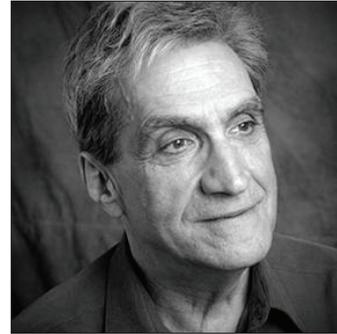


At the Founding Hospital
Poems by Robert Pinsky
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Review by Michael Todd Steffen

Abandonment and Identity in Robert Pinsky's new book *At the Foundling Hospital*

In Robert Pinsky's new collection of poems, *At the Foundling Hospital*, we get timely expressions of doubt, about facts, about information, the language that attempts to manage facts:

It's not

*Exactly our fungicides killing the world's bees.
The theory is, rather, the fungicides make the bees
Die from our pesticides, otherwise harmless. Or,
Maybe it's the other way around, who knows?*

Pinsky has elected to title the poem "CUNNING AND GREED" after bits of dialogue inserted in the poem from Dickens' novel *David Copperfield*, resonating with the theme of the book of poems, with its title designating special hospitals or shelters (comemorated at the Foundling Museum in London, which also includes an impressive collection of 18th century art work) where abandoned infants, or orphans, Dickens' heroes, could be left to be cared for.

*Near the end Uriah Heep says, David Copperfield,
I've always hated you, you've always been against me.
Copperfield retorts, As I've told you before, it's you,
Heep, who have been against the whole world...*

*Your artful greed and cunning—against the whole world.
And never yet has there been any greed and cunning
That did not do too much and overreach themselves...*

It is interesting that the poet for his title has inverted the accusing words from the passage, greed and cunning, to "CUNNING AND GREED." Language is easily manipulated, even the words of Charles Dickens. It is a fact that undermines all "facts," not threatening to poetry whose domain is the imagination, yet bothersome to the social as well as natural sciences that use language to assert truths about humanity and the physical world. So the confusion is permitted as to what is killing the bees, the fungicide or the pesticide which makes the fungicide deadly... Or, "who knows?"

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Poetry is hard enough to define. Some like it for its strangeness and riddlesome quality, for its ambiguous utterances producing irony or mild double-entendre, conveying two or several meanings simultaneously. "CUNNING AND GREED" serves as a good example of this, one of the many ways Pinsky's poems can step beyond just pleasing us to dazzling, while they instruct—or rather, bring up things we perhaps need to be concerned with. We are not in the age of Lucretius or Pope where didacticism goes over with appreciation. So Pinsky defers ideology and the sermon to quotes from Dickens, managing to avoid any obvious banner-waving about a troubling environmental phenomenon (the spreading death of honey bees, thought by Einstein and other leading scientists to herald the end of our natural food chain) by leaping from the passage in David Copperfield to the mention of the bees. This way, he has called attention to the plight of these beneficial creatures without too much souring our pleasure at the reading, without getting in our face about it. The Dickens' quotes are like old museum pieces. The "who knows?" protects us with its mild indifference or nonchalance. Though we have more and more cause of it, we don't appreciate alarm. We may have just picked up on the bees themselves in the passage, which quietly appears to be about the confusion between fungicides and pesticides. The real problem gets lost in the debate. The passage mimes somewhat the national debate, about bees and everything else, about our being.

The thing about "information" these days with the Internet in everybody's palm 24/7, there's no shortage of it. For this reason, bringing up the threat to the bees gets a little more focus by its being showcased in a book by a nationally honored poet, not the vast anywhere of cyberspace that allows everything and anything. Among all the grave subjects he could take on, Pinsky's discernment and delivery distinguish his poems. We may pause to remember the poem doesn't place the national debate at its center, or bees, or David Copperfield. It holds up some weighing ideas in the title, "CUNNING AND GREED," which are not directly addressed in the poem, while it sings and interweaves these various concerns, perhaps softly ruing some facts, disowned children and their agencies, a threatened environment, in a palatable way that is like simply giving voice to these pains and anxieties, singing the blues, as poets and singers do.

This is present in the flower at the beginning of the poem. The peculiar orchid is an example of cunning, or artifice, artfulness, in one of many deception strategies we recognize as intelligent in nature:

*An orchid that mimics an extinct female bee survives
Persisting for generations with untouched pollen
Stagnant inside it: an unmated simulation becoming
A funeral portrait. Floral, archaic as rhymed verse.*

It is a self-reflexive trope for the poet to announce that "rhymed verse" is "archaic." The poem on the previous page, "THE WARMING," also on an anxiety of the age, chants in rhymed couplets, bemusedly in the opening about the sexual origin of song, the symbiotic partner of the poem, the lyric:

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*Young men like my uncles in olden times would "croon":
Walking or at work, a musical inward groan:*

