The Instrument of Voice
AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT PINSKY

By Maggie Dietz
One of the most well-known and respected poets of our time, Robert Pinsky has undertaken in his forty-year career no smaller task than to observe and interpret America. He is an artist less interested in landscape than in what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called inscape. In muscular, energetic poems that are as indebted in their rhythms to seventeenth-century English poetry as they are to American jazz, Robert writes an American amalgam that both celebrates and censures the country’s vibrant, messy cultural variety.

I met Robert when I was a graduate student at Boston University, and then worked with him for years on the Favorite Poem Project, his undertaking as US Poet Laureate (a post he held for an unprecedented three terms, from 1997 to 2000). Over the course of a year, we collected letters and e-mails from 18,000 Americans about poems they love; and over the next several years, we culled the best of these letters, along with the chosen poems, into three print anthologies and a series of fifty, short video documentaries featuring, for example, a Boston construction worker, a Georgia Supreme Court justice, and a California teen whose family had fled the Cambodian genocide. (The videos can be viewed online at www.favoritepoem.org.)

During the laureateship and since, Robert has arguably done more to engage the American audience for poetry than any other living poet. And yet, he insists that poetry doesn’t need a spokesperson, that the art—the pleasures of a poem’s sounds, the human hunger to experience things on an individual scale—advocates for itself.

In person, Robert embodies an anomaly: his easy demeanor is the product of formidable intelligence and confidence. He’s at once down-to-earth and larger-than-life. His friend the artist Michael Mazur insisted he’s the spitting image of the actor Sam Waterston from Law and Order. Years ago, at a Favorite Poem event, a woman who’d seen Robert’s appearances on the PBS News-Hour approached me and said, “I always thought Robert Pinsky was very tall.” Robert is not particularly short, but it seemed that this woman, who’d pictured him at six foot five or so, just couldn’t believe her eyes. It was as if she wanted me to offer some explanation. I didn’t, but I might have said, “He has a tall voice.”

Robert reads poems aloud with intensity, emphasizing plosives and sometimes rocking unconsciously on his toes at the podium. It’s entrancing to see and hear him, in part because he seems to be speaking from inside the poems, his voice propelled by the force of words—whether his own or Wallace Stevens’s or Walter Savage Landor’s. To hear Robert read is to hear a translation from shapes on paper to sounds in air, in the voice of someone who has no agenda but fidelity to the sounds as his ears hear them. In his reading style—its intensity and directness without pretension—one sees qualities of Robert’s more general presence and of his writing.

I hope this interview demonstrates these qualities, as well as how much fun it is to talk to him.
MAGGIE DIETZ You grew up in Long Branch, New Jersey, a once-famous resort town whose regular visitors included President Ulysses S. Grant in the late nineteenth century. Some of that social luster had faded before your childhood, but your attachment to your hometown—even especially to its vibrancy in decline—is evident in your poems, and in the way you talk about the place. How did the town shape the man?

ROBERT PINSKY Grant, Garfield, Lincoln. But also prizefighters, actors, gamblers—the firehouse I walked by on my way to school was named the “Phil Daly Ladder and Hose,” endowed by the noted gambler. Diamond Jim Brady took Lillian Russell to Long Branch. Eugene O’Neill’s father, who played the Count of Monte Cristo a jillion times, had a summer house in the town. Jack Dempsey trained in Long Branch. Winslow Homer painted the town and did drawings of the crowds there on assignment for Harper’s Magazine. In the Museum of Fine Arts, here in Boston, you can see Homer’s wonderful painting Long Branch, New Jersey—the women with their parasols and little dog, up on the bluffs I know well, above the ocean.

In the nineteenth century, families of the now-extinct “High Society” summered in Newport, Rhode Island, or in Saratoga Springs, New York. In contrast, Long Branch was where the patent-medicine millionaires and show-business people went. High Society was the old idea; in Long Branch a more modern idea evolved: the social power of money and fame that replaced the social power of “birth,” meaning ancestry. Celebrity was born in Long Branch.

