

## Robert Pinsky and Randall Jarrell: The Functional Use of the Poetic Language

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When Robert Pinsky's book of poems *Sadness and Happiness* appeared in 1975 it received overwhelmingly positive reviews and was appreciated as much for its manner as for its matter, as an urbane and stylish verse the likes of which had not been heard since the passing of Randall Jarrell about a decade earlier. Hayden Carruth admired the public dimension of the poems, the way they filtered a serious tone through "formal lightness and intellectual elegance" ("Review of *Sadness and Happiness*" 19). Louis Martz similarly praised his "unflinching technique," as well as the original linking of "abstract utterance and vivid image," a combination that he saw pointing the "way toward the future of poetry" ("Recent Poetry" 1). And William Pritchard declared it to be "a distinguished accomplishment, remarkable for its daring and its poise." He heard an "appealing and convincing" new voice whose meditative quality he likened to the Randall Jarrell of "Next Day" or "Woman" ("Going Quietly Sane" 697). Observations like these made and still make a great deal of sense, and I would like to explore the last especially by way of sorting out some distinctive features in the way Pinsky's poetic voice approaches its various subjects in *Sadness and Happiness* and also in some of the books he has written since. Several poems continue to brood in contrary fashion upon situations found in the earlier poet, walking around them in the other direction, as it were, and where Jarrell may seem most original in translating Rilke. The easy wit and wide range of address of Pinsky can remind us of no one so much as Jarrell. No other poet since Jarrell, whom Jay Parini calls "the best poet-critic of his generation" ("The Poet-Critic" 109), has kept more alive for American poetry the role of the poet-critic such as Pinsky, who, in the words of Paul Breslin, is "the finest American poet-critic since Randall Jarrell" ("Review of *The Figured Wheel*" 226). At the same time, there are real differences to be remarked between the two. Some are differences of technique and

approach, others differences of opinion owing in part to changing social horizons. Taken together, their works form a running commentary on the American national psyche, and we can learn from both something about how the Americans got where they are as a culture which neither alone could teach us.

As a student of John Crowe Ransom, the critic who in 1946 christened the practice of Eliot, the young Randall Jarrell assumed the mantle of an austere modernism. His poetry reviews of more than two decades kept on a short tether anyone who strayed from the principles of the modernist canon—that is, of Pound, Eliot, Crane, Tate, Stevens, Cummings, and Marianne Moore, with honorary status granted to Frost and Auden. More than one younger poet, it is said, kept back a maiden effort for fear of Jarrell's sharp pen.<sup>1</sup> Jarrell was noted for his acerbic, witty, and erudite criticism. In a volume of essays about Jarrell titled *Randall Jarrell, 1914-1965*, nearly all of the writers praised his critical faculties. They also noted, commented Stephen Spender in the *New York Review of Books*, "a cruel streak in Jarrell when he attacked poets he didn't like" ("Randall Jarrell's Complaint" 27). Jarrell could be harsh, critics agreed, but his vehemence was a barometer of his love for literature. Robert Lowell wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that Jarrell was "almost brutally serious about literature." Lowell conceded that he was famed for his "murderous intuitive phrases," but defended Jarrell by asserting that he took "as much joy in rescuing the reputation of a sleeping good writer as in chloroforming a mediocre one" ("*Randall Jarrell, 1914-1965*" 3-4). Helen Vendler also felt that Jarrell's commitment to promoting good writers was the source of his vitriolic reviews. She wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that "nobody loved poets more or better than Randall Jarrell—and irony, indifference or superciliousness in the presence of the remarkable seemed to him capital sins" ("The third book of criticism" 4-5). Michael Dirda of the *Washington Post Book World* agreed that Jarrell had the best interests of literature in mind when he used invective.

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<sup>1</sup> The periodical reviews are collected in *Randall Jarrell, Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935-6*. Jarrell once began an omnibus review by saying that "poets are in the beginning hypotheses, in the middle facts, and in the end values" (127), and he treated most young poets very hypothetically indeed. Several poets proved their poetic worth in time, and he was generous enough to notice it when they did.

According to Dirda, Jarrell defended his willingness to "bury" (Jarrell's word) a work that did not meet his standards by saying that "taste has to be maintained (or elevated if it's at too low a level to make maintenance bearable) and there is no other way of doing it" ("Review of Jarrell" 1-2, 4).

Jarrell also worried that modern poetry had arrived at a mannered dead-end, that its quirky intensity had closed off the traditional modes of human expression, and he wanted to write that possibility back into it. His own verse made modernism approachable by catching off guard the everyday perplexity of the man or woman next door. Transposing the rustic ventriloquism of Frost into suburban monologues, Jarrell sang arias to the ordinary. His poems revealed his strong perception of the ironic incongruity between people's ideals and the way they live, as well as a sure feeling for the moral and psychological crises people have in common and a messianic vocation to show others what he learned and saw in the contemporary world. He consciously limited himself to a poetry of everyday life (and its corollary dream or nightmare) which he recorded in a language at times too much like that of everyday life, accepting perhaps too uncritically the Freudian model of motivation and behavior. In *Babel to Byzantium*, James Dickey argued that Jarrell's "poems give you the feel of a time, our time, as no other poetry of our century does, or could, even. They put on your face [. . .] the uncomprehending stare of the individual caught in the State's machinery: in an impersonal, invisible, man-made, and uncontrollable Force. They show in front of you a child's slow, horrified, magnificently un-understanding and growing loss of innocence in which we all share and can't help [. . .]: He gives you, as all great or good writers do, a foothold in a realm where literature itself is inessential, where your own world is more yours than you could ever have thought, or even felt, but is one you have always known." (24-5). Often enough Pinsky finds the things most worth talking about to be the same sorts of things—improbable sources of emotion, childhood recollection, the discomfiture of the comfortably off—yet from the beginning Pinsky has been less oracular, predicting only that the national muse would emerge from the waters of confessionalism refreshed and with something new to say. In part, what makes the two poets sound alike is a kind of *trompe l'oreille*. Both speak to the values of the quotidian across the currents of an unusual decade, the 1960s, but what it means to talk about quotidian values has meanwhile changed. It makes a difference that Jarrell never saw poetry attempt to

