

Innovation, rhyme, and feel in robert pinsky's poetry

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



The first U. S. Poet Laureate for three consecutive years (from 1997-2000), Pinsky has succeeded in much more than poetry. In 1984, for example, he was the author of an interactive fiction game called Mindwheel; today, he is the poetry editor for the irreverent online Slate magazine. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that his poetry embraces modern life—yet remains firmly rooted in a traditional education in poetry and the classics. In *The Figured Wheel*, for example, Pinsky's poetry ranges from a look at his mother to a discussion of psychiatrists. His style, although variable, is readable, and shuns much of the "encoding", or deliberately obscure language, of other poets. His poem "History of My Heart," for example, begins, 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 (Pinsky, 1996, 123) Even in this short excerpt, Pinsky uses a number of poetic devices that deepen the poem—yet make it both comprehensive, and conscious of modern life. For example, the unusual choice of the word "Rolled" instantly gives the reader the feeling of the large man emerging exuberantly into the snow, perhaps with a sense of urgency or inexorability. The capitalization of "Thirty-fourth Street", which is unnecessary, gives you a sense of the importance of the time and place. The colon use is unexpected in the "Shopping at Macy's:" line – and the colon alerts us that it is announcing what shopping at Macy's was about during Christmastime. "Chimes rang for change" brings up the sound of cash registers ringing and coins rattling, but it can have a different meaning. It

can just as well conjure up the image of bell-ringers ringing the changes (each different pattern of bell ringing in a church is called a “ change”) in a cathedral. It is an interesting image, and in keeping with the festival aura of Christmas with which Pinsky begins this poem. Pinsky’s style in this collection is generally free verse, with the occasional internal rhyme. However, he does not write in a prose style. With the use of inversion, parallel constructions, allusions, and poetic language Pinsky makes it clear what he is writing is a poem, not a prose-poem, or a poem trying to sound like prose. The poem “ Ode to Meaning” (which is an example of his wide-ranging subject matter – this is concerned with a philosophical questioning of symbols) shows how his poetry is not necessarily strictly metered or rhymed (the feet of the lines vary – 4, 3, 3, 5, 5, 3), but still very musical and poetic. You also in the laughter, warrior angel; Your helmet the zodiac, rocket-plumedYour spear the beggar’s finger pointing to the mouthYour heel planted on the serpent FormulationYour face a vapor, the wreath of cigarette smoke crowningBogart as he winces through it (Strand and Boland, 253)He uses anaphora, like the Bible, to make the lines ring together, and it makes the large amount of information passed in this one stanza easier to digest and understand. His exploration of images and symbols continues to the end of the poem: Dire one, Desired one. Savior, sentencer – Absence, Or presence ever at play: Let those scorn you who neverStarved in your dearth. If I Dare to disparageYour harp of shadows I tasteWormwood and motor oil, I pourAshes on my head. You are the wound. YouBe the medicine. (Strand and Boland, 254)Pinsky, it is clear, has a distinct ear for language. In one of his books of criticism, *The Sounds of Poetry*, he writes, “ The medium of poetry is the human body: the

column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth. In this sense, poetry is as physical or bodily an art as dancing” (Summary, Pinsky, 1998). Pinsky believes that poetry is to be experienced aurally. In this, he is harkening back to the origins poetry, when it was only an oral art. Despite the modern roots of Pinsky’s poetry, many of his other works show that he clearly hails from a poetic, classical background. For example, his translation of Dante’s *Inferno* is tackled in its entirety, both English and Italian, but Pinsky resists the original Italian convention of *terza rima*; as he explains, triple rhyming is extremely difficult in English. He rejects the *terza rima*, and instead translates the entire poem in a rhyming convention of “like sounds.” He writes, “This translation rejects that solution and instead makes a more flexible definition of rhyme, or of the kind and degree of like sound that constitute rhyme. But on the other hand, I have not accepted just any similar sounds as rhyming: the translation is based on a fairly systematic rhyming norm that defines rhyme as the same consonant-sounds-however much the vowels may differ-at the ends of words.” He gives examples “tell/feel/well” and “sleep/stop/up” (Pinsky, 1994, xix). In this, Robert Pinsky is innovating into a new kind of rhyme, or at least referring back to an old form (consonance - (Abrams 9) “repetition of a sequence of two or more consonants, but with a change in the intervening vowel”) and then restricting it to the ending consonant. In this, he is fulfilling what he said, when commenting on Landor’s poetry “One can be an ‘innovator’, ... by reviving, adapting and developing traditional forms, quite as much as by invention” (Schmidt 388-389). Pinsky did not invent a completely new kind of rhyme for his translation of the *Inferno*, but he has

made the sound of it uniquely his own, and adapted it well to the English language. For example, he writes, My teaching; He who made all of Heaven's features
In His transcendent wisdom gave them guides
So each part shines on all the others, all nature's illumination apportioned. So too, for goods
Of worldly splendor He assigned a guide
And minister - she, when time seems proper spreads (Pinsky, 1994, 57)
The "like sounds" of features/nature's, goods/spreads, plus the repetition of guide/guides gives the stanzas a feeling of unity and musicality, without the "hard rhymes" which he explains in his Translator's note (xix) that he dislikes so much. This is a novel innovation, and to modern ears sounds more poetic and less conversational than blank verse, but also lacks the sing-songiness that direct and hard rhymes have come to mean in our day and age
The enjambment, even across stanzas, is common in his *Inferno* and his own poetry works, such as "History of My Heart" (see above). It is curious, perhaps, that Pinsky would choose such extreme enjambment, which would seem to suggest fragmentation of thought. Actually it is part of his innovation against the sing-songiness and end-stopped conventionality of old forms. This enjambment leaves Pinsky free to make his like-sound rhymes, but doesn't limit his thoughts to the limit of his line, whatever its length.
"Wormwood and motor oil" - an old substance and a new one - perhaps give some clue to what Robert Pinsky's poetry is all about. His new poetry is accessible and engaging, without being overly simple or trite. His translations are dense, but poetic and light-hearted, even with serious subject matter. He chose a huge work, and a seven-centuries-old one, in Dante's *Inferno*, but he makes the conversations and the descriptions sound both full of poetic gravitas and a modern feel.

Thus, the Poet Laureate has managed to make the old new, and bring a kind of rhyme back into poetry that feels poetic without sounding false or old-fashioned.

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