Online Interviews With Robert Pinsky Essay, Research Paper

Interview with J.

M. Spalding for The Cortland Review

J.M. Spalding: Why

poetry, why not a musician or rock star?

Robert Pinsky: If I could

play the horn like Sonny Rollins or Dexter Gordon, it would be tempting indeed to trade

poetry for it. But the thrill I get from certain poems by Yeats or Ben Jonson or Dickinson

or Cavafy—I like rock, but I’ve never gotten a thrill like that from it. In truth, no

art has thrilled me quite as much as certain poems have. And why not try to emulate what

has seemed the greatest to you, for you.

J.M. Spalding: When did

you know that being a poet was something that you wanted to spend your life doing?

Robert Pinsky: Sometime

in my late teens or very early twenties.

J.M. Spalding: How did

you begin as a poet?

Robert Pinsky: One answer

might be "Imitating Yeats, Allen Ginsberg, Frost, Eliot." Another might be

"Reading the dictionary and daydreaming about the sounds of words when I was a

kid." Another might be "Liking entertaining people when playing the saxophone as

a teenager."

J.M. Spalding: Eliot’s The

Waste Land—a poem I’m quite sure you’re familiar with—what do you think of

it?

Robert Pinsky: A great,

personal poem once mistaken for a work about large historical and cultural materials.

J.M. Spalding: Poets are

sometimes liked for their work but despised for their views. Clearly there are those who

dislike Eliot for his anti-Semitism, Pound and Kerouac for their political views. In your

opinion, can one truly like the poetry but not the poet?

Robert Pinsky: Maybe.

Probably. But the limitations of all three of those artists as

artists—members of America’s provincial upper-middle class, who warred with that

class’s attitudes while embracing them—are deeply related to the meanminded aspects

of their social and political attitudes. Wouldn’t Pound be a greater writer if he had

attained something more like Joyce’s complex humanism, for instance? Wouldn’t Kerouac have

more depth as a writer if he had managed deeper views of American politics and culture?

J.M. Spalding: What was

your initial reaction to being named United States Poet Laureate?

Robert Pinsky: After the

initial feelings of pleasure at the honor and fear at the work (I knew how much energy Bob

Hass and Rita Dove had expended), I mused a little about the title itself: I had always

preferred "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress" as more dignified

and nobly American. But "Poet Laureate" has magnetic connotations for people,

too.

J.M. Spalding: What is

the most enjoyable thing about being Poet Laureate?

Robert Pinsky: The

responses to the Favorite Poem Project have been various, enthusiastic and moving beyond

expectation.

J.M. Spalding: What do

you want to do when your term as Poet Laureate expires?

Robert Pinsky: Keep

writing, keep enjoying my family. Maybe spend a little more time on music.

J.M. Spalding: What

inspired you to translate the Inferno?

Robert Pinsky: It was an

accident, an assignment to do one Canto for a group project.

J.M. Spalding: What text

did you use?

Robert Pinsky: My main

text was the Singleton en face in the Bollingen edition, with Singleton’s

wonderful notes. And I had much recourse to other translations (Sinclair, Musa,

Mandelbaum, Binyon, Longfellow) as trots and consultants.

J.M. Spalding: When you

sit down to write, what kind of setting do you have? Are there any objects that you keep

around you?

Robert Pinsky: I don’t

care about all that.

J.M. Spalding: Who is the

biggest critic of your writing?

Robert Pinsky: I am.

Friends like Frank Bidart and Louise Gluck help, as does my wife and many other friends,

but the main and most fearsome and important critic is the author.

J.M. Spalding: If you

were stuck on a desert island and could only have three books and three music recordings,

which would they be?

Robert Pinsky: Ulysses,

Paradise Lost, The Complete Works of Ben Jonson.

Toscanini, Parker, and Ellington boxed sets.

J.M. Spalding: If you

were stuck on a desert island with Rod McKuen, what would you do?

Robert Pinsky: I’d ask

him to tell me his candid, unexpurgated memoirs of people like Auden, Cary Grant, Charles

Laughton. I imagine that the gossip would be spectacularly entertaining.

J.M. Spalding: What is

the current status of poetry in America today?

Robert Pinsky:

"Status" or "state"? Both seem amazingly high. As to the status of it,

people are nearly pious about it, often, even though practice of it is uneven. As

to the state of poetry’s practice, writers like Frank Bidart, Louis Gl?ck, James

McMichael, Mark Strand, C.K. Williams, and Anne Winters have produced amazing work,

despite the deplorable state of much reviewing and of much academic criticism.

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Interview with

Maura Kelly for FEED magazine

FEED: Tell me about how you came up with

the idea for the Favorite Poem Project.