I was aware of growing up in an historic place—but also that it was history with a raffish, coarse or showy side. More Groucho than T. S. Eliot. And when I grew up in Long Branch, it was no longer the place of Winslow Homer and President Grant or even of Eugene O’Neill’s successful ham of a father, but rather a place of mostly working-class ethnic groups: certain black, Irish, Italian families had known my Jewish family for two or three generations. Some of them drank in my grandfather’s bar. Some of them had bought liquor from him during Prohibition. Some of them had been his colleagues or rivals in bootlegging. The groups also had in common that we were not summer people . . . a similarity to the Cape, I guess.

So, I grew up with a “sense of history” in many senses, none of them strictly academic. That may have shaped me and my writing.

MD You and your family go to Truro in the summer. How would you compare the Cape’s landscape and culture to the Jersey Shore’s?

RP Bluefish and clams and other good things to eat that come out of the Atlantic. Insular old-timers. Proximity to a city, and a certain remove from it. I wonder if you could say that the Cape is to the Vineyard as I just said Long Branch was to Newport or Saratoga Springs? The Jersey Shore doesn’t have the literary or artistic history that the Outer Cape has—Edmund Wilson, Robert Motherwell, Hans Hofmann, and all that . . . but our pizza is superior. And come to think of it, Edmund Wilson (like Count Basie) was born in Red Bank, the town next to Long Branch.

(An old-time, thigh-slapping Monmouth County joke: “Was it the Red Bank Branch of the Long Branch Bank, or the Long Branch Branch of the Red Bank Bank?” Ha-ha, we used to say.)

MD When we were working on the Favorite Poem Project together, you’d sometimes say, “Let’s do this the Long Branch way,” which usually meant call a guy who knows a guy who knows something about, say, fenders, or, in our case, fund-raising. Can you elaborate?

RP Certain pursuits and occupations and places lead to knowing people. My father’s father was a bartender. My father, Milford Pinsky, was a noted local athlete and optician. He and I both grew up on Rockwell Avenue, and we had the same homeroom teacher. My dad made eyeglasses for the plumber who fixed our toilet, and the guy who sold him cars got his glasses from him, and the chief of police used to work for Milford’s father, Dave Pinsky, in the whisky-running days. We ate at Nunzio’s Pizzeria, and Nunzio Chiafullo lived across the street. The football coach and Spanish teacher, Army Ippolito, had been a protégé of Dave Pinsky’s.

So I was raised to respect friendship and personal relations more than rules or official requirements and procedures and institutions. I tend not
to like organizations and committees; often those kinds of bodies don’t like me. In Berkeley, at an academic dinner party, I once got an inadvertent laugh. Somebody asked me: “Can it be true, Robert, that you lied on an official form, so Lenny Michael’s son could go to the Berkeley middle school?” “Well yes,” I said. “Lenny lives in Kensington and he wanted Daniel to go to school in Berkeley, so we went to City Hall and filled out the form saying Danny was my nephew and he lived with Ellen and me, at our Berkeley address.” “You agreed? You lied on an official form for Lenny? How could you do that?”

I thought about my father and mother, their families and friends, and how it would be a disgrace not to do something like that for a friend. I realized there was a difference in morals or mores. So I said: “I guess it depends on how you were brought up,” and they all laughed—though I wasn’t trying to be funny. That mentality—small-town, or lower-middle-class, or tribal, whatever you call it—may have helped create the Favorite Poem Project, with its emphasis on the personal more than the organizational, on experience rather than authority, quirks rather than forms, personal attachments to works of art rather than statistics. The readers in the videos at www.favoritepoem.org and in our anthologies, like An Invitation to Poetry, are, by design, readers . . . not poets or critics or professors of poetry.

The FPP is not the project—with all due respect to institutions—of a foundation or a society or an academy. Those FPP videos and the FPP anthologies have a relation to “ordinary” people that comes, in a certain sense, from Long Branch. There are limitations—my limitations!—to a way of doing things that is more intuitive than organizational. So while Green Bay, Wisconsin, may be your Long Branch equivalent, Maggie, the project probably also required the organizational skills of a young poet who was raised as a Catholic and whose father was a judge. You are bilingual: you can speak both Small Town and Get Organized.

