

EDITORIAL

Robert Pinsky's 2002 booklet *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*, based on lectures he delivered at Princeton in 2001 in the wake of his period as Poet Laureate of the United States (1997-- 2000), has just been released by Princeton University Press in the UK as a paperback.

One might have expected its original appearance in the United States to have elicited rather more comment than it did. It had the potential of taking up (with greater subtlety and force, ten years on) where Dana Gioia's tendentious *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (1992) left off. Both Gioia and Pinsky believe that poetry matters in a civic way, and Gioia -- the apologist for New Formalism -- is now Director of the National Endowment for the Arts, so whether poetry matters or not, Gioia does. Pinsky, who has proven himself a most resourceful reader of poems, from his early book on Landor to this present volume, takes us with him much of the way, until we realise that he is in the grip of a politics as forceful and potentially reductive as any modern theory or formal orthodoxy. A disinterested love of poetry has come to him to seem untenable in a modern world, which is somehow different in the demands it makes or, he feels after his stint as laureate, it *ought* to make, of art and artists, in the face of events, perils, demographics and the decorums that arise from them. He needs to make larger claims than he was accustomed to make, and to persuade himself, and us, that those larger claims have a more than rhetorical dimension. At one level, one wishes what he says were true. At another, one is relieved that it is not, that the kinds of 'value' argued for in the nine eloquent little chapters of his book, indeed the terms 'voice' and 'culture' themselves, are proof against his suaveness.

His conclusion focuses our attention on the poem 'Eros Turannos' by Edwin Arlington Robinson. He quotes the poem, a wonderful set of six octaves, prosodically resourceful and fictionally impassioned. There is much to say about the poem, but perhaps not quite this: 'Robinson, like the hero of his poem, wrestled with something larger than himself, and like hers his wrestling deserves a grave and enthralled communal awe.' Now, Pinsky is arguing always against an art that 'goes down easy', he has not once lost sight of what poetry can do. The distortion to his argument, and his language, is when he enjoins us to, as it were, give each other the kiss of peace when we respond to the poem. 'Communal awe' is a dreadful phrase because it displaces individual response, the *self-efacement* before the achieved poem; it conflates the variety of awes we experience, even before the same poem. The word 'communal' is treacherous when it comes to the enjoyment and appraisal of a work of poetry, in a way that it is not treacherous when used of a piece of orchestral music or a great religious or mural painting or a public sculpture.

The approximateness of Pinsky's language when he tries to join a political or civic programme with the individual response is unsettling. He knows that we hear a poem 'in the chamber of spirit and ear', what he calls 'the place of poetry'. But then follows the categorical arrogation, the politician's 'we' that makes some of us, at least, ask the conductor to let us off the bus. Robinson's poem 'answers and evokes' (why in that order?) 'our anxieties about mass culture with an individual, enigmatic fate. It answers and evokes our anxieties about fragmentation with the fiery ingenuity of its cadences, the audacity of its references. To the American thesis of a deadening absence of culture and its antithesis, a devouring omniculture, the poem responds with a synthesis...' This is, we remind ourselves, a lecture, hence the insistent rhythms. But at the

level of argument, Robinson's lovely poem is too frail a bridge to bear the weight Pinsky places upon it. It has nothing to do with mass culture or omniculture, and the delighted skill with which Robinson handles the form he has borrowed from -- is it? -- Thomas Hardy is hardly *fiery*; nor is his handling of the commonplaces of classical mythology audacious: if it seems so to us, that is a measure of our situation rather than of the poet's intentions. The 'synthesis' that Pinsky talks about evokes a kind of dialectics we were more at home with in the 1960s.

Are the issues Robert Pinsky raises *real* in the terms in which he raises them? Is the diagnosis from which he proceeds not dictated rather by politics, including the politics of funding, than by the art and audience themselves? Aunt Sally is near at hand: 'The place of poetry in modern democracy is no place, according to conventional wisdom. The poet, we hear, is a casualty of mass entertainment and prosaic public culture, banished to the artistic sidelines to compose variations on insipid themes for a dwindling audience.' The blurb trails its coat. 'Robert Pinsky, however, argues that this gloomy diagnosis is as wrong-headed as it is familiar.' And Pinsky is presented as a figure whose life story itself 'undermines the view'. He shows how 'The voice of poetry... resonates with profound themes at the very heart of democratic culture.'