PINSKY: The project is so much an

extension of what I’ve been doing all my life that it’s hard for me to think of it as an

"idea." Poems are meant for people’s voices. The art is vocal, but not

necessarily performative. The appeal of cadenced language is as universal as voice. It’s

not much of an "idea" to go from those basic notions on to the idea of asking as

many people as possible, of as many kinds as possible, to say a poem they love, and to

explain a little bit about why.

Most attachments are based on a physical

encounter, or begin with a physical encounter. That is why the teacher must read aloud

things he or she loves to the children, and the children must read aloud to one another

things that they have chosen, that they love. Analysis and interpretation are good, but

the appetite for them comes after that physical encounter and the attraction. First you

like the cuisine, the sport, the person, the animal… then, later, the craving comes for

information, analysis, interpretation.

FEED: So that’s why it’s important to read

poetry out loud, for the physical encounter?

PINSKY: Poetry is a bodily medium. Its

intimacy and universality depend on the medium of the reader’s voice. It must be heard to

be appreciated and to work.

FEED: What was the FPP submission that

most stood out in your mind?

PINSKY: Probably the only anonymous one in

the anthology (Americans’ Favorite Poems), about Edwin Arlington Robinson’s poem

"Eros Turannos."

FEED: Right. "What fated her to

choose him;/She meets in his engaging mask/All reasons to refuse him…" Like most

of Robinson’s work, that poem is haunting, tragic. What explanation did the anonymous

person give for why he or she submitted it?

PINSKY: The letter is quoted on page 235

of "Americans’ Favorite Poems."

FEED: A poetry cliff-hanger! All right.

So, do you have a favorite poem? Was there a poem that you read that made you say to

yourself, "Okay, I’m becoming a poet"?

PINSKY: The list is long, perhaps

beginning with and certainly including "Sailing to Byzantium," which I typed up

and hung on the wall when I was 17 years old.

FEED: Who turned you on to "Sailing

to Byzantium"? What was it about that poem that captured your imagination?

PINSKY: My freshman English teacher Paul

Fussell first showed it to me, I think. A great teacher. I may have been attracted by the

poem’s spiritual power, entirely apart from, and as it seemed to me, above any religion

such as Christianity or Judaism. The religion of art, I suppose.

FEED: How important is the oral tradition

to you in writing poems? Telling stories used to be a popular entertainment because there

weren’t many other options. But television, and, more recently, the internet, are much

easier forms of entertainment than storytelling. Do you think poets growing up today are

missing out to some extent because they are not verbally sharing stories with their elders

and peers?

PINSKY: I don’t think the appetite for TV

or the web exhausts or diminishes our appetite for personal contact, or the vocal arts. I

think people still tell and hear stories, as much as ever. What may be unusual about my

childhood and youth is that my town was a close-knit microcosm. Maybe that kind of

experience is increasingly rare. It was the New Jersey Shore as a small Southern town, in

a way.

FEED: Why are you working to keep poetry

active in American life?

PINSKY: In an age of dazzling, gorgeous,

mass media, highly duplicable and inherently on a mass scale, there is profound value in

an art whose medium is one individual’s voice — and the audience’s voice, not necessarily

the artist’s! Because poetry is inherently, and by its nature, on an individual, intimate

scale, we value it.

FEED: By that, do you mean that the voice

of any given poem is the voice of the reader more than it is the voice of the writer?

PINSKY: Not "more than,"

necessarily. A poem is a reality. That reality inheres not on a page or in an expert

performance but in the sounds of the words of the poem, realized in a voice, actual or

imagined. That reality is not bound to the poet’s voice, or to an actor’s.

FEED: Is storytelling, or the idea of

poetry sharing, necessary to sustain poetry as a viable, cultural force?

PINSKY: Sharing goods is more or less a

definition of culture, I think. It is "natural," in the way that culture is

natural. Such sharing may have more to do with the health and survival of an art than the

official world of grants, prizes, curricula, and so on.

FEED: A friend told me about an exhibition

that she saw at one of the Harvard libraries a few years ago in which your notes for your

translation of Dante’s Inferno were shown. They were covered with comments from

poet-friends of yours like Tom Sleigh and Seamus Heaney. Do you think collaboration is

important to the translating process? What are the similarities between the translation

process and the act of writing original verse?

PINSKY: I needed and used a lot of help –

more friends than it is easy to name helped out, besides Seamus and Tom, including Rosanna

Warren, Frank Bidart, Bob Hass, and many, many others. Steve Greenblatt. David Ferry. Mike

Mazur, Gail Mazur, Peter Sacks. For me, the only difference between translating and

writing a poem is that in translation one doesn’t have to think what to say next.