**MD** Part of the ethos of your childhood and adolescence in New Jersey, I gather, was a sense that there were certain people who had your back. Your mother seems to have been an exception. Some of your poems (such as “The Green Piano” and “Poem with Refrains”) refer to the head injury she suffered that changed her personality, and to her erratic moods and behavior. Are there ways that an unpredictable home life contributed to the self-reliance or improvisation it would take to write poems, to decide to become a poet?

**RP** Sylvia Pinsky graduated from Long Branch High School, where she met Milford—but she was born in Arkansas, raised partly in Oregon, partly in Brooklyn and other places. Her expression for her family’s moves in her childhood was “one jump ahead of the sheriff.” Even before her fall and the concussion, she knew how to rail eloquently, and a bit madly, against Long Branch and its provinciality. Also, she railed against my father for landing her in the wrong part of the town. She was a reader of sci-fi, a racer through the Times crossword puzzle, an acerbic wit, a non-preparer of meals, a brooder. An ardent New Deal liberal. She drew well, loved opera, made enemies easily.

The title poem of History of My Heart is a tribute to her force. In the poem, I entertain the idea that her laughter and intensity and diffuse rebellion against the world were formative.

The years of her concussion affected family life, perhaps creating some odd Pinsky family values I may have inherited. Improvising. Finding a way to fit disparate things together. Escaping from the straightforward while craving it from the outside. Comic timing. Retreat into laughter. Indirection. Seeing from odd angles. Talking. Racing between the poles of destruction and creativity. Gossip. Music. Complaining and schmoozing. At its worst, despair and defensive sneers. At its best, invention and generous laughter. When I hear politicians talk about “Family Values,” that is some of what flashes through my mind.

**MD** The first time I heard you read—at Northwestern University in 1993—I remember being transfixed by the poem “Ginza Samba.” You play the saxophone, tinker on the piano, and aspired as a young man to be a musician. You count Charlie Parker among your literary influences. How did the move from jazz to poetry—genres you’ve recently combined, as we’ll talk about—happen?

**RP** Cousins in a royal family
Of Niger known as the Birds or Hawks.
In Christendom one cousin’s child
Becomes a “favorite negro” ennobled
By decree of the Czar and founds
A great family, a line of generals,
Dandies and courtiers including the poet
Pushkin, killed in a duel concerning
His wife’s honor, while the other cousin sails
In the belly of a slaveship to the port
Of Baltimore where she is raped
And dies in childbirth, but the infant
Will marry a Seminole and in the next
Chorus of time their child fathers
A great Hawk or Bird, with many followers
Among them this great-grandchild of the Jewish
Manager of a Pushkin estate, blowing
His American breath out into the wiggly
Tune uncurling its triplets and sixteenths—the Ginza
Samba of breath and brass, the reed
Vibrating as a valve, the aether, the unimaginable
Wires and circuits of an ingenious box
Here in my room in this house built
A hundred years ago while I was elsewhere:
It is like falling in love, the atavistic
Imperative of some one
Voice or face—the skill, the copper filament,
The golden belfull of notes twirling through
Their invisible element from
Rio to Tokyo and back again gathering
Speed in the variations as they tunnel
The twin haunted labyrinths of stirrup
And anvil echoing here in the hearkening
Instrument of my skull.

*from Selected Poems, copyright Robert Pinsky, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux*
What I try to do with Laurence Hobgood, as we listen to one another, is to be POEMJAZZ. CD, you often can hear that we are in the same key. Makes,” his term “sentence sounds,” the very essence of the art, describes Branch High yearbook, I am voted “Most Musical Boy.” The photographer I thought was long behind me, something of my youth. Now, I have a version of it back again, through the instrument of my voice.

In college, with great teachers like Paul Fussell and Francis Ferguson, I soon learned how to pay attention to the task at hand. He has taken to dream-ing and talking to himself.”

That’s what poetry is for me: an art of pitch, quantity, and rhythm in language: a sister or close cousin of song, but not the same as song. Pitch and duration, along with rhythm, are important in spoken sentences as they are in music. In Frost’s great short essay “The Figure a Poem Makes,” his term “sentence sounds,” the very essence of the art, describes the melodies of speech. William Carlos Williams writes about the same vital shapes of utterance. A manic, rigid devotion to meter seems cuckoo to me, as though you approached music by concentrating on time signatures and notation. The word *form* should include the great range of elements that make sentence-sounds, not just patterns like sonnet and secunda.

