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**Robert Pinsky: Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry**

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# I Culture



The term “culture” with its old agricultural and biological connotations has taken on a new, surprising centrality. In world affairs and in American electoral politics, in geopolitical analysis and in economics, culture has become a kind of ulterior cause of causes. It has been proposed that culture determines the power of a nation to achieve economic development, and that cultural more than political differences underlie electoral contests and atrocities, economic trends and terrorist acts. Cultural clashes seem to have replaced ideological strife. Even the directions and conceptions of science have been seen in cultural terms.

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Far from resisting this trend, I want to consider the voice of poetry—emphasizing its literal or actual “voice”—within the culture of American democracy, amid the tensions of pluralism.

The art of poetry has many of its roots in hierarchical, pre-democratic culture: the flirtations and imperial visions of European courts; the monkish preservations of scholars, the wistful, stylized perception of Asian officials and monks, the folk-narratives, charms and ballads of peasants. Poetry’s place in the United States—often presented, I think inaccurately, as no place—presents a node of anxieties about culture itself and about the idea of democracy.

In its long-ago, rather frumpy state, the term “culture”—as in the antiquated phrase “a person of culture”—generated no aura of dread (despite Marxist or Freudian analysis of the mere social fear that one might seem “uncultured”). In its contemporary form, however, the notion of culture evokes anxiety of two contradictory, more or less opposite, kinds.

On one side, there is the nightmare of undifferentiation, a loss of cultural diversity comparable to the loss of biodiversity. Hundreds of languages have died in the last century, with their alphabets and epics and delicate structures. In the terrible closing pages of *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Levi-Strauss indicates how the mere breath, the very glance, of the observer rapidly destroys differences that evolved for centuries, homogenizing and sterilizing the former abundance. This vision of destruction by an all-consuming dominant culture reminds us of the etymological link between “culture” and the “*colon*”: the one who cultivates or scratches the soil, the colonialist.

Closer to home, in the market-generated mass culture that is a successful export, we can see something that resembles the irresistible domination of the colonizers who sweep away and drown out and plow under the ancient range of cultural variety: a kind of internal colonialism, the image of a dominating uniformity that threat-

ens to macerate distinction and level terrain until all are the same.

But the other, obverse dread is of a vicious, tribalized factionalism, the coming apart of civic fabrics through fragmentation, ranging from the tremendous, paranoid brutalities of ethnic cleansing and ruthless terrorism to the petty division of mass culture into niches. Religious difference, racial difference, linguistic difference, even generational difference can seem compounded and hypertrophied by information-age forces. The fanatical concentration on difference and its exploitation by tyranny have been multiplied, accelerated and terribly empowered by modern technology. For example, the speed and reach of contemporary broadcast propaganda have sometimes fit neatly with the activities of killing squads. In this disturbing area, the etymological ghost is culture's relation to "cult," a word denoting arcane forms of worship: the perceived sinister difference of strangers, its ultimate evolution a zeal for extermination.

And here, too, there is a kind of inward, domestic corollary, a dread that goes beyond the breakdown of bowling leagues and civic clubs. In the local microcosm, the cult of xenophobia has its parallels in the paranoid dread of new democratic generations as subliterate media savages. The fear of our own young as letterless, unassimilable barbarians is perhaps an extreme vernacular form of this emotion.

Such are the opposed nightmares of *colon* and *cult*: fear of suffocation by a centralized overknitting on one side and fear of murderous unraveling from the fringes on the other. These fears—and who can be immune to them?—reflect a profound ambivalence about culture itself, which like the goddess Kali-Parvati both nurtures and destroys. The concept of culture, Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out, “gestures toward what appear to be opposite things: *constraint* and *mobility*”\*

\**Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

normative terms roughly parallel to the uniformities of the colonialist and the fanaticisms of the cultist. We are simultaneously afraid of constraints making us so much like one another that we will lose something vital in our human nature, and also in fear of becoming so fluently different, so much divided into alien and brutally competitive fragments, gangs or fabricated nationalisms, that we cannot survive. In what ways do these opposed, even contradictory cultural anxieties share a single source?

For an American poet, the fear of lost differentiation and the fear of excessive differentiation do indeed embody a single, in fact familiar, anxiety: that of being cut off from memory—forgotten. The shimmering presences of American mass culture, pervasive and ephemeral, make a peculiar context for an art associated with memory—with mnemonic rhymes, with the mother of the Muses, perhaps with epics and sagas. American memory is so jagged, so polyglot—

often so phantasmagorical—that it has sometimes been thought not to exist. A complementary supposition is that American poetry is cut off from American cultural reality.

