

LEAVENED NOT LEVELED

Robert Pinsky and Laurence Hobgood. *POEMJAZZ*. New York: Circumstantial Productions, 2012.

Joe Francis Doerr

On hearing that Robert Pinsky had released a CD called “POEM-JAZZ,” a collection of poems written and read by Pinsky set to an accompaniment of jazz pieces composed and performed on piano by Laurence Hobgood, my initial thoughts went immediately to a review of Pinsky’s *Gulf Music* written by Robert Archambeau and published in this journal a few years ago. In that review, Archambeau quotes from Pinsky’s “The Forgetting,” a poem dealing with the emotional fallout of the 9/11 tragedy. In “The Forgetting,” Pinsky revisits his experience of listening to one of Amiri Baraka’s public readings of “Somebody Blew Up America.” In that poem, Baraka takes venomous aim at the authorized version of the events of September 11, 2001 and implies that the conclusions published in the *9/11 Commission Report* cannot be trusted. He suggests that the official story is a cover-up designed to protect the identity of the individuals who are truly responsible for the catastrophic events of that day, and that their agenda is much more sinister than the one espoused by the official story’s villains, those nineteen terrorists with Al Qaeda connections who “hate[d] America for its freedoms.” Baraka’s poem implies the workings of an internal conspiracy, one predicated on a false-flag attack designed to generate American support for the Likud Party’s aspirations of creating a Greater Israel in the Middle East. Through his relentless anaphoric interrogation—“Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed / Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers / To stay home that day / Why did Sharon stay away? / Who? Who? Who?”—Baraka prompts Pinsky to write in response

The crowd was applauding and screaming, they were happy—it isn’t
That they were anti-Semitic or anything. They just weren’t listening. Or

No, they were listening, but that certain way. In it comes, you hear it, and
That selfsame second you swallow it or expel it: an ecstasy of forgetting.

YouTube is full of videos of Baraka reading “Somebody Blew Up America,” but the one that came to mind when I learned of Pinsky’s new CD was videotaped on February 21, 2009 in Troy, New York at The Sanctuary for Independent Media. It shows an intensely impassioned Baraka reading his

poem from a pulpit while accompanied by jazz saxophonist Rob Brown. Brown's cool soprano tones end by sliding into a musical impression of Baraka's vocal repetition of "who," the word ascending into owl-like falsettos by the performance's finish. What I find most incredible about Baraka's own personal ecstasy of forgetting, his loosely veiled finger-pointing, is that it bears an unsettling, speculative similarity to Henry Ford's infamous denunciation of jazz in his overtly anti-Semitic broadside *The International Jew* (1934):

Many people have wondered whence come the waves upon waves of musical slush that invade decent homes and set the young people of this generation imitating the drivel of morons. *Popular music is a Jewish monopoly.* Jazz is a Jewish creation. The mush, slush, the sly suggestion, the abandoned sensuousness of sliding notes, are of Jewish origin.

Despite its malicious, propagandistic intent, Ford's theory on the origins of jazz bears a kernel of truth. Jewish educational organizations routinely claim jazz for the Jewish province and revel in statements like "jazz was the racist's worst nightmare." Many famous names synonymous with popular jazz are of Jewish origin: Goodman, Getz, and Gershwin; Connick, Katz, and Konitz. Sander Gilman, author of *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*, writes that it was through "popular culture and jazz—think of Irving Berlin—that the Jews truly entered into the multicultural arena of America." Pinsky, whose earliest aspiration was to be a jazz saxophonist, told *The Paris Review* that his "first experience of art, or the joy in making art, was playing the horn at some high-school dance or bar mitzvah" and that "there's a lot of cant about poetry and jazz." Let me suggest that Pinsky uses the word "cant" (as in cantor) associatively and achieves the desired effect. Because while he certainly eulogizes all things creolized, it is clear that he draws his most valuable inspiration from the deep intellectual stream running vigorously through secular Judaism.

POEMJAZZ was released in February by Circumstantial Productions, a company out of Nyack, New York perhaps best known for publishing *What Does It Mean to Be Human?*, a collection of essays by an eclectic group of contributors including The Dalai Lama and Elie Wiesel that went public in 1998. In 2011, Circumstantial released its first CD, *Conversations in Blue* with David Maxwell & Otis Spann. The record was nominated for three Blues Music Awards last year by the Blues Foundation in Memphis. POEMJAZZ is Circumstantial's second CD. In the liner notes of the CD's jacket, Pinsky describes the disc's fourteen tracks—thirteen poems by Pinsky and

one by Ben Jonson (“His Excuse for Loving”) set to Hobgood’s accompaniment—as a record that

treats a voice speaking poetry as having a role like that of a horn: speech with its own poetic melody and rhythm, in conversation with what the music is doing. To put it simply, POEMJAZZ is a conversation between the sounds of poetry and music.