That’s what poetry is for me: an art of pitch, quantity, and rhythm in language: a sister or close cousin of song, but not the same as song. In POEMJAZZ the sentence-sounds of the poems interact with the music. What I try to do with Laurence Hobgood, as we listen to one another, is to be like a horn player, with the lines of the poem as my horn. Laurence isn’t playing mood music for me as though I were an actor: we’re playing music together. I’m not singing, but I’m speaking with attention to pitch and cadence. On the POEMJAZZ CD, you often can hear that we are in the same key.

In the Long Branch High yearbook, I am voted “Most Musical Boy.” The photographer has posed me blowing a trumpet, an instrument I never played. Possibly a prophetic image? But through difficult high-school years, I made money playing the saxophone, and it gave me a social identity. It was my one success.

In my teens and twenties, making music with other people. It’s a pleasure to be part of the band? A tremendous pleasure, related to the joy I felt playing an instrument in my teens and twenties, making music with other people. It’s a pleasure I thought was long behind me, something of my youth. Now, I have a version of it back again, through the instrument of my voice.

MD You can’t jam onstage, right? I know you revise your poems heavily after you’ve written them. But maybe revision is akin to practicing an instrument, the capacity for improvisation achieved only with a certain level of mastery. How much is “jamming” part of your writing process?

MD You’ve said jokingly that the Pinsky family motto, inscribed on your coat of arms, emblazoned on your shields as you run into battle, is “All of the above!” The motto certainly applies to your artistic pursuits. There are the poems—the critically acclaimed *Selected Poems* recently out in paperback—as well as a landmark translation of Dante’s *Inferno* and several books of prose, including *The Life of David*, your inventive retelling of the legends and scriptures surrounding King David. In 2010, your libretto for Tod Machover’s opera *Death and the Powers: The Robots’ Opera* premiered in Monaco before coming to Boston’s A.R.T. Next year, your adaptation of Friedrich Schiller’s *Wallenstein* will be presented by the Shakespeare Theater of Washington, DC. Do you sleep?

MD And is it fun to be part of the band?

MD In a sense, writing is improvisation if it’s any good: every departure from convention or expectation is like the informed departure of improvisation, simultaneously free and systematic. In fact, to keep the poem alive in relation to the music, in performance, I do vary repetitions, go back to phrases, create refrains where there hadn’t been any. The music and the words in relation to music are different every time. Is that impure? I don’t know, but in the process it feels right.

RP Maybe I am still compensating for early failure as a student, being told I was lazy, lacking in self-discipline. “No stick-to-it-ive-ness.” My effort in those days was to seem indifferent to Fs and Ds, to appear bored by warnings that my work habits would prevent me from ever holding a job. But inside, there was a kind of bewildered panic; I didn’t know why I couldn’t do well in school. Is it possible that those old shames and anxieties still propel me? Or maybe the same inborn nature that made me a poor student—easily getting bored, difficulty staying with any one thing, wandering attention, inability to prepare, whatever you call it—is more acceptable in my grown-up context? Something in me likes to try something new—sometimes, it seems, anything new!

My sister found among our mother’s relics my first-grade report card. The teacher wrote, “Robert is always polite and friendly, but he has not learned how to pay attention to the task at hand. He has taken to dreaming and talking to himself.”

I like Robert Pinsky’s poems because they are solid and real. You feel if you punched a hole in one and stuck your head through, like a stage set, instead of some two-by-six’s propping it up and a couple of stagehands waiting around for the end, you would see all the roots and histories, old sounds and meanings of the words out front. He reminds me in a way of the artists who, tiring of the illusory nature of the surface of the canvas, tried to make their paintings also “objects” in the world, taking away the frame, the stripping, letting you see the stretcher, raw canvas’s folded corners, etc., no longer trying to hide the material of which they’re made. In this way, the paintings, or poems, might appear in the world as objects—or, if as thoughts, then also as the body experiencing those thoughts. This honesty and wholeness in Pinsky’s words creates a presence that is as welcome as it is rare.