levitate the Pentagon and that Pinsky did. Verse makes much more room for quotidian values these days. Pinsky also approaches the familiar scene or feeling with inflections more detached than those of Jarrell and with a markedly different sense of technique, as if transforming a poetics of the inner voice into a poetics of consensus. "Pinsky's poetic gifts," as Tony Hoagland contends, "are better suited than almost anyone's to represent the postmodern situation—its wonders, duplicities, and estrangements" ("Three Tenors" 38). His body of work shows his ability to evoke the universal from the singular and personal, and his ability to capture the essence of America and the human spirit.

Juxtaposition is enough to show the affinity. Jarrell's best-known poem is "A Girl in a Library," a long monologue that Pritchard in his fine biography of Jarrell calls "ingenious, highly amusing, and poignant" (*Randall Jarrell* 193). This poem is Jarrell's contemplation of the archetypal American college girl, so different from the fictional romantic heroine who is her foil in the poem, but elementally human, and, in her own way, mythic. As with many poems from the 1950s, part of the game is determining the situation. It happens that a male speaker is worrying the academic and poetic potential of an undergraduate woman asleep at a library table. The poem takes the form of a long reverie. Herein, the speaker, almost surely a professor of literature, is found at a safe distance leisurely observing "an object among dreams" sitting "with [her] shoes off" as her "face moves toward sleep," "studying" home economics and physical education. Not content with his status as an observer, the speaker enters into an imagined conversation with a female colleague, where he conjures up an image of Pushkin's character, Tatyana Larina, a character fancifully borrowed from the novel he is reading (*Eugen Onegin*). The image of Tatyana Larina, herself the very type of romantic heroine, is seemingly invoked by the narrator to be an antithesis to the girl. Together they begin to whisper about the young woman without ever addressing her. What does she dream about? they wonder. The observer successfully penetrates the closed world of her psyche without even disturbing her nap. And the poem answers, extravagantly, that her dream is to recover a lost cultural moment. Jarrell's speaker would gently waken her to the worlds of learning that must always extend far beyond any reader and make a gift of what is ritual and instinctual in classical culture to an athlete knowing little of antique lore. The poem helps in gaining insight into the poetic consciousness caught in the act of transforming

life into art. Robert Pinsky has commented that, although the use of a borrowed voice or alter-identity "[...] partly distinct from the poet, constitutes one of the most widely noted [...] and fundamental aspects of modernism," certain recent poets have employed "a speaker or protagonist who is not only dramatic, but somewhat eccentric [to] present a statement about oneself" (*The Situation of Poetry* 14). In his use of personae, Randall Jarrell is able, as Pinsky implies, to be both dramatic and confessional and realize the full benefits of both poetic strategies. The poem thus proceeds by verbal fits and starts, a mannerism that, as Pritchard remarks, sets it off from much of the polished verse written under the dispensation of the New Criticism (197-98). Its hesitant accents are those of the soldier-scholar entering the reaches of the American university through an accident of historical chance, the GI bill, just after the academy operated on a European scale for the last time, and they are meant to be an index of sincerity.

These are also gendered accents, of course. The silent young woman speaks to a time when men outnumbered women nearly two to one in higher education according to the *U.S. Bureau of the Census: 1952* (125). Wendy Lesser has characterized the tone the speaker takes toward the young woman as highly ambivalent. Because Jarrell typically associates masculinity with wit and intellectuality and femininity with fecundity and imagination, she suggests, he approached his role as critic with greater personal assurance than that of poet. Where Jarrell usually finds much to praise in his female muse, here he fails to come to terms with his own womb envy: "The poet and the girl are each other's victims," Lesser writes. "He attacks her mindless self-satisfaction even as he envies it, while she destroys his confidence in his own ability to create and love literary characters" (*His Other Half* 153). And yet, as Lesser goes on to say, with its mildly optimistic closing turn—

I have seen  
Firm, fixed forever in your closing eyes,  
The Corn King beckoning to his Spring Queen.

(CP 18)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Abbreviated references are to Randall Jarrell, *The Complete Poems*, and are cited further in the text.

the poem somewhat redeems the dual potential of its mute subject. More than that, one could say that the poem actually means to challenge the exclusion of women from the academy, along with a couple of other academic commonplaces. According to one of these, the life of the mind necessarily entails the denial of our physical dimension as humans. According to another, culture is best mediated through an elite pedagogy. *Culture* is a word that the poem never quite pronounces but everywhere queries. Jarrell would hurry its meaning away from evaluation and toward simple description—away from Europe, in effect, and toward America. Second-generation agrarian that he was, Jarrell recoups for the word a sense of tending something growing understood by *cultivation*.<sup>3</sup> Learning cannot be constituted by assignments completed, the poem argues, since "the soul has no assignments." Instead, it

wastes its time.