FEED: Are Creative Writing programs — the

Creative Writing poetry "track" — helping or hindering modern poets and poetry?

Have they narrowed the audience? Or were such programs necessary for the survival of

poetry in the second half of this century?

PINSKY: America, without the single

unifying folk tradition or the aristocratic tradition of some other cultures, has relied

on school to care for many things. Even jazz and the films of Keaton and Hitchcock now

find a harbor in universities. Creative writing becomes obnoxious when it becomes a guild.

But it is valuable in other ways: To the extent that English departments have abandoned

literature, creative writing programs have inherited it.

FEED: When does creative writing become a

guild?

PINSKY: A guild is an organization that

requires membership in order for a person to practice a craft. For instance, the

silversmiths or shoemakers allow only guild members to make silver candlesticks or leather

brogans. It would be obnoxious to limit the art of poetry to accredited members of the

creative writing guild.

FEED: You’re a great jazz lover. How is

jazz like poetry? Any favorite poems about jazz? (One of mine is Levin’s "I Remember

Clifford.")

PINSKY: Like poetry, jazz is based on

contrasting recurrence and surprise. Most poems I like are not "about" topics in

this way; "Ode to a Nightingale" is not about a bird, and "Sailing to

Byzantium" is not about sailing or a city or sages. A wonderful poem that includes

jazz references, that comes to mind, is O’Hara’s "The Day Lady Died," which is

about different kinds and levels of being alive.

FEED: Are the bookstores and publishing

houses so inundated with poetry books that the "bad stuff" is weakening the

market and distracting readers from the "good stuff"? Or are poetry lovers

becoming overwhelmed by the plethora of choices? Or are poetry lovers damn happy to have

so much choice?

PINSKY: I think these are serious

questions: The bad driving out the good is a disturbing thought. My tendency is toward the

theory that the cream rises to the top, in the long run. Thank god for boredom! It insures

that inflated writing or coterie writing — whether the coterie is avant garde or academic

or ethnic or whatever — quietly sinks.

FEED: Is the internet helping to

disseminate poetry to a wider audience?

PINSKY: I think so — the number of poetry

sites, and the amount of poetry on them, both old and new, canonical and not, is

remarkable. And as with the poems in Slate, some of it is audible.

FEED: Which poems would you recommend as

an introduction to your work?

PINSKY: Maybe "Shirt" or

"The Figured Wheel." Maybe "The Want Bone" or "History of My

Heart." Maybe a section from "An Explanation of America." Maybe "From

the Childhood of Jesus" or "Immortal Longings." But this [choosing one of

my poems] is, as the old line has it, like choosing a favorite child. And each different

reader in each different mood will want something different.

FEED: Finally, who do you write for? Do

you have one person in mind?

PINSKY: I write for a person like me, but

who did not write this poem. To put it another way, I try to write things that would

attract and move me, if someone else had written them. I try to write something that would

make me feel something like what I feel when I read "At the Fishhouses" or

"The Snow Man" or "Eros Turannos."

Or to put it yet another way, I write for

Ben Jonson or Emily Dickinson if they were me.

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Interview with Ted Genoways for Meridian

How did you find out you had been named Poet Laureate?

I came home from giving a poetry reading, and there were three messages on my answering

machine from the Library of Congress. I thought it probably wasn’t an overdue book.

[laughs]

One of the things the Library of Congress mentioned that appealed to them was your

effort to make poetry accessible to a broader audience by putting it on-line and seeing

the web as an asset rather than a liability.

Like print and writing, the computer is just a kind of representation of what is the

actual medium of poetry, which is the human voice. I’m the poetry editor of a weekly

magazine published on the web by Microsoft; the magazine is called Slate. We have a poem in Slate every week

and readers can click on the poem and hear it read aloud. There’s a lot of poetry on the

web.

What would you say to the people who complain that there’s no system on the web for

people to divide what’s good from bad beyond their own critical faculties?

I think that’s true, but it’s also true when you walk into Grolier Poetry Bookshop [in

Boston]. It’s also true when you pick up a literary magazine. I don’t think there’s any

guarantee of quality.

Another thing the Library of Congress cited was your other work in poetry. You seem

more interested in being a complete poet and critic than I think most contemporary poets

are. I think it was The Nation that drew the comparison to Robert Lowell. How do

you see the interaction between those different disciplines, or do you see them as

separate disciplines?

I grew up with the idea that to practice an art was to be involved in every part of it and

to try to involve art in every part of life. I never took a creative writing course, so I

don’t have a creative writing degree. I never specialized in an academic way. There are a

lot of things I’m interested in, and I try to carry that out in my poetry. The generation

of T.S. Eliot and people influenced by Eliot, I think those people as a matter of course

wrote in many different forms, were interested in translation, and it’s never occurred to

me to be any other way.