— Keith Althaus
MD Well . . . maybe just a little . . . In your current classroom, though, you certainly aren’t talking to yourself, but very generously and genuinely to your students. You’ve been teaching for more than forty years, and were my teacher, so I know some of your advice to young or aspiring writers. It bears repeating. So?

RP Choose your ancestors, and study them. Read their work the way an ambitious young cook tastes, or a serious filmmaker watches movies, or a gifted singer listens to singing. Study whatever you judge to be monuments of singing’s magnificence.

Study your art with your body, as well as your mind.

Poetry is sort of preindustrial; so rooted in the human body, in particular in breath, that it lives apart from changes in technology like printed page to monitor. The page and the monitor are both industrial products; the voice is much older than that. Like many other people, I’m beginning to feel a bit elegiac or nostalgic about The Book As We Knew It. But in a way, that has more to do with prose. Those rectangular blocks of print, alive with Defoe and Freud and Melville and Marx and Austen and Carroll and Joyce and Woolf—those magic justified rectangles are a product of the Industrial Age. Poetry is older, more fluid and deeper in the human body.

Its technology is verse.

Or, to look at it another way, I think the human appetite for made things is boundless: we happily play video games and string quartets, watch Kagemusha and Mixed Martial Arts. We recite and we twitter, we sing and we program. All of the above. And the below, too.

And of all of it, poetry may be the most durable: like music, related to an appetite that’s a little like the cravings for food or sex or bodily comfort.

MD What if you had to choose just one poem to represent your work—the time-capsule poem, or the surviving stone tablet?

RP My deep conviction is: that is for other people to decide. I think you make the poems, and if you are lucky someone will want one of them, as the readers in the Favorite Poem Project want the poems they choose in the anthologies and the videos. A poem happens when someone thinks it, says it, feels it. You hope that will happen for someone, and you recognize that in some ways it will be different each time, though in other ways the same. And you don’t know what some person remote from yourself in place or time might want; that’s part of what I mean at the end of “Antique,” if I imagine someone who at a stall buys “this picture of you”—as the poem imagines it—“for the frame.”

MD I wonder how the long poem “An Explanation of America,” which you wrote for your first daughter, would be different if you were writing it, say, to her daughter or to another of your grandchildren. Are the poems in Gulf Music an amendment to the explanation, to some extent?

RP What you say may be true of the recent poem “Creole.” It is one of the tracks on the POEMJAZZ CD—and that track, “Creole,” is now on iTunes. There’s a sense in which “Creole” is a rewriting of “An Explanation of America”: the particular, homemade form of ancestor worship, the blend of conflicted fatalism and conflicted patriotism. It still amazes me that I tried something as formally crazy as “Explanation”; a wacky experiment that I hope still feeds my writing. I haven’t done anything as extreme in that direction since. But the approach and music of “Creole,” the way it’s a kind of meditative shpritz, and the poem’s notion that French and German et alia are Creole languages . . . that’s in the spirit, the deadpan-goofy but dead-serious, and small-town yet somehow classical, spirit.

MAGGIE DIETZ’s book of poems Perennial Fall won the 2007 Jane Kenyon Award for Outstanding Book of Poetry. For many years she directed the Favorite Poem Project, Robert Pinsky’s undertaking during his tenure as US Poet Laureate, and is coeditor of three anthologies related to the project, most recently An Invitation to Poetry. She teaches at the University of Massachusetts Lowell and is assistant poetry editor of the online magazine Slate.

Creole

I’m tired of the gods, I’m pious about the ancestors: afloat in the wake widening behind me in time, the restive deivers.

My father had one job from high school till he got fired at thirty.

The year was 1947 and his boss, planning to run for mayor,

Wanted to hire an Italian veteran, he explained, putting it in plain English. I was seven years old, my sister was two.

The barbarian tribes in the woods were so savage the Empire Had to conquer them to protect and clear its perimeter.

So into the woods Rome sent out missions of civilizing Governors and invaders to establish schools, courts, garrisons:

Soldiers, clerks, officials, citizens with their household slaves.