Here in this enclave there are centuries  
For you to waste: the short and narrow stream  
Of Life meanders into a thousand valleys  
Of all that was, or might have been, or is to be.

(CP 16)

Where should the individual bark of wit, in Dante's phrase, find its guide along these far-branching waters? Jarrell takes the long primordial view and situates the dreamed story of the student in the precritical nature of ancient narrative, as if the unformed character well nurtured yet might shape itself into myth, as if our individual dreams might yet democratically express the human condition. The poem finally allows itself to imagine an academic calendar of mixed study and play with a Greek revival taking place every time the campus crowns its homecoming king and queen. While the pedagogical ideal has gone the way of great book clubs, Jungian archetypes, and the like, the higher education of a wide spectrum of men and women has come to pass, and these matters of class and gender, like the advertisement where the poem first appeared offering the uninitiated a glossary of

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<sup>3</sup> Calling it "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language," Raymond Williams points out that "culture in all its early uses was a noun of process: the tending of something, basically crops or animals" (*Keywords* 27).

New Critical terms,<sup>4</sup> serve as cultural subtext. In his sleeping woman athlete Jarrell finds the occasion for some progressive if inevitably outdated thinking about educational opportunity and gender equity.

A poem from Pinsky's *Sadness and Happiness* called "Library Scene" begins with a similar setting, a speaker observing a student in a library, and even employs a somewhat similar metaphor. Where Jarrell challenges the limited expectations of an imaginary colleague, Pinsky addresses a woman colleague who is quite real even if identified only by initial letters. Where Jarrell's tone is sentimental and uncertain, Pinsky's is reassuring in its arm-around-the-shoulder conventionality. The poem, dedicated to educator Patricia Spacks, forms thirteen stanzaic couplets. The first three summon words for critical understanding by describing its physical simulacrum:

Under the ceiling of metal stamped like plaster  
And below the ceiling fan, in the brown lustre

Someone is reading, in the sleepy room  
Alert, her damp cheek balanced on one palm.

With knuckles loosely holding back the pages  
Or fingers waiting lightly at their edges.

(SH 34)<sup>5</sup>

Tentatively the poem tries out between half-rhymes like these a few words for the absorption of critical reading—a kind of *work*, or *force*, or *love*, or maybe *action*—and chooses at last straightforward simile, recharting Jarrell's river of learning with its difficult tributaries into the busy calm of a reader's attention—

that calm like water braiding  
Over green stones [. . .]

(SH 34)

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<sup>4</sup> In the April 1951 number of *Poetry* 78: 1 (7-11). The glossary is William Elton's *A Guide to the New Criticism*, sold at student discount by the magazine.

<sup>5</sup> Abbreviated references are to *Sadness and Happiness* (SH); *An Explanation of America* (EA); *History of My Heart* (HH); and *The Want Bone* (WB).

—into the white noise of concentration which keeps those who read for love, those in what Pinsky calls "the house of power" (SH 35), at a proper distance. Where Jarrell reworks mythology to find a place in its beginnings for his sleepy dream-wanderer, Pinsky converts his precise setting into an exemplary realism in order to worry the mysterious transfer of learning first suggested by the indefinite pronoun interpersonal contours first suggested by the diction of *something*, *someone* find their situational counterparts in the diction of *something*, *some work*, and *somehow*. "Someone is reading," the poem says again and again, her eyes attending to some work of "delicate surfaces." Then the poem turns in final tribute to a woman colleague:

Someone is reading in a deepening room  
Where something happens, something that will come

To happen again, happening as many times  
As she is reading in as many rooms.

[ . . . ]

Or it happens that they come, at times, to you

Because you are somehow someone that they need:  
They come to you and you tell them how you read.

(SH 34-35)

With the doubly indeterminate phrase "somehow someone" the personal pronoun at last locates its lost referent in the woman colleague, and the mild wonder of the scene is answered. The poem can close only after the young reader and the woman colleague engage in dialogue; that a mature woman should be there to offer her own understanding of things is partly the point. It was in 1976, the year after the poem appeared, according to the *U.S. Bureau of the Census: 1978*, that for the first time in recent memory more women than men began baccalaureate study in the United States (162). The poem recognizes the need that entails. Pinsky offers a small tribute to pedagogy that at once approves the educational concerns of Jarrell and that from the perspective of history also slightly reproves the gendered address of his predecessor. When we read these poems together, of course, my women students remind me that the perspective from which a *woman* poet could offer a meditation about the understanding of a



young male student at all resembling that of Jarrell or Pinsky remains well beyond the present social horizon.

If Pinsky can charm us into attention, he also draws us into social thought out of some pretty unlikely situations. "The Beach Women" opens with the playful freedom of pastoral, its accentual-verse stanzas unfolding with the enjambed curl of breaking waves:

In the fierce peak of the day it's quietly they wade  
With spread arms into the blue breakers rushing white  
And swim seemingly with no tension, the arms  
Curved, the head's gestures circular and slow.

They walk dripping back into the air  
Of nineteen-fifty-five smiling downward from the glare  
As if modestly, as they move daintily over the sand  
Shaking their hair, tingling, taking it easy.