Pinsky has a willing and adept conversationalist in Laurence Hobgood. According to the biographical note he supplied to NPR, the classically trained Hobgood (b. 1949), whose father worked in the theater department at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, began impressing his piano teacher at the tender age of six by riffing on Bach and Chopin. Subsequent to developing an interest in jazz while in high school, Hobgood continued his musical studies at the University of Illinois where he persisted in exploring the intersection of jazz and classical music. After moving to Chicago in 1988, Hobgood began working with a number of musicians eventually landing a spot in a band led by jazz vocalist Kurt Elling, another member of the growing Circumstantial stable of talent. It is Elling who provides the back-cover blurb on the jacket of POEMJAZZ.

When it comes to articulating his half of the “conversation” Hobgood, described by Dave Brubeck as “one of the most incredible pianists I have ever heard,” is exceedingly eloquent. He is obviously inspired in great part by George Gershwin, but Brubeck, too, informs his musical vocabulary and one can hear echoes of Duke Ellington, nods to George Shearing, and hints of Thelonious Monk in his technique. Though the conversation, alive with what Elling calls the “sympathetic reverberations between the music of poetry and the poetry in music,” is present throughout POEMJAZZ, it is at its best in “Horn,” “Creole,” and “Street Music.”

“Horn” begins with the line “This is the golden trophy. The true addiction,” and proceeds to engage the intersection of music and language on a level that is nearly metaphysical:

The master, a Legend, a “righteous addict,” pauses
While walking past a bar, to listen, says: Listen—
Listen what that cat in there is doing. Some figure,

Some hook, breathy honk, sharp nine or weird
Rhythm this one hack journeyman hornman had going,
Listen, says the Dante of bop, to what he’s working.

No prizes for identifying the “Dante of bop,” but the poem taken as a whole seems to be a reference to what the Dante of verse called the poetics of *mira vera*—true marvels—a term the poet uses in one of his *Eclogues* for the miraculous flute that became animate and produced not sounds but words. Like Pinsky, his devotee-translator, Dante Alighieri is fascinated by reeds that can transcend their musical purpose and enter verbal conversation. Recall another poem from the *Eclogues* that relates the story of King Midas who, upon witnessing a musical contest between Apollo and Pan, judged Pan’s piping to be superior to Apollo’s (poetry fans might recall that in “The Hymn of Pan” Shelley writes about this same contest). To punish him for what the god considered a display of asinine judgment, Apollo changed Midas’s ears into those of an ass. In the story, Midas tries to conceal his new ass’s ears under his Phrygian cap, but the slave who cuts Midas’s hair discovers them—who knew that old Clairol hook “only your hairdresser knows for sure” had a classical precedent? Because he cannot betray his master by revealing his secret to any human being, the slave digs a hole and whispers into it, “King Midas has ass’s ears.” Though the slave finds peace after he fills in the hole, a reed imbued with the power of speech grows from the same spot where the secret was planted. The reed then betrays the secret to the world.

Pinsky seems fascinated by (if not “addicted” to) this story, and its “secret”—which is perhaps the real “golden trophy” to be won in this contest—is the knowledge that there are certain hidden qualities of language that can only be revealed when language is closest to music. Pinsky suggests that one of these qualities is intimacy. In “Creole,” he celebrates the origin of language as a by-product of intimacy and, to make his point, uses an historical precedent—the expanding Roman Empire as a facilitator of linguistic improvisation:

As I get it, the Roman colonizing and mixing, the intricate Imperial
Processes of enslaving and freeing, involved not just the inevitable

Fucking in all senses of the word, but also marriages and births
As developers and barbers, scribes and thugs mingled and coupled

With the native people and peoples. Begetting and trading, they
Needed to swap, blend and improvise languages—couples

Especially needed to invent French, Spanish, German: and I confess—
Roman, barbarian—I find that Creole work more glorious than God.

This notion finds an objective correlative in musical innovation. Any good jazz musician will readily attest to the fact that improvisation is the primary ingredient of jazz, the eternal staple on which composition dines; it is the spiritual meat and potatoes of the craft. There is no dearth of legendary sax men who have weighed in on the subject of improvisation. The great Sonny Rollins claimed that improvisation “is the ability to create something very spiritual, something of one’s own.” Paul Desmond likened improvisation to writing, claiming that “it can’t be taught but somehow you have to learn it.” And Steve Lacy reminded us that improvisation is like wooing a woman—you only get one chance to get it right. It is the stuff of thinking on one’s toes, and it must be done quickly and with confidence. It is always a product of the moment. Lacy suggested that “the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have [only] fifteen seconds.”

It would be a case of falling prey to unchecked optimism to suggest that Hobgood is working improvisational wonders on the black keys as Pinsky engages in spontaneous composition and recites “Creole” on the spot for this recording. There is a real dilemma at the heart of “Creole”: we can forgive this couple—Pinsky and Hobgood—who are actively engaged in a rehearsed conversation, one that is certainly not unfolding spontaneously before our very eyes. We can do this because we understand the setting, the place. It is writing. And if we can take Desmond at his word (and I suggest that we can, and should), then what Pinsky has made is a work of improvisation. This place does not require a complete commitment to linguistic acrobatics. It is, after all, a realm of suggestion rather than formal imitation, this place. Pinsky, who seems aware of his predicament, shrewdly ends the poem with a statement that is at once edifying and qualifying:

Creole comes from a word meaning to breed or to create, in a place.