Years or decades or entire lives were spent out in the hinterlands—

Which might be good places to retire on a government pension, Especially if in those work-years you had acquired a native wife.

Often I get these things wrong or at best mixed up but I do feel pretty toward those persistent mixed families in Gaul,

Britain, Thrace. When I die may I take my place in the wedge Widening and churning in the mortal ocean of years of souls.

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.

The way it happened, the school sent around a notice: anybody interested in becoming an apprentice optician, raise your hand.

It was the Great Depression, anything about a job sounded good to Milford Pinsky, who told me he thought it meant a kind of dentistry.

Anyway, he was bored sitting in study hall, so he raised his hand, and he got the job as was his destiny—full-time, once he graduated.

Joe Schiavone was the veteran who took the job, not a bad guy, Dr. Vineburg did get elected mayor, Joe worked for him for years.

At the bank an Episcopalian named John Smock, whose family owned a piece of the bank, had played sports with Milford. He gave him a small Loan with no collateral, so he opened his own shop, grinding lenses and selling glasses: as his mother-in-law said, “almost a Professional.”

Optician comes from a Greek word that has to do with seeing.

Banker comes from an Italian word for a bench, where people sat, I imagine, and made loans or change. Pinsky like “Tex” or “Brooklyn” is a name nobody would have if they were still in that same place:

Those names all signify someone who’s been away from home a while. Schiavone means “a Slav.” Milford is a variant on the names of poets—

Milton, Herbert, Sidney—certain immigrants gave their offspring.

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

from Poetry, February 2012
Michael Mazur’s Vision of Dante’s Inferno

By John Yau

I

M I C H A E L M A Z U R was destined to illustrate Dante’s Inferno, which was translated by his friend Robert Pinsky. He was the coeditor of the literary magazine at the prestigious Horace Mann School and an associate editor of the literary magazine at Amherst College, where his art teacher was the renowned book illustrator and graphic designer Leonard Baskin. In 1956–57, while a student at Amherst, Mazur spent a year abroad, living in Florence, which he characterized as “Dante’s town.” It was during this time that he first had the idea to illustrate Dante’s Inferno, but recognized that he was “unprepared” to do so. As Lloyd Schwartz tells us in his illuminating essay, “Michael Mazur: The Poetry of Illustration,” instead of a complete cycle, Mazur started modestly with “drawings of Dante and Geryon, from Canto XVII.”

As anyone who knew Mazur will tell you, he followed his passions—and he had many—wherever they took him. One passion was to illustrate Dante’s vision of Hell and suffering. By 1992, when he began working on his illustrations, more than thirty years after he first read the Inferno in Italian, he was well prepared to undertake the challenge. He had compiled many lithographs based on what he experienced while volunteering at the Howard state mental facility in Cranston, Rhode Island, during the early 1960s (Schwartz characterizes the resulting portfolio, Images from a Locked Ward, as Mazur’s “first artistic descent into Hell”); he had single-handedly revived the monotype after seeing the exhibition Edgar Degas: Monotypes at the Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1968; he had completed a group of tonal black-and-white monotypes to illustrate Richard Howard’s translation of Les Fleurs du mal (The Flowers of Evil) by Charles Baudelaire in 1982; he had traveled to China to study landscape and garden traditions in 1987.

All through these years the idea of illustrating the Inferno never left him. In “Image and Text: A Dialogue with Robert Pinsky and Michael Mazur,” which took place at the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities (University of California at Berkeley, December 4, 1994), Mazur told the audience that in 1968 he tried to do something connected to the Inferno “related to an anti-war effort. . . . It was unsuccessful and [he] gave up on the effort for a while.” All of this changed when he heard the poet Robert Pinsky, his longtime friend, read the translations he had made from the Inferno:

I was totally unprepared for the fact that he had written two translations already; one of Canto XXVIII and one, I believe, of Canto I. It was such a remarkable surprise to me because I’d known Robert for twenty years and suddenly he was writing the translation that I’d hoped someone I knew would write so that I could illustrate it. I was very, very taken by this incredibly moving, contemporary and fast-paced, exciting translation. At that point I couldn’t wait to go up to Robert and simply say, “Look, I’m gonna do this now. I’m gonna do the illustrations. Whether we use them together or not, that’s fine. What do you think? Do you think this will go?”