(SH 53)

The diffracted syntax invokes a visual aspect and one way of reading the opening retrospective is to see it as a reluctant, hyperreal birth of Venus. A diffident figure of beauty anadyomene emerges from the godhead and looks momentarily around at the times, unable to decide whether to return to the world of ideal form or remain here with the rest of us. The poem has an undertow of serious social concern, for beneath all the seasonal insouciance the women have arrived at a cultural crossroads. With one foot in the present, the other in the past, the speaker admits to a disquieting acquiescence in the social forces that held the women hostage. Or if that is putting it too strongly, then say that the summer colors of

suits, towels, blankets,  
Footwear, loose robes, bottles, carriers of straw,  
Bright magazines and books, gear feminine and abundant

(SH 53)

distracted them all from the dilemma of living under easy circumstances, the speaker and these beachgoing women, the wives of husbands who travel "down from New York to tip big on the weekend" (SH 54). In the sixth stanza the tense shifts from present to past, the meter settles briefly into an irregular blend of anapest and iamb, and the speaker lists their entertainments:

It was Irving Stone they read, John O'Hara or  
Herman Wouk

Or the decade's muse of adultery: Grace Metalious.  
With her picture in *Time*, floppy dungarees, no bra,  
Retrospectively a seer, a social critic—

Eventually the speaker steps into the poem as his younger self working  
summers as a clerk on the boardwalk. The newspapers are full of  
"Caryl Chessman, Chaplin, Lucky Luciano / Ike and the Rosenbergs,"  
but the speaker, like one recumbent reader deep in *Caine Mutiny*,  
remains oblivious to the seriousness as well as the absurdity of the  
situation.

What can I recall? Women,  
Moving in the sparkle of the sidewalk, blinding  
Even in the reverse colors of the afterimage

Outside the drugstore where I worked  
and where he

on dark days purveyed  
Dozens of copies of *Confidential*: "Victor Mature

Locked Me in a Cage"

A loosened cadence resists imposing much order upon these reflections  
and the poem closes with another list, the bill of goods the speaker  
unwittingly sold the women:

Perfume and lipstick, aspirins, throat lozenges and Turns,  
Tampax, newspapers and paperback books—brave stays  
Against boredom, discomfort, death and old age.

(SH 54)

Immaturity and commodification together blind the speaker to sexual  
politics, an admission that allows us to confess in turn that we all sell  
ourselves these things. If the inventory reminds us of the Jarrell of  
"Next Day," whose sad shopper makes a desolate pilgrimage down  
market aisles stacked with Cheer or All or Joy, there is also an  
important difference. In Jarrell, the list becomes a negative allegory of  
the poetic life by preserving for the speaker a sense of otherworldliness;  
here keeping the names that the culture supplies amounts to a  
postmodern complicity in cultural consumption. The serial anodynes

named in those punning *stays* are also suggestive in a limited way. Now that we all doubt the values enshrined in the contained immediacy of things, what are some others? They ask. And if the writers the women take to the beach speak for social change despite themselves, should that not make it somewhat easier for those who wish to speak for the future to do so? Although memory is cast in forms broken by time's passing, it holds the key to understanding, the closing suggests, and though beauty colludes with her captors she still inscribes an imagined resistance.

There is no such resistance, imagined or otherwise, in the apposite poem from Jarrell. "In Montecito" is a much darker lyric as a result. The poem, drawn from a 1960 visit to southern California, parodies the genre of the murder mystery. It reports on a crime in three movements and gives to each an increasingly menacing tone of voice. In the first a bystander speaks with sardonic disinterest about a murder he witnesses ("In a fashionable suburb of Santa Barbara, / Montecito, there visited me one night at midnight / A scream with breasts" [CP 282]). The next catches the empty values of a certain social set ("People disappear / Even in Montecito" [CP 282]). And the last sums up the unsolved murder with the flat moral of restatement ("Greenie has gone into the Greater Montecito / That surrounds Montecito like the echo of a scream" [CP 282]). The lyric is as disturbing as it is because it lacks an immediate locus for our sympathy. The crime is in a literal sense victimless, or else the poem would incline to elegy. The real crime occurs before the poem begins in the cruel combination of circumstance that prevents the unconsciously constructed self of the victim from ever becoming her own. The speaker defines her personality in exclusively material terms, describes her disappearance with tightlipped meanness, and by invoking habeas corpus finally leaves us with the sound of the American dream hollowing itself out. The real dimension of loss is something we are simply forced to guess at.

Arguably, it is the dense semiotic weave of Pinsky's "The Beach Women" that lends the flat critique of "In Montecito" the pointed clarity of parody. It's as if the gendered books the women carried to the beach in 1955 had through a sort of historical detour reached a point of utter exclusivity, so that men now read one set of authors, women another. Without naming them, the brusque inflections of "In Montecito" mimic the most obdurate attitudes of masculine discourse.

And the philistine surrealism of the poem, stretching every trope to an impossibly hyperbolic scale, is the very voiceprint of hardboiled detective fiction. ~~With its broad range of intended response the poem is~~ typical of postmodern parody, as Linda Hutcheon points out, the better to force the male reader to consider a full range of dehumanizing behaviors (*A Theory of Parody* 103).<sup>6</sup> If Jarrell proves a faultless mime of male discourse, does he also believe in a feminine writing? A year or so before he died Jarrell was planning a new collection called *Women* that would probably have provided an answer. While he becomes increasingly sympathetic about the social restrictions placed upon women ("Men are what they do, women are what they are," he has his woman speaker say in "In Nature There is Neither Right Nor Left Nor Wrong" [CP 331]), Jarrell tends to describe the problems of his women speakers in individual rather than social terms. He probably would have treated their shared situation as the sum of personal concerns about such matters as aging or ingratitude. The dramatic monologue that serves him as the formal container of the bemused meditation or confused lament of so many different women speakers—from the young bride who dreams that she Owns an eland ("Seele im Raum" [CP 37-38]), to the housewife watching the boy load her groceries into the back of the station wagon ("Next Day" [CP 279-80]), to the mother comparing her loss of a daughter to another daughter's loss of her childhood ("The Lost Children" [CP 301-303]), to the matron recalling a girlhood scene of desire ("Gleaning" [CP 343])—may privatize a more generalized discussion of gender politics of the sort broached by Pinsky.<sup>7</sup> Then again, it is not easy to imagine any

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<sup>6</sup> Hutcheon thinks of parody as a quintessentially post-modern and highly politicized imaginative mode cutting across several art-forms. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon briefly discusses a number of women writers and artists in whose work a woman's body becomes "the locus of power politics" through a similar fetishization (151-60), among them Maxine Hong Kingston, Margaret Atwood, Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger.

