

Proverbs of Limbo by Robert Pinsky
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Review by Michael Todd Steffen

**Amplly Speaking Silences in Robert Pinsky's
Proverbs of Limbo**

Exorbitant rents and constant overwhelming congestion of their city's spaces due to mass tourism have become too much for the residents of Barcelona. This has been somewhat in the world news over the past year or so. Locals there have been waving signs—Tourists go home!—and even aiming at them with water pistols and spraying them.

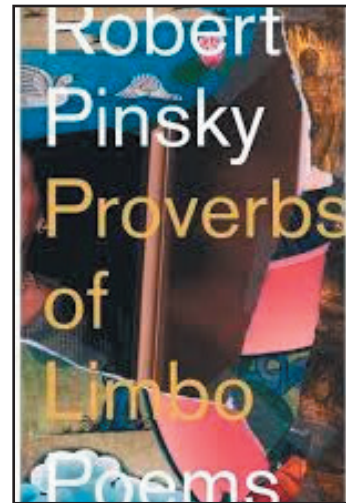
From his new collection *Proverbs of Limbo*, Robert Pinsky's cursory poem "In Barcelona" draws resonance from the story, if we have caught the particular item in the floods of information we're awash in these days. Though no specific reference to the dilemma of Barcelona's residents appears in the poem's mere six lines:

*Are you Italian? Ignacio asked me. Thank you
I said in Spanish, I am a Jew of New Jersey.
And I, a Jew of Venezuela, he answered.
As Ellen said, If he was improvising
So much the better. The art of conversation:
Projecting in turns onto the screen of being.*

Poetry gets a lot out of the generosity of terms in language. Ellen's word here, "improvising," is a polite way of saying that Ignacio is lying. But it's a kindly kind of lie in that its purpose is not to deceive but to associate. Why Ignacio brings up the question of the nationality to begin with—Are you Italian?—will be supported by the conversation's taking place in Barcelona. It's a likely question tourists ask when meeting other tourists. These days it's a question tourists in Barcelona might ask with some uneasiness, reading the locals' signs telling them to go home, getting sprayed with water pistols. Ignacio's "art of conversation"—congeniality, rather than attitude—is to associate himself ethnically in spite of national differences. You wouldn't want to be a lone tourist in a mob of residents against tourism.

The tourists under threat in Barcelona could pose an artful representation of any of the scores and scores of people worldwide these days who could say they're in the wrong place at the wrong time. The terms "homeless people," "refugees," "asylum seekers" are not only terms of reputation but newsy words, depending on a point of view, dehumanizing—or super-humanizing them like Odysseus, that wanderer of wanderers.

The Jew from New Jersey, the American who speaks colloquial Spanish—wouldn't he be a resident from a land of massive immigration by



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Spanish speakers today? Pinsky's poems are interesting for their suggestive amplitude, balance, as well as for their silences. In this instance, a good deal of balance comes from a silence or omission, like a heteromorphic kinetic statue.

Talking around the big splashes of world events, suggestively omitting, euphemizing, naming entities by their parts, calling the king "the crown," money "coin," poetry exercises an art to conversation, as it reminds us there's other stuff people are interested in. At the critical moment when Icarus's wings are making a small, far-away splash in the sea, nearer to the painter and larger, sheep are grazing and a plowman is plowing his spring field. W.H. Auden meditating on Breughel memorably noted, suffering takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along...

*Children...skating
On a pond at the edge of a wood...
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree...*

You could glance over the six lines of "In Barcelona." You wouldn't be wrong to wonder. You might well be reading this commentary on the poem and rolling your eyes. Mike's reading too much into it. And you wouldn't be wrong, by the evidence Pinsky has left in the text itself. And the poem wouldn't be less interesting. It might be even more curious now, more enigmatic.

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So much the better. The art of conversation:
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Our being, blank as a screen, with our choice of projections to cast on them, depending on what we choose to say or are impelled to say about ourselves. "And I, a Jew of Venezuela." We are as passing as movie theatres, the identities we take upon ourselves as fleeting as the movies we love to watch.

