I decided I could take advantage of all the dead time of travel by working on this book. As you know, I earn my bread as a teacher; the book is an account of the things I say to students about hearing poems. I'd like to think that the book is refined by years of discovering what people find useful, the kind of questions they raise. For instance, all that stuff about thunketta and thunk-pa-thunk is really a way of dealing with the fact that students will often think of different ways to divide up a line, quite validly, because it's just a like proposition in arithmetic or logic—there are a lot of equally accurate ways to describe the stresses in a given phrase or line.

The quotations in The Sounds of Poetry all had to be checked after I

finished the first draft because, being without books while on the road, I was quoting from memory. I tended to draw on examples I knew that well. So it's a book that was written on that one subject, but it was written episodically—the plane would be delayed for an hour, and while people around me were going off into an irritable trance or looking at the newspaper I would get out my little notepad and start working on, say, the chapter on rhyme. Any coherence the book has derives from teaching, from having a quite specific subject, and also from that condition of writing without any library, in the absence of books. Basing what I wrote on what was in my head seemed quite appropriate for this subject, because these were poems I had incorporated. I had what athletes call “body knowledge” (sometimes inaccurate knowledge!) of these poems. Whereas my other books of criticism were written about contemporary poetry, sometimes about poetry I was being rather critical of, and I had to take a book down off the shelf and look at it...

JQ: *Because it didn't stick in memory.*

RP: Yes, or hadn't yet stuck in memory. In effect a kind of ground rule for this book is that I could only talk about things I knew by heart.

JQ: *The Figured Wheel was published two years ago in England. Your concerns and techniques seem very different from anything happening there at the moment. How do you view the current situation of poetry in England now?*

RP: I think the gap between the two countries is fascinating and seems quite obdurate. There's a tremendous amount of mutual incomprehension and it strikes me that the English literary scene, in poetry, is consumed by an inferiority complex. Between the Irish and Americans, I would think that it makes it rather hard to be English. That may be a kind of cliché but there's something in it. The odd thing is that there are so many Irish poets of my generation that I do understand quite well. For instance, I read the work of Michael Longley, to take only one example. He's not as Americanized as Muldoon, but one feels immediately one knows where one is. The English scene is alien.

JQ: *You teach creative writing. There's great cynicism in Europe toward the idea of the creative writing workshop (even while they don't question the idea of schools of art). How do you react to the criticism?*

RP: Well, I never attended a writing program and only lately began teach-

ing in one here at BU, but I'm happy to give two cheers for creative writing. There's a social aspect to the matter in this country. It's not an accident that Americans invented "creative writing" as a school discipline. The art of poetry in many other places of the world is perpetuated and curated by two sources. One source is a unifying folk culture. The United States of America does not have a single unifying folk culture. By no means do the American grandmothers and grandfathers all sing the same songs or tell the same jokes; there is not even a single predominant folk source of that kind. We have the Chinese-American grandmother and the Hungarian-American grandmother and the Yankee grandmother and the African-American grandmother, and that richness benefits us but does not provide a single source for poetry: that is not available to us. There are also many countries in the world where there is a high bourgeoisie, an aristocracy, that finds snob value in art, so that people want to emulate that social class and having (or faking!) some familiarity with the great national poets has social meaning. And we don't have that either:

This double absence doesn't mean that we're baboons or Yahoos, it means that culturally the United States is different from a nation that has folk unity or a nation with a social class that considers itself the hereditary curator of art. Nor is this to say that there've not been attempts at a cultural upper class: Boston presents a notable attempt at such a thing, speaking not only about nineteenth-century Brahmins. Take the anthology that was published about ten years ago, called *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. At one time not long ago you could compile a respectable anthology of American poetry that included only people who had gone to Harvard, including a drop-out like Frost, as well as graduates like Stevens and Eliot. In the later generations you could include poets as different as Adrienne Rich, Robert Creeley, Frank O'Hara, Donald Hall, John Ashbery, Robert Bly. They all attended Harvard, many or most of them at the same time. Or extend it to other East Coast private colleges. At Princeton more or less at the same time you had Merwin and Kinnell—I think they may even have been roommates. Ginsberg was at Columbia. All at the traditionally elite, expensive, North-East universities.

Well, then something changes: no one in that *Harvard Book of Contemporary Poetry*, from my age and younger, went to an Ivy League university. Everyone in the book born after 1940 attended a state university or a very small college, or no college. We attended the University of California, Riverside, or Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and so on. This reflects a social change in this country related to the GI bill, related to the rise of the land-grant state universities. And creative writing

has to be fitted into that social and historical context. Because of creative writing, children of farmers, children of people who operate small grocery stores, children of factory workers, have had access to certain kinds of knowledge and ambition. It is a geographical matter, too: middle to lower class people in the provinces, across the expanse of the country, find in the creative writing schools of Iowa, Montana and so forth access to something that was formerly not easily available. In the absence of a cultural capital in this country (you know, we have New York, Los Angeles, Washington, Chicago, Boston, Dallas, all “central” in different ways—we don’t have a single capital of government and finance and art and glamour—in the absence of a geographical and cultural capital, in the relative absence of the unifying folk tradition, and in the relative absence of an aristocratic tradition, we invent things, nutty and imperfect and perhaps vulgar improvisations like creative writing.

On the other hand, I think that in so far as creative writing evolves into a guild it is obnoxious: you should not need to be “one of us” or have “our” degree or stamp of approval to be an artist. That’s not what art is. It’s deplorable to make poetry into a mere guild, with students attaching themselves to professors they hope will help them get published, and people awarding publication prizes to their students, and so forth. But just the same, a lot of the dismissal of creative writing, and condescension to it, is unconsciously reactionary in cultural and social terms. To the degree that it serves the art, and makes the art available to people, it merits respect. The students who come here to work in the Writing Programme with Derek Walcott and me, and to take courses with Geoffrey Hill, are serious about the art, and I think all of us feel that in teaching these people, we serve the art as well.