Let’s not forget that one of the most important “places” for breeding this musical creole is “the streets.” In his jazz-flavored “Crystal Ship,” Rimbaud-obsessed Jim Morrison reminds us that “the streets are fields that never die”—true, as long as the crop they yield is perennial: each harvest must produce sustenance for the next generation without satiating it to the point of laziness. In “Street Music,” Pinsky offers up a smorgasbord of street fodder that feeds the muse and quenches the imagination with the “[c]oarse sugar of memory,” the “[s]alt Nineveh of barrows and stalls,” and then sends those who are inspired (yet still lean and mean) on a journey of their own to

find and strike the necessary balance between the disparate though necessary elements of creativity.

Candy Memphis of exile and hungers.
 Honey calends and drays,
 Syrup-sellers and sicknesses,
 Runes, donkeys, yams, tunes
 On the mouth-harp, shuffles
 And rags. Healer, dealer, drunkard.
 Fresh water, sewage—wherever
 You died in the market sometimes
 Your soul flows a-hunting buried
 Cakes here in the city.

Street music is street food and vice versa, Pinsky implies. Both are the stuff on which the “creole” thrives. At their center is a delicate balance between memory and desire. Memory (whatever the nature of that which is remembered) will always be fertile and therefore sweet, but desire—or more appropriately, desire that becomes an active pursuit of the past—yields nothing but brackish disappointment (think of the obvious associations of these two words—“salt Nineveh”—and then follow the trail of brine to Lot’s wife).

In much the same way, pursuing, capturing, and preserving memory in a work of art tends to be a precarious business for the maker. Much in the way of creative output that fails miserably as art does so because its maker is or was concerned only with producing the purely representational. Makers who become obsessed with preserving memory intact will find only disappointment—even film and video are devoid of the emotions one might experience in the original moment. Wise is the maker who, inspired by memory and desirous of capturing and preserving the emotions it may have produced, strives not for representation but rather ambles towards suggestion as Pinsky and Hobgood do in “Street Music.” Abstract the language may be, but it is therefore all the closer to capturing the experiences that inspired it, and distancing itself and Pinsky from the inevitable failure of mere representation.

Pound wrote that poetry that strays too far from music is bad poetry. Walter Pater suggested that all art aspires to the condition of music. It would be a hopeless philistine indeed who would fret over the “meaning” of Beethoven’s 5th Symphony (or Stravinsky’s “Right of Spring” for that matter). Music is what it is, and many artists are liberated by Pound’s and Pater’s discoveries. For instance, Dorothy Seiberling, the editor of *Life*, recalled that when Jackson Pollack was asked about hostile critics he answered, “If they’d leave most of their stuff at home and just look at the painting, they’d have

no trouble enjoying it. It's just like looking at a bed of flowers. You don't tear your hair out over what it means."

Using paint, or stone, or any of the visual media to produce works that achieve the condition of music is one thing, but using language to do so is something else entirely. The most difficult task any poet faces is how to work in a medium—language—that defies the condition of music at every turn. Words convey meaning. It is inescapable. Poets who ask their readers to forget this risk losing their readers. It's ultimately difficult for any reader—even you—to willingly suspend expectation, reduce words to mere objects or units of sound and not be tempted to "tear out your hair" over what it all "means." At the same time, I'll wager that the hair on your head can be found wholly intact after reading anything—no matter how nonsensical—by Dr. Seuss. That's the music speaking to you.

This is ultimately what Pinsky is concerned with accomplishing through POEMJAZZ, albeit on a more intellectual scale. His goal was to initiate and sustain a conversation between music and language in an effort to achieve with words what the music is capable of doing, while not sacrificing any implied meaning or causing you the audience to lose interest. He wants you to have a hand in making the poetry make sense.

"Somebody Blew Up America" is not difficult to understand. Anyone who reads or listens to it can immediately grasp precisely what Baraka hopes to convey. Making poetry that is this transparent

...In it comes, you hear it, and
That selfsame second you swallow it or expel it: an ecstasy of forgetting

is not Pinsky's concern. No, Pinsky wants you to remember. Pinsky wants you to think. Pinsky wants you to listen and hear in that "other" way. His poetry is leavened rather than leveled.

Works Cited

- Gilman, Sander. "The Fanatic: Philip Roth and Hanif Kureishi Confront Success." *Comparative Literature* 58.2 (2006): 153-169. Print.
- Pinsky, Robert. Interview with Ben Downing, Daniel Kunitz. *The Paris Review* 144 (1997): 180-213. Print.