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## Interview with Robert Pinsky

### Abstract

Robert Pinsky has published nineteen volumes of poetry and prose, including a translation of Dante's *Inferno*. He served as U. S. Poet Laureate from 1997-2000, has won countless awards, and has been nominated for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He's taught on both coasts and in Chicago, and was called "the last of the 'civic' or public poets" by the Poetry Foundation. His work has the meticulous, meditative beauty of a Japanese garden and the deliberate wit of an American East-coast native. As Poet Laureate, Pinsky started the Favorite Poem Project, a public-outreach effort that convinced 18,000 Americans to share their favorite poem during a one-year open call for submissions in the late 1990s. That project now sponsors an annual week-long summer institute for teachers, with a focus on poetry as an out-loud art form. He believes this continuing effort to keep poetry in the American consciousness is far more important than the title he held as Poet Laureate.

### Keywords

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# BOOTH



A JOURNAL

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April 5, 2013

## Interview with Robert Pinsky

by Emma Faesi

Robert Pinsky has published nineteen volumes of poetry and prose, including a translation of Dante's *Inferno*. He served as U.S. Poet Laureate from 1997-2000, has won countless awards, and has been nominated for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He's taught on both coasts and in Chicago, and was called "the last of the 'civic' or public poets" by the Poetry Foundation. His work has the meticulous, meditative beauty of a Japanese garden and the deliberate wit of an American East-coast native. As Poet Laureate, Pinsky started the Favorite Poem Project, a public-outreach effort that convinced 18,000 Americans to share their favorite poem during a one-year open call for submissions in the late 1990s. That project now sponsors an annual week-long summer institute for teachers, with a focus on poetry as an out-loud art form. He believes this continuing effort to keep poetry in the American consciousness is far more important than the title he held as Poet Laureate.

**Emma Faesi:** *Although you've written prose and translations as well as poetry, you remain best known for your poems. Do you think poetry chose you, or you chose poetry? Either way, how did it come about?*

**Robert Pinsky:** From as early as I can remember, I have thought about the sounds of words and sentences: at night, in my bed, as small child, tapping the rhythms of sentences on the headboard with my fingernails. That habit of the ear has been my compass and my engine, all my life.

**EF:** *What does your writing process look like today? How has it changed over the*

years?

**RP:** “Writing” is not the most accurate word for how I work. Nearly always I begin a poem with my voice, sometimes compose most of the first draft without touching paper or keyboard. The work of composition can happen while driving a car, or in the shower. Yeats is supposed to have said, “I get a tune in my head.” That sounds right to me: sometimes, the words aren’t there yet but your voice has discovered the essential pattern of pitches, grammatical energies, cadences. It’s much more like noodling at a piano than like writing a term paper.

On the other hand, the process of revising and refining can consume a lot of paper!

**EF:** *How do you know when you can call one of your poems finished? What inner voice tells you that you’re done?*

**RP:** You run your voice over it, as you run your hand over something you are sandpapering.

**EF:** *Your literary lineage can be traced to Yvor Winters. What other poets and writers have had an impact on you, and how?*

**RP:** Francis Fergusson, author of *The Idea Theater*, was my teacher at Rutgers. His idea of action is tremendously important. William Carlos Williams, William Butler Yeats, T.S. Eliot. Willa Cather, Nikolai Gogol, Isaac Babel, Charles Dickens, James Joyce, Lewis Carroll. The first great poets in English, George Gascoigne, Ben Jonson, Fulke Greville, John Donne, William Shakespeare, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell. John Keats, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman. The *Odyssey*, in Pope’s verse translation and E.V. Rieu’s prose translation. Dante.

**EF:** *In a time when prose poems can run on for pages and some free verse poems skitter across the page word by word, you tend to maintain measured stanzas and an adherence to form. Are these formal decisions made for a reason, or are they simply the method that works best for you?*

**RP:** Simply what works for me. The triads of William Carlos Williams, the sentence-to-line in Yeats and Jonson, the syntactical be-bop of Elizabeth Bishop (see “At the Fishhouses”), the musical grace of Campion, the momentum of Greville, the unrhymed pentameter of Stevens in “Sunday Morning” or Frost in “An Old Man’s Winter Night”: all those have absorbed me. While on the other hand I’ve never had much interest in “forms,” like sonnet, villanelle, sestina, all of that. I’m nuts about lines, don’t care about forms.

**EF:** *In your poem “Shirt,” you begin and end in the present, but in the middle you provide a vision of low-wage labor, the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist fire, and even slavery in an example of how a simple object can tell a story of great events, even horrific ones. However, at the end, you state that you are “satisfied” with it, which seems to indicate you’re able to shrug off the history and just wear the shirt. Is this a choice to move on from the past? Is it a method of going through day-to-day life, as we all must do, surrounded by objects weighted with negative baggage?*

**RP:** “Satisfied” is not “gratified” or even “content.” And certainly not “satiated.” The garment worker and the customer wearing the garment in the poem are both satisfied by certain details (color, fit, feel), that enable them to get on with their lives— not necessarily satisfied by every aspect of those lives, together or individually. The word “and” is important in that sentence: “both her and me.” In different and similar ways, the worker and consumer (most people are some of each) take part in a system.