Unlike memory in a pre-democratic national saga or myth, memory in our high and low cultures contains an element of self-negation, a release not into meanings or destinies but into fantasy. Gabriel García Márquez has said that the best novel written about Latin America is *The Hamlet*, by William Faulkner. That statement is not only a tribute to the seeds of magic realism in that great novel, but to the quicksilver, recklessly fabulous nature of Faulkner's historical imagination. Faulkner's South—or the South of D. W. Griffith or of Toni Morrison—like the West of cowboy movies, the suburbia of classic sitcoms, all have a dreamlike or delirious quality that is conventionally misnamed “mythic.”

When Hart Crane concludes his “Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge” with the line “And of the

curveship lend a myth to God,” he is explicitly writing not a myth but a fantastic invocation of myth itself, a beseeched transformation of “God” and “bridge” and “us lowliest.” And the city of Crane or of Ralph Ellison, as much as the city in American gangster movies or screwball comedies, is based not merely on any historical New York or Chicago or San Francisco or Los Angeles, but on the City as a dreamscape of possibilities: a brick and mortar embodiment less of the past than of desire, and more as chorus or antagonist than as a specific, fixed setting. Like the Western town of the movies always about to be tamed, endlessly at the cusp of potential, the City is a civic dream.

But it is historical memory that tempers both of the imagined extremes of culture, the barely habitable polarities of total undifferentiation and total fragmentation. Memory resists uniformity because it registers fine gradations; memory resists the factional because it registers the impure,

recombining, fluent nature of culture. It is memory that eventually undermines the apparently total successes of both the colonializing Conquistador and the leveling Visigoth. The fantastic element in democratic memory exaggerates the anxieties of uniformity and fragmentation. Accustomed to practicing an ancient, singular art amid a dazzling mass culture, the American poet is a kind of veteran of these anxieties.

(A theory of American poetry itself could be based on the polarity of cult and *colon*. The fragmentation, ellipsis and implosion of referentiality that have been presented as an experimental or avant-garde style for nearly a hundred years resist the *colon*, the complacent central uniformity. The styles of an often desperate, Anglophile urbanity or an amiable middlebrow accessibility conduct an equally heroic—or at least embattled—resistance to cultural dissolution, a breakdown into provinces and cults.)

The most profound observers of the United

States have seen in our manners, and in the cultural correlatives of our democracy, a version of fragmentation, the dread that we become too unlike one another. Alexis de Tocqueville, in the locus classicus for this viewpoint, associates the separation of individuals into fragments or atoms horizontally, from their peers, with the separation of individuals vertically, from their past and future. Tocqueville writes:

Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.\*

This passage recalls the great classical tag, found in *Gulliver's Travels* as well as in *King Lear*, which notes that the human animal is a puny

\**Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York: Knopf, 1945), p. 99.

creature: its patchy fur and flimsy hide give inadequate protection; its claws and little teeth are poor weapons. It is a mediocre climber and swimmer, and even its best specimens cannot run as fast as the young or aged of many other species.

This commonplace trope—stripping the human animal of its cultural armature—is traditionally deployed to emphasize certain redeeming human qualities, such as the capacity for reason, free will, or civilization. It is also deployed, as by Lear on the heath, to demonstrate ultimate human frailty and dependence. Tocqueville, in comparing democracy with aristocratic culture, paints the isolation of the single heart in a wilderness that is temporal as well as spatial. To be thrown back “forever” on oneself alone suggests a degree of mobility, a freedom from constraint and dependence, that is potentially exhilarating as well as deranging: a liberation, as well as a void.

That void in its terrible, bleak aspect seems to be in keeping with Tocqueville's most explicit pronouncement about American poetry—a pronouncement that, out of context, as it is usually quoted, can seem comically harsh:

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. (*Democracy in America*, p. 74)

But in fact Tocqueville, after observing that the principle of equality “has dried up most of the old springs of poetry,” proceeds to ask “what new ones it may disclose.” Legends of heroes and gods or angels and demons, old traditions and rituals, all viable material for the poet in aristocratic societies, he says, will not serve poetry in America. He has an interesting notion about the first thing poets in the new world would turn to:

When skepticism had depopulated heaven, and the progress of equality had reduced each individual to smaller and better-known proportions, the poets, not yet aware of what they could substitute for the great themes that were departing together with the aristocracy, turned their eyes to inanimate nature. As they lost sight of gods and heroes, they set themselves to describe streams and mountains. . . . Some have thought that this embellished delineation of all the physical and inanimate objects which cover the earth was the kind of poetry peculiar to democratic ages. But I believe this to be an error, and that it belongs only to a period of transition.