Yet this little book is worth reading because Pinsky's love of certain kinds of poetry is such that we almost suspend disbelief; he reads *with* us, like a teacher, and when he works at that, rather than the political, level we open our eyes to poems, not to poetry, to particulars, not to generalities. We can trust him so long as we are inside a poem with him.

For him the poem is a heard thing; it is at the level of its aloudness that he politicises it, the poet reading to an audience literally or figuratively; and at that level the poet engaging the reader, the poet not heard but overheard, is attenuated. The voice of the poet rather than the voice of the poem: there is a difference, and in the relative emphasis we place on this difference we can locate aesthetic and political differences.

What compels me in this suggestive book is that Pinsky feels the need to write, to *lecture*, in these terms. The tension between reductive conformity and liberal individualism he seeks to resolve in the double nature of the poem, as a thing individually conceived, composed and set down (for a reader) and the thing spoken aloud (for an audience). If we credit the connection between the two, his argument will tease and worry at us. But implicit in it is an unquestioning notion of poetic 'voice' which belongs to the early years of the last century, not this, and which radical modern poetry of an engagedly political nature is doing much to disrupt.

I am reluctant to mention alongside the generous and inclusive arguments of Robert Pinsky's lectures the text of a recent British lecture. The cultural gap between these two instances is as wide as the Atlantic itself. In the British lecture the priorities and strategies of Thatcherite market politics triumphantly displace the traditional disciplines of serious editorial engagement, and the marketplace is given its head in the area of artistic choice. In the 2005 StAnza Lecture, entitled 'Bile, Guile and Dangerous to Poetry', Neil Astley, styled as 'the UK's leading anthologist', 'speaks his mind on poetry today', and attacks critics who have been less than wholehearted in their appraisal of his commercially successful anthologies *Staying Alive* and *Being Alive*. He discovers a 'poetry establishment' hostile, due to education and gender, to his dearest projects. He 'believes he has found a huge new audience for contemporary

poetry at the same time as the poetry establishment has become narrow-minded, male-dominated and Anglocentric. Poetry publishing and reviewing is [*sic*] policed by a clique of academics who rail against "populism", "democratisation", "marketing" and "dumbing down" but (ab)use these terms to censor poetry they dislike -- including much poetry by women and ethnic minority writers -- in support of a damaging academic agenda. Astley argues that their attacks on anyone who addresses a broader readership or promotes emerging talents may threaten the survival of poetry. Incestuously fawning to their poet and academic peers instead of serving readers, the poetry police have become so out of touch with the grassroots readership that they should go.' This summary does justice to Dr Astley's polemic, but not to the quality of his argument, divided into twenty-five little chapters with headlines, for example: LIES AND GUYS, GANGS AND BULLIES, POETRY POLICE ACADEMY, BITCHY ACOLYTES, MISOGYNY, PERVERSIONS. In PUNISHING OFFENDERS he declares, 'Intolerance of other opinions, it seems to me, is one of the distinguishing features of current poetry journalism.' In NOVEL APPROACHES: 'I think it's time the critics, reviewers and poetry editors were subjected to a more intelligent kind of scrutiny, and if they are failing the readership, they should be sacked. Or their funding should be cut in the case of the subsidised presses. The readers deserve better, and so do the poets.' This is the nub of the argument. Those who criticise his anthologies or disagree with his larger programme of editing through marketing should be silenced. In a lecture ostensibly against intolerance and in favour of greater freedom of expression, a contrary impulse is at work, as virulent and reductive as the Thatcherite ethos that spawned it. His metaphorical framework of the police state gives way, in the closing pages of his lecture, to a longer perspective, and his final chapter is entitled, MOVE OVER DINOSAURS. We are into natural selection. 'If the unresponsive dinosaurs in the poetry establishment don't change their ways, falling sales or subscriptions as well as reduced funding will precipitate or accelerate their demise. This process of disintegration is already happening... But as the dinosaurs collapse, there will be many new opportunities for new enterprises, and I'm convinced that because the current situation is so bad in many quarters, the Arts Councils and other funding bodies will want to support newcomers and new voices who want to promote poetry by all kinds of writers to all kinds of readers.' I am convinced that the Arts Councils are already doing just that, as are the Arts Councils' clients, and that this call for censorship based on ideological market populism should be seen as perilous to writing and readership and treacherous within the republic of letters.