

Pinsky Notes

from Pinsky's *The Sounds of Poetry*

- No instruction manual can teach as much as careful attention to the sounds in even one great poem (7).
- The medium of poetry is a human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth. In this sense, poetry is just as physical or bodily an art as dancing (8).
- The reader's breath and hearing embody the poet's words. This makes the art physical, intimate, vocal, and individual (8).
- Poetry calls upon both the intellectual and bodily skills (8).
- The technology of poetry, using the human body as its medium, evolved for specific uses: to hold things in memory, both within and beyond the individual life span; to achieve intensity and sensuous appeal; to express feelings and ideas rapidly and memorably. To share those feelings and ideas with companions, and also with the dead and with those to come after us (9). [*Here, you should note that Pinsky is invoking the notion of archetypes. He wants us to understand how poetry serves to preserve life in a particular way, using images and sounds to make us remember the past but to also predict the future, in some vague sense.*]
- The stress on a syllable in English is not inherent in the sound, but relative. [*Remember how we've talked about meaning not being inherent in the poem? This extends to the sounds of poems (and words in general), too.*]
- [Pinsky thinks] one can learn a lot by typing a poem up as a block of prose and then, working from that block, trying to arrange it in lines that you think bring out the rhythms in the most effective way possible. How would one distribute the different kinds of emphasis? Where should the emphasis of enjambment go? On which words should the emphasis of beginning a line go? On which words should the emphasis of ending a line go? Which faster and slower passages are most crucial? Where should the emphasis of the end-stop go? Then, after completing what seems the most successful typographical arrangement, and listening to what it seems to indicate about the rhythms of the sentences, one can compare the new version to the original, the lines composed by the author. It doesn't seem impossible to [Pinsky] that occasionally the new arrangement, designed for the exercise, might have some virtue the actual poem lacked. Either way, one learns something in the process (49).
- The vocal reality, in other words, is individual and distinct in ways too subtle for any terminology or system to describe completely (52). [*Literary vs. literal*]
- Rhythm is the sound of an actual line, while meter is the abstract pattern behind the rhythm (52).
- The *play* between pitch and duration, between syntax and line, between like and unlike sounds, becomes a means of art. These are comparable ways to achieve meaning and feeling (97). [*Please pay special attention to the PLAY of language in poetry. A poem is nothing more than broken prose if it lacks the play that Pinsky discusses here.*]