<sup>7</sup> Unless we agree in advance that it is only the personal which is political, a tenet that Jarrell, even in his most intensely lyrical moments, never held. For a series of brief, sympathetic excursions toward a larger discussion of this sort, see his introduction to Eleanor Taylor's *A Wilderness of Ladies* in *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket: Essays and Fables* (196-211).

speaker, man or woman, who could fully inhabit such a public discourse during the late 1950s and early 1960s and make good poems of it, nor to name another male poet who took a woman's view half so often. As for Pinsky, the separation of gender from sexuality and the emphasis on a collective entity link "The Beach Women" to an advanced feminism concerned mainly with understanding, in order to outmaneuver, social conditioning. In effect, Pinsky transforms a threat of extreme loss into an awareness of forms of acculturation. And reading the two lyrics in the perspective by incongruity of voice reveals just how permeable the border between late modernist and postmodern verse can sometimes be.

Jarrell borrowed a phrase from Marianne Moore—the "plain American that cats and dogs can speak"—to name the way he thought vernacular speech should unwind itself down the length of the line. The phrase suits his own conversational idiom, reminds us coincidentally that his poetry contains a virtual menagerie of animals (*CP* 3),<sup>8</sup> and also serves Jarrell as a rough equivalent for what Robert Frost called the "sound of sense." Jarrell's most sustained close critical reading is of Frost's "Home Burial." The dramatic situation is a conjugal quarrel about the death of an infant. After quoting the poem whole, Jarrell goes on to paraphrase it nearly line by line, praising the effect of realism it conveys. When an aggrieved tone begins to creep back into the husband's terse and urgent pleas for reconciliation, for example, Jarrell notes approvingly from the side-lines that "there are no long peacemaking speeches in a quarrel." Jarrell celebrates above all the vivid interplay of sound and meaning achieved through the idiomatic syncopation of prosodic measure. In several well-known letters Frost

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Jarrell had three poems ready for the book to be called *Women*, he wrote to Michael di Capua during the summer of 1964: "A Man Meets a Woman in the Street," "Gleaning," and "The Player Piano" (*Randal Jarrell's Letters* 492).

<sup>8</sup> Pritchard notes the debt to Moore in *Randal Jarrell* (160). We find animals in Jarrell not only where we might expect them but also throughout. Theriophily, the love of animals, is a feature that many of his speakers have in common. The word *fur* turns up in a surprising number of poems, from "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" ("And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze"; [*CP* 144]) to "The Lost World" ("And we go off, robbed of our fruit, our furs . . ." [*CP* 284]).

defined the sound of sense as what you hear when a conversational tone and rhythm is stretched taut across poetic meter. When you hear the rhythm of talking rather than the words themselves, as from behind a closed door, he said, you hear "the abstract sound of sense." The task of the poet according to Frost is to break these irregular cadences, bred into the bone of a language, across the "regular beat of the metre." Jarrell agreed. Of the wife's condemnation of her husband's heartlessness, "You could sit there with the stains on your shoes / Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave / And talk about your everyday concerns," Jarrell says

The five hissing or spitting s's in the strongly accented "sit," "stains," "shoes"; the whole turning upside down of the first line, with four trochaic feet followed by one poor iamb; the concentration of intense, damning stresses in

fréh eárh of yóur ówn báby's gráve

—all these lend an awful finality to the attack, he says, so that for the wife the obliviousness of the husband approaches absolute boorishness ("Robert Frost's 'Home Burial' " 206, 215-17). Of his reply "I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed, / I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed," Jarrell says that the first line seems so natural as to quote some unknown folk proverb and of both lines that

the sounds have the gasping hollowness of somebody hit in the stomach and trying over and over to get his breath—of someone nauseated and beginning to vomit: the first stressed vowel sounds are "agh! uh! agh! uh! agh! uh!"

(Selected Letters of Robert Frost 80)

Although his prosody is rarely as regular as Frost's is, Jarrell often works a heightened tonal vividness or *enargeia* into the various dramatic situations he imagines. In "The Woman at the Washington Zoo," a government clerk passes through the animal exhibits feeling that she has become her own cage, that her body imprisons her. The nacreous irritant of the metaphor becomes the priceless pearl of her monologue. With the opening line, "The saris go by me from the embassies," a light dactylic measure underscores her belief that the colorful life she wished for is slipping away. Across the next few lines the rhythm dissolves into broken declarations of sorrow, loneliness, and desperation only to reassemble in the moaning trochaic of the line that

closes the first section, the long vowel of the initial exclamation repeating, as Jarrell notices such features to repeat in Frost, in the Rilkean imperative of the verb: "Oh, bars of my own body, open, open!" (CP 215).<sup>9</sup>

As poet and critic, Pinsky has devoted too much attention to craft to let the art of poetry settle back into idiom. He dedicated his first book of poems to Yvor Winters, the critic who made of Stanford what Dr. Johnson called Pembroke, a nest of singing birds. Winters instilled a long-standing reverence for poetic technique in everyone he taught, and Pinsky must be counted among his best students. What Pinsky most admires about Marianne Moore is her refusal to indulge in the sort of idiomatic versification that Jarrell so admired in Frost. Of her epigram "To Be Liked By You Would Be a Calamity" he says that it demonstrates a mastery of the colloquy without sounding colloquial, and that its very "artificiality is [. . .] the point":

The address is not only highly, but pointedly, artificial, an invention that represents its true action of silence or reserve. She creates an artificial dialogue to dramatize, and to protect, her inward poise.

