



Book Reviews

Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry

Robert Pinsky

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Originally delivered as part of the prestigious Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton University, this book contains a series of thoughts on the role of poetry in democracy, in particular contemporary American democracy. Rather grandly, it sets out ‘to consider the voice of poetry — emphasizing its literal or actual “voice” — within the culture of American democracy, amid the tensions of pluralism’ (p. 2). As head of the popular Favorite Poem Project, which documented poetry readings by ordinary American citizens, and having served an unprecedented two terms as America’s Poet Laureate, one would expect Pinsky to be well placed to share with us some original ideas on this subject. However, I shall be frank: the resulting book is far from brilliant, at least by any yardstick — scientific or other — that values clarity and precision.

The book’s main thesis, if I understand it correctly, is that poetry shares roots and affinities with democracy because of two quintessential features. First, because poems are the intimate expression of individual voice, they are linked to the notion of human dignity and form a countervailing power — and underground resistance, as it were — against the apparent loudness of mass culture and show business. Second, poems always invoke a larger — presumably democratic — community, and have therefore necessarily a social character. As Pinsky puts it: ‘Poetry is a vocal imagining, ultimately social but essentially individual and inward’ (p. 39). Now it is easy to concur with the author in saying that most good poems simultaneously contain something of the individual and of the public realm. Pinsky is at his best when he re-reads and interprets some beautiful poems in this light, notably Edwin Arlington Robinson’s ‘Eros Turannos’, William Carlos Williams’s ‘These’, and Robert Frost’s ‘Home Burial’. And he stresses compellingly that it is pointless to expect poetry to compete with mass culture and modern media, precisely *because* poetry’s human scale makes it unsuited for the demands of that culture.

But disappointingly given the book’s stated aims and title, Pinsky makes few, if any, inroads in explicating the relevance of such poetic features to democracy. Moreover, whatever arguments he does harbor to talk of democracy are thin and stretched at best. ‘Poetry,’ according to the author, ‘mediates, on a particular and immensely valuable level, between the inner consciousness of the individual and reader and the outer world of other people



... I have said that poetry penetrates to where the body recognizes the stirring of meaning' (pp. 45–46). Or elsewhere: 'To some extent, poetry always includes the social realm because poetry's very voice evokes the attentive presence of some other, or its lack' (p. 30). Now, even disregarding the truth status of such statements, they do not even begin to spell out to us why poetry would be linked, let alone would contribute, to a living culture of *democracy*. Worse still, to assert that the individual's freedom to judge poetry irrespective of the constraints of social prestige and authority, as well as the evocation through poetry of the ambiguity of immigrant dislocation are characteristically 'American' (pp. 56, 58), is plainly misinformed and parochial. And this reviewer, for one, would like to see some proof of a 'paranoid dread of new democratic generations as subliterate media savages', or of the 'fear of our own young as letterless, unassimilable barbarians' (p. 5).

A second main line of thinking is rooted in the author's reading of Alexis de Tocqueville's witty and original, if off-hand, observations about poetry and democratic equality. Pinsky (pp. 12–14) quotes the French aristocrat's famous quip that 'nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests — in one word, so anti-poetic — as the life of a man in the United States,' and he refers time and again to Tocqueville's more flattering parallel prediction that the themes of the American poetry of the future, far from being external to mankind — gods, myths, heroes, demons, and the like — would more than elsewhere be rooted in the internal plight and destiny of men. But again, the author largely fails to demonstrate the relevance of these excerpts to contemporary democratic culture. For instance, he does not show the connection between Tocqueville's clear and precise argument and his own assertion that 'though poetry's history may link it to hierarchical, pre-democratic societies, the bodily nature of poetry links it to the democratic idea of individual dignity' (p. 17). This failure is all the more problematic since such sweeping statements form the bulk of Pinsky's contribution and are not part of a more substantive and consistent set of observations on the book's title subject. Perhaps not surprisingly given the author's background, the book offers a number of original readings of poems and some worthwhile remarks on culture — but little that is new or helpful to connect these to democracy.

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