"I mutter flakes of meaning. Foofarraw, / Shmagegeh. Blah-blah-blah," the poet admits in another of the collection's poems, "Talking," which makes interesting observations on how spoken language has meanings other than signification:

*The baby rehearses melodies of speech,
The tunes of chat, of menace...*

The poetry is timely and also extraordinary—in its solemn, quiet insistence on what is ordinary in us, with our doggy life, in incompleteness, wanting originality, common, yet irrevocably unfounded. His "flakes of meaning. Foofarraw, / Shmagegeh" echo "The Foundling Tokens" of his

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haunting 2016 collection *At the Foundling Hospital*:

*Bit of lace or a pewter brooch,
Identifying coin, button
Or bangle, or crushed thimble...
Fragment of a tune or rhyme or name
Mumbled from memory. Incised
Into a bar of soap or even scraped
Into the very death-compound dirt
Or hut dirt or chalked onto pavement...*

I'll never forget where I was in mid-June this summer when Proverbs of Limbo came out. Mentally, at least, I was with many other news watchers on the International Space Station where American astronauts Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore were stranded, in limbo, as it were—they're still up there for another couple of months as I write this—after the Boeing Starliner, their maiden ship, was deemed unsafe to return them. Though the poems in Proverbs of Limbo are hardly about space and astronauts, world events had center-staged, at least for a few days, while the news was still new enough and the book hot off the press, a looming figure, in the two stranded astronauts, of what the poet had chosen for a telling name—Limbo—to describe things in 2024. Being relevant has kept Pinsky's poetry in front of us. In this new book he demonstrates a philosophy in the art, like a key idea from the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who is referenced in the collection, that "Philosophy" in a rarer sense can summons wisdom of love.

When the book came out in June there were internal urgings for me to write about the new poems, though why I waited—in limbo myself—till the end of November? Maybe subconsciously I wanted the election with its fervor of national suspense to touch down. Unlike news journals that are also supposed to announce the times, poetry is supposed to stand in the wake of things and still clap its hands. Maybe the book came out in time to situate itself more fully and be settled in for this time, before the transition of powers, where things seem yet evermore unresolved, at the mere threshold of a very scary place. Limbo. It's not quite Hell, but it's a far cry from better places, even from Purgatory.

The book's title prompted me to think beyond the colloquial sense of Limbo—"up in the air," "unresolved"—to Dante's depiction of this last sort of locus amoenus before entering the bad place, the serene land of sighs housing the scribes, poets, philosophers and the good elders, like Virgil the pilgrim's guide, who had the misfortune of being born before Christ, their only condemnation. Dante hails a current phenomenon, the countless groups of dispossessed people we see fleeing wars, cartels, unyielding farmland, trying to migrate to Europe and North America. Even if we find Dante's theological explanation for their plight obscure. Or if we think about Dante at all. Pinsky's readers would be likely to.

Back in June I discussed the appearance of the new book with Lloyd Schwartz, noting the echo in Robert's title of one of Lloyd's own memorable poems from his 2000 collection *Cairo Traffic*. Schwartz's poem, "Proverbs from Purgatory," appropriately for the moment opens—

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*It was déjà vu all over again.
I know this town like the back of my head.
People who live in glass houses are worth two in the bush.
One hand scratches the other.
A friend in need is worth two in the bush...
[Who's on First? New and Selected Poems by Lloyd Schwartz, The
University of Chicago Press, 2021, page 107.]*

Resolving a lingering in the air as to the likenesses of the titles, Lloyd gracefully conceded both his and Robert's titles are references to William Blake's famous passage of Proverbs from Hell, from "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell."

Drive your cart and your plow over the house of the dead. The road of excess leads to the place of wisdom. Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity...

So the title of Pinsky's book cocks an ear back at this passage from Blake: conventional wisdom demonized, turned on its head; turned sinister.