("Marianne Moore" *Poetry and the World* 48).<sup>10</sup>

Pinsky suggests that to align the vernacular too easily with realism is to play false both the artfulness of poetry and the complexity of what it represents. Marianne Moore reminds us that in real life vernacular speech forms a social mask to be put on and taken off at will—as when, for instance, an educated person says "It ain't necessarily so." Scattered among the acute remarks on Moore is an argument against a poetics of the vernacular that runs something like this. Depending upon the context, the vernacular can represent a variety of tonal features, from irony to directness. While idiomatic speech is by definition realistic, it

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<sup>9</sup> At the request of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Jarrell contributed an essay to their textbook *Understanding Poetry* about writing "The Woman at the Washington Zoo." The essay takes the same title as the poem and is found in *Kipling, Auden & Co.* (319-27).

<sup>10</sup> "Idiom is the sameness of the language customarily used by people in the same place," Pinsky notes, while "idiosyncrasy, with its first half from the same root, is in language the sameness of a person's *crasis*, or constitution" (50).

is not uniquely so. Like most other ways of representing reality, in fact, it depends upon the conventions of artifice in order to be recognized as realistic, doubly so when cast as dialogue. As a result the moments of baldly idiomatic statement in Pinsky's poetry are few and far between. Just one poem offering longer passages of impersonation comes to mind. In "Three on Luck" three voices identified as a senior poet, a child borne late in life, and an elderly disabled gentleman, all situated well inside ironic quotation marks, give the listener tiresome advice about, respectively, the rites of publication, euthanasia, and sex after a prostate operation (HH 13-14). If the poem may be seen to comment at all upon its own representational manner, then it says wryly that the monologue, at least as employed in everyday life by friends and acquaintances on buses, in departmental offices, or at dinner parties, often dramatizes nothing so much as the easily understood human need of explaining away distress.

From the outset Pinsky has preferred a poetics of inclusiveness to one of verisimilitude. Jarrell's allegory of mimesis is "The Mockingbird," in which the raucous aggression of the bird symbolizes a writer's need to clear a creative space before casting a spell. Where the nightingale in Keats calls the poet back from representational reverie to the real world, the mockingbird fools the ear into confusing the two: "He imitates the world he drove away / So well that for a minute, in the moonlight, / Which one's the mockingbird? which one's the world?" (CP 281). Pinsky would accept the clearing of space but not the raucousness nor so Pyrrhic a victory for imitation. One of his briefer lyrics treats mimesis as a natural Marvellian shade, the reflective habit of conducting into a "green recess" any sort of figure you can think of, all "brought beyond / Even memory's noises and rages, here in the quiet garden" ("The Garden" HH 45). Pinsky gives the name *discursiveness* to the freedom of thought that poetry enjoys when it is allowed to range widely across the varied forms of language and into the yet-undiscovered nature of things. He seeks to reconcile two seemingly contradictory meanings of the modifier *discursive*, a sense of disorder and a sense of explanation, by taking the word back to its roots, where the two meanings are etymologically joined in a sense of briskly crossing terrain (*currere*). Rather than signify aporetic despair at the undecidable, the radical sense provides a point of creative departure, and along the way the modifier attracts to its rhetorical cause three other modifiers, *inclusive*, *explanatory*, and *earnest*. Pinsky wants the adjective to bring to poetry all the possibility of plain prose language



and he wants it to apply liberally, to poets otherwise as stylistically diverse as Lowell and Berryman. He wants verse to find a middle way between the extremes of an arid nominalism, on one hand, and an "ecstatic fusion of speaker, meaning, and subject," on the other (*The Situation of Poetry* 134-76).<sup>11</sup> The basic tasks of the writer, he says, with Eliot, are transmission and transformation. One passes along a command of craft while leaving open the question of what is and is not poetic. The duty of transformation Pinsky frames as a paradox. While readers expect poets to provide them with an accurate picture of the current horizon of poetic expectations, the task of the poet is to drowse beyond the horizon for a more prospective sense of the poetic. "Society depends on the poet to witness something," he says, "and yet the poet can discover that thing only by looking away from what society has learned to see poetically" ("Responsibilities of the Poet" 2, 426). In short, Pinsky has always sought to have discursive poetry come out to meet the world with a noetic regard which it is not too much to call philosophical as well as with the more properly poetic qualities of a carefully discerned feeling and perception, whatever its objects.