How would you remedy what seems to be a growing distance between the writer — as

artist — and the critic?

William Butler Yeats says, "Nor is there singing school but studying / monuments of

its own magnificence" [in "Sailing to Byzantium"]. That is, there’s no way

to learn to be better or to learn to do an art other than to study monumental examples of

the art. Ezra Pound says, "The highest form of criticism is actual composition."

That is, the poet must choose — the word "critic" is based on

"krinos," which means "to choose" — and critics today get away

with not choosing or not selecting but a poet every moment must choose: whether to use a

long word or a short one, this adjective or that one or none. This constant process of

criticism is part of the work of composition.

Is it a spider’s web in that way?

Everything breaks off from the matrix; the decisions may not be conscious ones, but one is

choosing at all times. With each step tens of thousands of new possibilites appear.

Which has implications especially in translation, because it’s not only your own

intentions you’re trying to forward but also someone else’s.

Yes, it’s interesting.

Especially because you, in your introduction to Dante’s Inferno, and John Ciardi

[in the introduction to his 1954 translation] say almost identical things about the

limitations of rhyme in English but come to the opposite conclusion. Where he says that to

attempt translating Dante into terza rima would be "a disaster," you obviously

didn’t think so.

No, obviously not, and I suppose I should say it was daunting, but in fact it was a

tremendous pleasure. That’s what made me do it, how much fun I had solving the difficulty

of creating a plausible terza rima in a readable English.

You employ a lot of unusual word combinations, similar to Old English kennings. For

example, from the beginning of Canto XIII: "The leaves not green, earth-hued; / The

boughs not smooth, knotted and crooked-forked."

Yes, it’s so much fun to use all those Germanic roots, particularly when you’re

translating from a Romance language. Walter Benjamin says a wonderful thing about

translation, that a restrung translation "records the change in the new

language," brought about by the work that’s being brought into it. I’m partly trying

to record the impact upon English of The Inferno.

And it must not only have an impact upon English, but also upon your poetry.

Well, translating is a wonderful form of reading; it may be the most intense form of

reading, and whenever you read a great work, it’s going to affect your own work. I think

working on this translation brought me a new intimacy with and appreciation of the

physicality of poetry. Dante is so tactile, so sensuous a writer, and trying to get some

of those effects in a parallel way or a simulacrum or an equivalent way in English gave me

a heightened sense of the importance of physical sounds, like going to all those Germanic

roots or the Old English roots in the passage you mentioned.

And I’ve noticed some of those appearing in the new poems in The Figured Wheel…

Yes, I think so, and…wait, excuse me a minute. [A brief pause] Excuse me, I had some

photographers here.

It’s all right; I’m sure your schedule must be constrained at all times.

Well, I do find that everything has to be written down, so it doesn’t get completely

crazy. Some guys were here taking my picture; I thought they were going to be gone when

you called. They were finished, but they were still packing up.

You must have far more requests than you can handle. How do you make those decisions?

It’s a great question. There are some things that just seem, to use my booking agent’s

expression — he will say, "This is just a good Poet Laureate thing to do."

There will be some things that just seem as though this is what the post was created for,

something that involves encouraging somebody who’s doing a very good job, bringing poetry

into schools or something where you what to enourage and support something that’s very

worthy. And sometimes it’s a personal connection. Or if it’s something that seems to

involve some national thing, like I was invited to go to the birthday party of Old

Ironsides, the U.S.S. Constitution here in Boston, which happens to be a ship that was

saved by a poem. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that poem [after a newspaper article in 1830

proposed dismantling the ship], and it seemed like that was something one ought to do.

A few years ago, Rita Dove did a lot to help redefine what a Laureate "ought to

do." How do you think the role of the Laureate has changed?

I think it has changed in response to the change in the times. I think that there’s been a

notable upsurge of interest in poetry and the practice of poetry, and in response to that

change in the culture the office of Laureate in a typically American way has sort of

improvised itself into something somewhat different.

So what are you hoping will be your trademark or your legacy?

I have a project that I hope to complete, which is to create an audio and video archive of

many, many Americans saying aloud a poem that person loves. I hope to have a very wide

range of regional accents, a range of ages, professions, kinds of education, and it will

not concentrate on poets or critics or experts. The idea will be to establish a record at

the millenium of the life of poetry in the United States, outside of any professional

microcosm of poetry. This project will be sponsored by the Library of Congress, as part of

their bicentennial celebration, and I hope it will also be part of the country’s millenial

celebration.

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