I am persuaded that in the end democracy diverts the imagination from all that is external to man and fixes it on man alone. Democratic nations may amuse themselves for a while with considering the productions of nature, but they are excited in reality only by a survey of themselves. Here, and here alone, the true sources of

poetry among such nations are to be found. . . . Among a democratic people poetry will not be fed with legends or the memorials of old traditions. . . . All these resources fail him; but Man remains, and the poet needs no more. The destinies of mankind, man himself taken aloof from his country and his age and standing in the presence of Nature and of God, with his passions, his doubts, his rare prosperities and inconceivable wretchednesses, will become the chief, if not the sole, theme of poetry among these nations. (*Democracy in America*, pp. 75–76)

And in a rather ringing final paragraph to his chapter, Tocqueville concludes:

Such are the poems of democracy. The principle of equality does not, then, destroy all the subjects of poetry: it renders them less numerous, but more vast.

This is a startling declaration by its aristocratic author. Even if one has no interest whatsoever in

the art of poetry, the movement of the passage's argument should be arresting. Tocqueville's progress from "petty . . . insipid . . . anti-poetic" to "the destinies of mankind" and materials "less numerous, but more vast" traces an ambitiously prophetic (if perhaps morally ambiguous) trajectory for American culture—pluralistic, omnivorous, syncretic.

I interpret this passage as suggesting not exactly the absence of legends, memorials, heroes, and pantheons but their insufficiency: a worn, jejune quality—a need for something either more candid, or more candidly fantastic. The "old memorials" do not feed the democratic imagination, with its skepticism and isolation. In practice, the inadequacy of "the great themes that were departing together with the aristocracy" has inspired various myth-making projects, including Longfellow's honorable but doomed attempt to make indigenous versions of the "great themes" by way of Paul Revere or Hiawatha. A more enduring invention has been

Walt Whitman's extravagant and unrealized idea of the democratic bard—hardly “aloof from his country” but as surely concentrated on the independent human figure, alone with God and Nature, as—equally unmythical, equally rooted in longing—the secularized devotional quatrains of Emily Dickinson.

What Tocqueville's paragraphs say about subject matter in democracy is not merely prophetic of the formal and moral eccentricities of Whitman and Dickinson: her skewed hymns, his break-away arias. Beyond poetry itself, Tocqueville's idea of democratic nations turning toward a “survey of themselves” raises large questions of constraint and mobility, order and liberty, selfishness and community. Poetry and our ideas about it may offer ways to inspect characteristic dramas of our national life. This Tocqueville passage about poetry and the individual soul adds an historical aspect to certain qualities of poetry that contrast with, perhaps even resist, a

mass-scale cultural leveling. 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. That dual nature of the art gives it a unique significance in the cultural dramas of particularism and universalism, individual and mass.

I don't mean to put popular culture on one side and poetry on another. The drama between human scale and mass scale is embedded to some degree in every modern work. An entire genre of dystopic science-fiction cinema is based on this polarity. The hypnotic mania and unfathomable persistences of minstrel show and sitcom, country music, vaudeville and be-bop reflect that drama, as do similar qualities in our poetry, in the work of poets as different as T. S. Eliot and Allen Ginsberg. The art the poets practice has a special poignance in a society that emphasizes the idea of the individual in the very act of dreaming on an unprecedented mass scale—

and so too in a different way do the plaintive, introspective works in “popular idioms” by such artists as Buster Keaton and Charlie Parker. Poetry reflects, perhaps concentrates, the American idea of individualism as it encounters the American experience of the mass—because the art of poetry by its nature operates on a level as profoundly individual as a human voice.

Lyric poetry has been defined by the unity and concentration of a solitary voice—such as might be accompanied by the sound of a lyre, a harp small enough to be held in one hand. It is singular, if not solitary. But the vocalicity of poetry, involving the mind’s energy as it moves toward speech, and toward incantation, also involves the creation of something like—indeed, precisely *like*—a social presence. The solitude of lyric, almost by the nature of human solitude and the human voice, invokes a social presence.