While Jarrell and Pinsky are both poets of early memory, the uses they find for memory finally sets them apart. Each recalls what Geoffrey Hartman terms, in "The Recognition Scene in Criticism," the "micromegas character" of childhood experience—moments "at once insignificant (childish) and hugely significant (mortgaging the child's future)" (264)—but Jarrell is the more traditional psychologist. Partly to inscribe a high seriousness in his late verse, Jarrell describes insights that a patient might work through with an analyst. A symbolically charged line or phrase is represented as the breakdown of cathexis, as insight surfacing in consciousness, and meaning becomes the sum total of moments like this one:

I sleepily confide  
My dream-discovery: my breath comes fast  
Whenever I see someone with your skin,

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<sup>11</sup> "The idea is to have all of the virtues of prose," Pinsky explains, "in addition to those qualities and degrees of precision which can be called poetic" (134). Charles Molesworth maps the emotional terrain that discursiveness opens onto in "Proving Irony by Compassion: The Poetry of Robert Pinsky" (1-18); while Robert von Hallberg charts its intellectual range in *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (232-39).

Hear someone with your voice.

("The Lost World" CP 288)

The profession of psychology has undergone a wide variety of adaptive strategies over the last decades, turning pragmatically from intrapsychic psychology to problems of family and social relations, and in the process the Freudian scenarios of modernism have faded badly. Pinsky avoids them altogether to speculate in a more personal and public way about the national psyche or family relations. One interest has been to try to gauge just what degree of skepticism should be accorded to one of our major instruments of self-knowledge, psychiatry. In reading late Jarrell, we are asked more and more improbably to impersonate a psychiatrist. In Pinsky, meaning travels through the whole of the work to meet coded discourse of all sorts with ironic resistance, forcing language to query itself, and we see analysts as more or less imperfect versions of our selves. A long poem from the first book tests some common cultural myths about psychiatrists ("only a few / are not Jewish. Many, I have heard, grew up / As an only child" [SH 67]) to conclude that "'psychiatrist' is a synonym for 'human being'" ("Essay on Psychiatrists" SH 73).

Among his other longer poems, the title poem of *History of My Heart* is perhaps most revealing in this regard. It is about the grammar of sexual awakening, about the dawning awareness of what it means to *desire* and of how a constant relation among its successive objects keeps the verb properly transitive. It begins like this:

One Christmastime Fats Waller in a fur coat  
Rolled beaming from a taxicab with two pretty girls  
Each at an arm as he led them in a thick downy snowfall

Across Thirty-Fourth Street into the busy crowd  
Shopping at Macy's: perfume, holly, snowflake displays.  
Chimes rang for change. In Toys, where my mother worked

Over her school vacation, the crowd swelled and stood  
Filling the aisles, whispered at the fringes, listening  
To the sounds of the large, gorgeously dressed man,

His smile bemused and exalted, lips boom-booming a bold  
Bass line as he improvised on an expensive, tinkly  
Piano the size of a lady's jewel box or a wedding cake.

She put into my heart this scene from the romance of Joy,  
Co-authored by her and the movies, like her others—

(HH 25)

Three sentences are cadenced to move rapidly with a four-stress beat through a remembered narrative, while a slower fourth sentence tells us who wrote the story and what it means. The cadence recalls the boogie-woogie rhythms of the 1930s. It "emulates the measured syncopations of Fats Waller's stride piano and Waller's half-chatty, half-vocalized patter," as Tony Whedon writes, since the time is the adolescence of the speaker's mother, whose memory this is ("Public Pinsky" 127). The first four-and-a-half lines take us into the scene, pausing between tercets to cross the busy street. The spatial movement is cinematic: the camera swoops down at the colon through the doors of the department store and into the noisy commercial bustle of the season. As it pans across the array of goods in the next half-line it pauses awhile; as if deprived of consumer goods like perfume, the poem lingers over them a full beat longer. The nasal consonants of *rang* and *change* in line six, discreetly onomatopoeic, toll the needs of commerce. And then in the bolder music improvised by the jazz musician, poetic theme asserts itself. The point of the story for the mother and child rests mainly in the surprise of seeing a celebrity perform unexpectedly; my wife tells a similar story about seeing Ray Bolger in a green velvet jacket clamber onto a bus in Chicago. The last sentence, spoken by the man the child has become, has all the impatience of a professional interpreter with a tale beneath his powers. It is only as the poem unfolds that he understands how much the story has come to mean to him, which is its drama.

The disproportion a boy does and does not understand on hearing his mother tell a story about a figure larger than life performing upon a diminutive instrument introduces another disproportion. The music she heard as a young woman is transmuted into the saxophone diminuendo that he plays at the close of the poem, his "breath / Strained into song emptying the golden bell it comes from, / The pure source poured altogether out and away" (HH 32). Pinsky means to score a filial song of identification and release *lentamente e piano*. What would it mean, the poem asks, to have a name for the maternal counterpart of an emotional patrimony? What should we call the mother's tuning of her son's sexual temperament? How are we to speak of the disinterested maternal gift of love so necessary for the proper

investment, as Freud would say, of the individual portfolio of desire? Considering his life in stages from infancy to young manhood, Pinsky ~~proposes that manhood really means~~ understanding the responsibilities of desire and that it depends upon a tacit knowledge passed along by the mother. The abstraction *desire* is symbolized by the snowfall of the first stanza and by the toy piano of the fourth. Like a blizzard blanketing a street, desire is at once a troublesome inevitability and a divine gift of "manna" (*HH* 26), and like taking band in high school, it happens to young people in groups without ensuring that they ever make beautiful music together. The stages of the poem are not determined by the schematic sequences of Lacanian or Freudian psychology but rather by the odd remembered shards of life turned over in the mind, by memory traces surviving the havoc of adolescence. And as master tropes of music and weather, of moodiness and improvisation, circulate through a swirling, associative pattern of action, serial vignettes of sexual yearning are energized by gratitude coming to consciousness rather than by unconscious libido. Neither ordinary language nor psychology has a word for the maternal counterpart of what we would call a *patrimony* if we were speaking about fathers, meaning the emotional bequest allowing us to exchange our early oneness with the mother for the mature experience of a reciprocal female otherness. One learns about and eventually understands the mysterious bargain of a mutual gift freely given by rethinking the stories one grows up with. In the title poem of his last book, *The Lost World*, in the section called "Children's Arms," Jarrell says that "happiness is a quiet presence, breathless and familiar" (*CP* 285). But "happiness needs a setting," Pinsky explains, meaning a story of "Shepherds and Shepherdesses in the grass," of "kids in a store" (*HH* 25), or of a mother working at Macy's. Like the maternal narrative it rehearses, the poem creates its own logic of discovery, defining a nameless idea by tailoring the fabric of language to fit the world.