*The blue of the night meets the gold of the day.
Ramona. Dance, Ballerina. Too-ra-loo-ra-lay.*

*I asked my mother, why did they sing like that?
Her enigmatic answer: They're in heat.*

*Stopped at a light just now a guy in his van
Their same age, sound system blasting, windows down.*

*We men like sounding hot. Or warm and charming—
Even folk singers who rhyme about global warming...*

Music has long been a key topic in Pinsky's poetry, whether it's a "Song of Porcelain," "Louie Louie," or a canto translated from Dante. The theme pulses with a strong vein in the new collection in titles like "Mixed Chorus," the jazz rhythm poem "Horn," in a recitation game called "Baseball" in "The City," or in "Glory" evoking an ode by Pindar reminding us of the power of verse to celebrate and to be remembered—for over 2,000 years! If poetry is memorably significant, though, it is also as we find it in the title poem, "THE FOUNDLING TOKENS," a lot of spare reminders and wishes in the way of personal keepsakes, scribbled notes, identifiers:

*At the Foundling Museum
A wall displaying hundreds
Of scraps, each pinned once
To some one particular infant's
Nightie, nappie or blanket*

*Each with surviving particulate
Ink or graphite in studied lines
Betokening a life...*

Like the debate about fungicides or pesticides, rhyming poetry and rhyme's archaic quality, music and poetry are both poignant and wondrous but also frail and evanescent.

*My friend was in a coma, so I dove
Deep into his brain to word him back. I tried*

*To sing Hallelujah, I Just Love Her So in
Ray Charles's voice. Of course the silence grew.*

*I couldn't sing the alphabet song. My voice
Couldn't say words I knew: Because I Could
Not Stop For Death, He Kindly Stopped For Me...
(“IN THE COMA”)*

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(With the reference to “the alphabet song” perhaps we get a glimpse at a former poem that was very popular for Pinsky about ten years ago, “A, B, C” — “Any body can die...”)

Curious as the sound of a musical instrument being played, the opening poem, “INSTRUMENT,” makes a myth of the making of the first lyre out of a tortoise shell and strings of rabbit gut. We normally think of cat for the gut of stringed instruments. The rabbit in this poem perhaps brings an allusion to the fable of the tortoise and the hare, reminding the reader of the distractions, frustrations, impatience and ultimate slowness of the victory of finding music. The process involves the work of “a little newborn god” (Love, portrayed as a child god? — or perhaps left — “newborn” — at a foundling hospital), in an effort to sound the mystery of the —

*Sweet vibration of
Mind, mind, mind
Enclosed in its orbit...*

Louise Glück has praised Pinsky’s “taste for assignments to which he devises ingenious solutions.”

So the solution to “Instrument,” as an artifact of the thinking triadic Mind, mind, mind itself:

*The newborn baby god—
As clever and violent
As his own instrument
Of sweet, all-consuming
Imagination, held
By its own vibration:*

*Mind, mind, mind pulled
Taut in its bony shell...*

*Thrumming from here to there
In the cloven brainflesh...
With its blood-warm channels...*

Thought for the poet is like the hum of music. A stringed instrument may be as adequate a model of our psyches, language and of meaning (another of Pinsky’s curiosities) as theories by Freud or Jung, religions or philosophies.

An astonishing leap occurs between the first poem, “Instrument,” and the second, “Procession,” that reminds me of the leap in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey, between the stone-age ape bone tossed into the air and its correlative image of a spaceship navigating to the moon in the space age. From the birth of consciousness and the invention of the primitive tortoise-shell lyre, the second poem in Pinsky’s new book shuttles us to the dominance of scientific instruments observing the planet and worlds beyond and within:

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*At the summit of Mount Kea, an array of antennae
Sensitive to the colors of invisible light. Defiling*

*The sacred mountain, they tilt and sidle to measure
Submillimeter waves from across the universe:*

*System of cosmic removes and fine extremes
Devoted to track the wavering nature of things.*

That is *de rerum natura*, the nature of things pervasively from the core through the sphere, “wavering,” between this and that, denoting a divide: it is a long and vast way to come from “the cloven brainflesh” in “Instrument.” If the national debate is split between fungicides and pesticides, the pattern for that division has been deeply established and is widely resonant. We didn’t make this up any more than it makes us up. Yet we are caught in this circle of ourselves.

Only recently John Koethe released his 10th book of poems, *The Swimmer*. Including his most recent *Selected Poems*, *At a Foundling Hospital* makes this Robert Pinsky’s 10th collection of poetry. Who said the 9th is always the most masterly? This is as curious, fun and moving a collection as he has put together. It sings and dances with humor, surprise and assurance and here and there draws across deep cello chords for our fears and sorrows, giving credence to the miracle of forging identity and culture out of human leftness, abandonment, witnessing the strange (self?) destruction in the wake of our inventions.