Ironies begetting sarcasm begetting satire soon wear thin to the American sensibility. We too demand more matter, less art. Yet there's a quiet art in choice and arrangement for the historical ironies of the poet's deliberations. The poem "Forgiveness" juggles two seemingly unrelated 20th-century cultural icons—the Cantos poet Ezra Pound and the popular jazz singer Keely Smith, announcing Pinsky's topic:

*The mind skitters, its one rudder
Being its own voice. The great Fascist
Poet taught me free verse.
Trying to concentrate on "The forgiving
Of an unforgivable crime" in a lecture
By Emmanuel Levinas, I drift into
Keely Smith being Cherokee...*

Meaning gnaws at the silent meat on the bone: the associative leaps that bridge these two strophes, under the title "Forgiveness"—"Fascist" and "concentrate"; "rudder" and "keel" sounded out in "Keely Smith." And that the jazz singer is "Cherokee" immediately turns our ready pointing finger for a "Fascist / poet"—line breaks are significant in poems—back on us, the reader—if the reader is a 21st-century American intruder on native American soil, likely any of us, centered and thriving on the fallacy (ad hominem) that the value of an artist's work has everything to do with who you are—politically, racially, sexually—and less and less to do with the demonstrable virtues of word choice, manner, style, rhythm, cadence, scansion, melody, esprit (a more silent quality) that bring creative integrity, joy (or danger), beauty—curiosity, interest—into the picture. (Glass as a structural material can assume every subtle shape and luminous color. It's the stones thrown from them and back at them that imperil the edifices.)

A little more plainly the opening two units of the poem announce "free form"—"vers libre" and jazz, Pinsky a devotee and able practitioner

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of both—as the main topic here. The art of conversation invites a likely reader’s attention for current slants in political debates and headlines. But the poet interests us with technicalities, betraying a purer preoccupation with the art of poetry:

*quantity
Reasserting itself after years
Of starvation.” Reading that, I
Got the idea—just like in music,
Longer is different from higher.
Like with long “ee”s,
And it was called “quantity” —
I could hear it. The third syllable
Longer, the first one stressed by pitch:
Bitterness. Cherokee. Popinjay...*

The zoom back away from topical politics—“Fascist / poet” —to some shoptalk about prosody, elements of tone, cadence, the poem’s materials and assemblage, relieves the possible political animosity of Ezra Pound’s appearance here, expanding the notion of the poet as a maker of song, perhaps first and foremost, above the weather of his times, his duty to record.

For in this poem about a jazz singer, a 20th-century French-Jewish philosopher, a Modernist poet and more specifically that poet’s attention to prosody and his translation of the 8th-century Chinese poet Li Po in “Exile’s Letter” —Pinsky is artfully conjuring (as he also avoids directly addressing) some terribly present subjects: Fascism, in general, its groping emergence in the result of our recent election as well as its side in current conflicts, in Sudan and Ukraine. The Israeli question now seriously problematic in Gaza, on hold for now but alarmingly spread throughout the Middle East. The less obvious yet likely the most sinister aspect of the machines of war and their bottomless proliferation and profit by these current conflicts without an end game is a topic that arises with the U.S.’s providing arms for a genocide in the making. Not to mention—and nobody does!—the blatant detriment advanced active far-ranging ballistics are causing the environment in our time of desperate talk about the need to upgrade camping heaters and curtail global warming.

Lest anybody unfairly get off the hook here, “Forgiveness” has included a jazz singer whose Cherokee identity indicts the whole of modern American culture. Only, like Prufrock, that is not what Pinsky meant:

*I don’t pretend I was thinking
About the Trail of Tears or any other
Unforgivable crime. I was thinking
About how well she imitates
Louis Prima’s pelvis-forward walk, mocking
The magic of it while singing like
An angel in a prom dress, and how
Great it would be to write something
That funny and impassioned.*

An acknowledged good of poems and art in general, making and

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appreciating them, is the therapeutic element of finding a way to grasp, get a different look at, get hold of a seemingly insurmountable dilemma, with an expression. Naming a pain or illness is the first step to its cure. The poem comes to a kind of climax here, "how Great it would be to write something That funny and impassioned." The writer's enactment of that essay and desire, the poem at hand itself! If I am wholly unable to do anything against this current unraveling of my world, I can pull Youtube up on my phone and watch Keely Smith dancing with (and in loving mimicry of) Louis Prima, as they sing—I've got you under my skin...So deep in my heart, you're really a part of me...The very title, "Under my Skin," reminds us of the inextricable bond, the pain and difficulty of love with another, but also the inseparable union we thrive by, if merely to survive, to be reminded we survive. That intimate union that relies absolutely on forgiveness: be unrelenting with me and you ruin yourself.