There are of course limits involved in reading some of the poems of Pinsky as commentary on some of those by Jarrell. Their intertextual affinity forms a measured relation. For one thing, not every poem in Pinsky finds a precursor in Jarrell, far from it, and where the verse does intersect, a common setting or concern works to underscore the integrity of both. Whatever debts are incurred are repaid in a distinct approach or thoughtful difference of opinion meant to register the importance of the subject. An expected rivalry is made

conspicuous by its absence, for another. The Wintersian moralism of Pinsky records nothing so much as admiration for the unusual social engagement of Jarrell, a note heard mainly in a sense of continuing relevance understood by the tribute of clarification. And finally, the affinity has become attenuated. No poem in *The Want Bone* (1990) strikes me as a candidate for comparison. What seems most remarkable about these poems is their independence and flexibility. The line plunges down through the column of verse to recount parables utterly familiar and yet absolutely unrecognizable. The urgency of these poems, in other words, belongs to the strangeness they conceal. Speaking with the inflections of biblical injunction ("Memoir" *WB* 6), biblical curse ("From the Childhood of Jesus" *WB* 4), or animistic dismay ("The Want Bone" *WB* 14), they warn us all against the dangers of possessiveness. "The Refinery" stalks the progress of the old industrial deities that blaspheme against nature *and* language as they slouch like Miltonic demons toward the tar pits of production—

The muttering gods  
Greecily penetrate those bright pavilions—  
Libation of Benzene, Naphthalene, Asphalt,  
Gasoline, Tar: syllables  
Fractioned and cracked from unarticulated

Crude

(*WB* 61)

—toward the hellish palaces where crude oil, likened to a shared language sleeping in the earth, is refined. On this view language is a homely resource to be preserved for the many, not wasted for the profits of a few; the poem asks that we make of it a counter-rhetoric to ensure the preservation of all such resources. Or again in "Window" Pinsky imagines the way a child first learns a language, a primal scene of ordinary language philosophy:

My mother Mary Beamish who came from Cork  
Held me to see the snowfall out the window—  
*Windhold* she sometimes said, as if in Irish  
It held wind out, or showed us that wind was old,  
*Wind-hold* in Anglo-Saxon [. . .]

(*WE* 9)

And then the poem goes on briefly to address what Stanley Cavell calls the problem of others. For Cavell the duty of recognizing others as fully human is resolved by understanding the other as the person who, by providing us with an outsider's perspective, helps us to see the stranger in ourselves—the part of us whose humanity has failed by not yet meeting its duty to others (*The Claim of Reason* 410-36). In much the same way, the sounds from other languages that seem momentarily to mean something in our own but do not, really, may fleetingly remind us of the otherness of our own tongue:

We took their language in our mouth and chewed  
(Some of the consonants drove us nearly crazy  
Because we were Chinese—or was that just the food  
My father brought from the restaurant downstairs?)  
In the fells, by the falls, the Old Ghetto or New Jersey,  
Little Havana or Little Russia—I forget,  
Because the baby wasn't me, the way  
These words are not

(WB 9)

Even after the daily use of language lulls us back into our usual sense of its workings, the poem suggests, we never again hear language spoken without also hearing a trace of verbal dispossession in the different sense another speaker gives it. In taking up language as both a birthright and as an impersonal tool we hold in common, whatever our other differences, poems like these speak forcefully of the human power to articulate common ends, because a faith in language is indeed a faith in the good works language can perform, such as relation and kinship with the other. For Pinsky, poetry's task is "to deal both with the inert circumstances of the world and the spirit's hunger for true speech" (*The Situation of Poetry* 169). When he reflects on the implications of this hunger for true speech, Pinsky proposes the following conception of poetic language: "Between the spooky quiet of the natural world and the quiet solipsism, the poet arranges a kind of partnership, so that prose virtues [. . .] can conspire toward the achievement of statement. Statement is human, is a relation to others: wife, brother, and so forth" (171). Pinsky's conception of language as "true speech" is a means of establishing human ties by stating them. This conception of language amounts to a poetics privileging "partnership" or *relation* in a way that can be associated with the I and Thou relationship which Martin Buber saw as the foundation of human

communication. By opening the channels of communication, the poem exposes the values of the "I" and dialogically calls for the reader's values to come to the fore to be either challenged or confirmed.

Pinsky's conception of language can be taken as a rhetorical model which helps us understand how language functions in social and political situations where the speaker seeks to foster a sense of human *relation*. Relation does not automatically imply that the exchange takes place without any misunderstanding or conflict. It simply means that a framework of relation and exchange is inaugurated by a statement, and that this inauguration of statement can be affected by material conditions of class, gender, culture, and race.

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