**EF:** *You say, “Translation, always, is a matter of degree.” How did you become comfortable with the idea that no translation will ever be an exact copy? How do you untangle the meaning from the original language, and then seek to repeat it in a different tongue?*

**RP:** Writing a poem is always a matter of degree: you never get exactly and completely everything you want. Even the “Ode to a Nightingale” is a great, great translation of an original in the sky, or if you prefer in the mind of God. For me, the way I make translations, it is not significantly different from writing a poem.

**EF:** *From 1997 to 2000, you were the United States Poet Laureate. What duties are assigned to that title? Which were your favorites? Least favorite?*

**RP:** No duties to speak of. It’s an honorary title, not a job. Fortunately, thanks to having Maggie Dietz as program director, thanks to Cliff Becker at the NEA, thanks to Hillary Clinton and the Clinton White House Millennial Celebration, thanks to Boston University, we were able to create the Favorite Poem Project, those books and videos and the summer institute. The Favorite Poem Project, I think, is significant, in ways beyond any title.

**EF:** *In “The Uncreation,” you wrote “And sometimes even machines may chant or jingle / Some lyrical accident that takes its place // In the great excess of song that coats the world .” There could be two (and probably many more) readings taken from these lines: that poetry is natural, unstoppable, and gloriously universal, or that poetry is so pervasive that individual contributions don’t matter. Which reading is truer for you? Both? Neither?*

**RP:** Both.

**EF:** *In “ABC,” you were obviously working with the exercise of beginning successive word with the following letter of the alphabet. Was this simply an exercise that turned into a fantastic and often-anthologized poem? How often do you give yourself writing “assignments” like that?*

**RP:** The alphabet-thing is based on one of my insomnia games, Forms like that in my poems have less to do with writing and assignments than with being a certain kind of weirdo.

**EF:** *You make Biblical references in your work, or invoke the gods and rituals of ancient societies, but you’re not above writing a line like “And Buddha the dog-doo you flick” in “First Things to Hand,” in a prime example of juxtaposing the sacred and the profane. Are juxtapositions like this your way of saying the vastness of human experience has room for both Jehovah and dog-doo when put on the page?*

**RP:** If the sacred is not somehow in everything, including the profane, then it is nothing.

**EF:** *“The Figured Wheel” weaves concrete images into an abstract idea. How did you choose the images and physical places that ended up in the poem?*

**RP:** The poem reflects the actual processes of my mind— a jumble of meanings, not meaningless, but jumbled. And the poem with its –what? its rotating eruption?– of details, things, ideas, reflects my intuitively or psychologically rather non-linear, I guess cyclical relation to time.

**EF:** *Do you believe that poetry is essential to contemporary America, or to contemporary civilization in general? Will poetry stick around, despite reality TV and twitter?*

**RP:** In a survival race, I am quite certain that poetry will long outlast reality TV and Twitter. I’d bet my life savings on it in a second. Do you think the bookmakers in Vegas would take that one? (They are probably too shrewd to touch it.)

The onetime magazine *Newsweek* once proclaimed poetry to be dead . . . guess what happened.

**EF:** *During your term as Poet Laureate, you started the Favorite Poem Project, which is now used as a resource for teachers and a model for community events. How did you form the concept for this project? Are you pleased with its success?*

**RP:** Every July, the Favorite Poem Project sponsors a one-week Summer Institute for K-12 teachers: the teachers get the videos and the anthologies. Poets like Louise Glück, Carl Phillips, Mark Doty, Heather McHugh give talks and readings, and the teachers meet by grade level to generate teaching ideas, projects, lesson plans based on the idea of poetry as an art: the poem as an audible work of art, not an exam question.

**EF:** *In your eyes, what needs to be done to keep poetry alive in contemporary consciousness?*

**RP:** Poetry takes care of itself. All art does— that is paramount.

What else? Well, the poetry organizations could do more to support teachers and librarians who are already doing a good job. The organizations and foundations waste a lot of time and money on silliness: how to make an Emily Dickinson costume for Halloween, prizes awarded to different categories of poet, poems in text that hops around on your iPhone, poetry soap, poetry aquarium gravel, etc . . .

It might be better to simply encourage libraries, schools, community centers to bring together different kinds and levels of activity: the local amateur poets in writing groups and readings with MFA students. The FPP's Summer Institute is a joint project of BU's MFA program and BU's School of Education— why doesn't every university that has an MFA program do something with the same university's school of education? With local high schools? Some do, and more should.

But really, that's not essential: art takes care of itself: its appeal is endless, like the appeal of cuisine beyond nutrition, lovemaking beyond copulation, dance beyond locomotion. Poetry meets a fundamental craving, the mind meeting the body in the sounds of words.

Emma Faesi is a student in the Butler University MFA in Creative Writing Program who writes environmental cleanup grants for a living. She is the Poetry Editor of Booth, is a regular contributor to NUVO, and has been published on miseducated.net. She loves furry, finned, and feathered creatures but doesn't like to write about them because animal stories make her cry.