It's neat how Pinsky composes an allusive Pound-style poem as he writes about Pound, an elder in the art who has profoundly inspired him. But Pound is at the same time much maligned by the agents of a current political correctness trying to arbitrate survival in the Pantheon. The range, accuracy and intelligence of Pinsky's materials here would make the consumers of ideas and objets balk. The same was true for contemporary readers of Pound, who didn't have cell phones, just much hoed and weeded memory in the works—in the possession of culture. It's also neat how Pinsky's formal ventures with the poem have brought up, in practice of the curious as well as in idea, a usefulness to the gadgets constantly in our hands that so define our time. That's another star on the poet's homework, he has anticipated the deep habits of our gestures and challenged the reader with widget errands to be informed and broadened as well as entertained.

Of course, we have known the cleansing and curative powers of forgiveness for forever and a day by now. Don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life. It is at the heart of the books of wisdom worldwide, even of *The Iliad* (which "yacks" to Pinsky) with its denouement between Priam and Achilles for Hector's corpse. Absolution from blame as well as from guilt is as essential to our spiritual and psychological health as citrus fruit was in the day to sailors as an antidote to scurvy. On the first page of *Poems of Limbo*, the poet announces with the "begats" of the Biblical genealogies the problematic "Underground river of passion and retrenchment." Of course, any notion that can be introduced by "Of course" cracks a whip at the dead horse of bygone ideas and their language.

In the stirred and stirring poem, the lecture by Emmanuel Levinas on "The forgiving Of an unforgivable crime" brings historical definition—the Holocaust of World War II—to the timeless dilemma. It merely suggests a victimized people in the spotlight of current history, to get more specific, since October of last year, where tables between victim and aggressor have

been direly tottering, in a surreally downhill sense of the Justice of an eye, arm and a leg for an eye. Once caught in the cycle of wrong begetting wrong begetting yet more wrong, reason it out however you want to. Cause brings no end to the daily destruction. The jury in observation, unnamed but conjured (as Henry Adams and the advent of modern techno-

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logical powers superseding the old-world cathedral), in a very Pound-like nut to crack open—

*The airy dynamo of song
Animates the shadows
is as instantly put into question as its vapor appears:
White soldiers
Took away the Arapahos' horses.*

And the particular open wound in Gaza “skitters” toward a more generalized Spiritus Mundi of animosity in the following lines, where again history turns the tables on a perceived victim:

*In old Ukraine, the Nationalists first
Mutilated some Jews, then made them
Dance and sing naked before
Killing them, as a way of showing
What they'd like to do to the Poles,
Or was it the invading Germans. Is the point
Humiliation beyond forgiveness?*

We are only a little more patient with history, being a nostalgic people, than with irony. If the poet gets documentary, the times are relentless in the production of facts. To the point nonsense becomes an antidote to the implacable aspect of the sense of things:

*Even poor John Keats, in his letters,
Enjoys a little minor Jew baiting.
Who do I think I am to forgive him?
After all, I am him. He too was the child
Of a New Jersey optician and please do me
A favor, don't tell me No he wasn't.*

Of the 33 poems in the collection, nearly half of the titles concern names or place names: Poem of Names, Branca, At Mt. Auburn Cemetery, Place Name Echoes, Geronimo, In Barcelona, La Cucaracha, Lenny Bruce, What Kind of Name is That, Leo Gorcey, Proverbs of Limbo, At the Sangoma.

*“What Kind of Name is That” opens:
Nice people like us will rank the one same folder
Differently if the name is “Michael Carruthers”
Than if we're told it comes from “Tashawna Johnson,”
Tilted by syllables in what the experts call
Unconscious bias, betraying how much more
We learn to swallow than we ever know.*

Poetry's more sacred duty—unlike its frequent occasional scratching—is to seek out the most tender, sorest blisters in a people's psyche and puncture them, easing their severity. For contemporary America, racial and ethnic profiling are at the top of the shipping list. If we come away from Pinsky's poetry confused, as soft and round stepping as he can be, as

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in "In Barcelona," it's in fact a confusion at how boldly he also confronts and addresses the stones of names in the air. Especially for one who has invested so much of his life and effort so admirably in the disciplined practice and promotion of poetry, of "Foofarraw, / Shmagegeh. Blah-blah-blah..."