The rest, as they say, is history.

Mazur completed more than two hundred black-and-white monotypes with the Inferno in mind. His goal was to end up with thirty-four monotypes, one for each Canto. In addition, he completed “a frontispiece, a concluding yet forward looking vision of the stars after the last page of the poem, double-page endpapers, and a searing red and black wraparound cover showing a limp victim impaled on a pitchfork in silhouette against a background of flaming fireworks.”

For Robert Pinsky, collaborating with Mazur, as the poet explains it, “helped [him] understand why an American born in 1940 into a nominally Orthodox Jewish family was translating this work that consisted mostly of physical visions of the torments that Christian souls devise for themselves.” Although they worked separately, they communicated and met often, discussed which caption would go with what image. There was a deep rapport between Mazur and Pinsky; they wanted to make a book that, in some sense, would be larger than each of them.

II

IN CONTRAST TO etching, which requires the artist to scratch into a metal plate, monotype involves drawing or painting on a smooth surface, such as glass or plastic. Typically, a press is used to transfer the image to a sheet of paper from the painted surface, but a rolling pin, or even one’s hands, can do the job. Monotype is more spontaneous than etching, but, unlike the many prints possible through etching, monotype produces one print, with each subsequent impression producing an inferior, ghostlier image.

I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that Mazur took to monotype like a hummingbird to nectar. As an artist who spent years making delicate lines in his etchings, and was committed to drawing and direct observation, monotype released something in him. More than anything else, it enabled him to move away from line and reinvent himself. In Mazur’s work, as the later paintings eloquently attest, abstraction and a haunting atmosphere superseded realism and linear precision. Works no longer had to be based on something he saw—they could be based on imagination and memory.

Mazur’s “Monotypes: The Flowers of Evil” (Les Fleurs du mal) for the Provincetown Arts Center, a frontispiece for the Quarterly. Mazur completed more than two hundred black-and-white monotypes with the Inferno mind. His goal was to end up with thirty-four monotypes, one for each Canto. In addition, he completed “a frontispiece, a concluding yet forward looking vision of the stars after the last page of the poem, double-page endpapers, and a searing red and black wraparound cover showing a limp victim impaled on a pitchfork in silhouette against a background of flaming fireworks.”

For Robert Pinsky, collaborating with Mazur, as the poet explains it, “helped [him] understand why an American born in 1940 into a nominally Orthodox Jewish family was translating this work that consisted mostly of physical visions of the torments that Christian souls devise for themselves.” Although they worked separately, they communicated and met often, discussed which caption would go with what image. There was a deep rapport between Mazur and Pinsky; they wanted to make a book that, in some sense, would be larger than each of them.
Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell About those woods is hard—so tangled and rough And savage that thinking of it now, I feel The old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter. And yet, to treat the good I found there as well I’ll tell what I saw, though how I came to enter I cannot well say, being so full of sleep Whatever moment it was I began to blunder Off the true path. But when I came to stop Below a hill that marked one end of the valley That had pierced my heart with terror, I looked up Toward the crest and saw its shoulders already Mantled in rays of that bright planet that shows The road to everyone, whatever our journey.

CANTO I, 1–15

Translation is always a compromise. It’s never complete. It’s an activity in which you know you’re going to fail and then can approach it almost merrily in some ways because the issue is: “How much can you get?” “How close can you come?” And you know that someday someone else is going to do it a different way and will get things that you missed.

Though I describe it as light-hearted, of course there’s also something terrifying about attempting to contribute to, to add anything to a work that is so monumental not only in itself but in the excellent previous translations and in, probably, a ton of commentary that it has attracted. So that process of collaborating I think in some spiritual way helped me in my effort, and maybe in some ways that I won’t go on about helped me understand the work. . . .

I think that somewhere in the word “soul” was an understanding of what the “spirit” was of a work that could survive so many hundreds of years and that could have my friend and me both thinking about it constantly. . . .

— Robert Pinsky, discussing his translation of Dante’s Inferno, in “Image and Text”