

HASS AND PINSKY SAIL TO BYZANTIUM

Robert Archambeau

Robert Hass, *Time and Materials*. New York: Ecco, 2007. Robert Pinsky, *Gulf Music*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2007.

I.

How to be an old poet? We live on the precipice of a great age of older poets, writes Roger Gilbert in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, with an unprecedented number of American poets still going strong as they approach, or pass, their eightieth birthdays: Maxine Kumin, Robert Bly, John Ashbery, Galway Kinnell, W. S. Merwin, Donald Hall, Philip Levine, John Hollander, Richard Howard, Adrienne Rich, Gary Snyder—one could of course go on. One imagines each of these *éminences grises* has found his or her own answer to the question of how to be an old poet, and plotted out a route over the mackerel-crowded seas to Yeats' Byzantium of ageless art. But what about the baby boomers, members of that rapidly getting-on generation hooked on the notion of youth? What, especially, about those poets whose careers began with a bang of youthful notoriety, rather than the now-typical whimper of post-MFA chapbooks and blog posts? The appearance of new books by Robert Pinsky and Robert Hass gives occasion to reflect on how the poetic wunderkinds of the early baby boom navigate waters.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Pinsky and Hass have sailed on parallel routes into what, with some slight euphemism, we might call poetic maturity. Their careers have, after all, followed remarkably similar routes since they attended graduate school together at Stanford in the sixties: each chose an academic career, each was picked up early by a major press, each has filled his trophy case with as impressive an array of prizes and awards as one could hope for, each has published good literary criticism as well as poetry, each has served multiple terms as Poet Laureate. Now, as the two poets push seventy, they have found similar ways to write as mature poets. Both have turned in some measure to a public-spirited, civic poetry; and each, in a different way, has developed what I'd like to call a poetics of accumulation, sensitive to the tradition behind them and to the presence of the work of their peers. With *Gulf Music* and *Time and Materials*, each has also pulled off a feat rare among poets who began so strongly, producing a volume of work worthy of his impressive past achievements.

II. Civics Lessons

Pinsky is no stranger to civic poetry: it has been a major part of his repertoire since 1980's *An Explanation of America*, in which he explicitly took on matters of national concern. At a time when many of his generation were in full retreat from public affairs, Pinsky riffed on Horace's *Epistulae*, coming, in the second part of *An Explanation of America*, to the conclusion that

we should aspire,
For ourselves, to struggle actively to save
The Republic—or to be, if not like Brutus,
Like Quinctius: a citizen of affairs...

For Pinsky there can be no retreat into private lyricism, nor can there be any identification of aesthetic radicalism with political engagement. While the confessional poets were having their backyard epiphanies, and the language poets were working late in the laboratory trying to square agit-prop with Mallarmé, Pinsky committed himself to addressing public issues in a public language. Invoking figures from the classical Augustan period, Pinsky sought to think through national affairs in an appropriately Augustan language, writing clear, discursive passages and making use of such public symbols as the great seal of the United States, with its eagle that “balances and screams,” a “wild bird with its hardware in its claws.”

As if writing an explanation of America weren't challenge enough, in *Gulf Music* Pinsky sets himself another tricky civic task: he sets out, in “The Anniversary,” to write an elegiac reminiscence of the events of September 11, 2001. The occasion sends him back to civic imagery, including the great seal—this time the reverse side, with its “Forgotten glyphs and meanings, the Deistic / Mystical and Masonic totems of the founders: // The eye afloat above the uncapped Pyramid.” By and large the poem does its work well, but there are moments when the civic imagery skirts kitschiness, as in the final invocation of the Statue of Liberty,

Shackles visible at her feet, her Elvis lips —
Liberty: not abundance and not Beatitude —
Her enigmatic scowl, her spikey crown

I suppose the Elvis Presley reference is meant to give a sense of American defiance in the face of the attacks of that tragic day, and to invoke ideas of the sort of American youthful licentiousness and all-pervading pop culture that

drives fundamentalists of all stripes to fits of rage. It does all this, and does it economically, but for those born too late to experience Elvis in his heyday firsthand, it's hard to avoid a certain sense of campiness when his name is invoked. Camp is certainly not what one wants here, but all one needs is to add sunglasses or a guitar and the Elvis-sneering statue could adorn a tourist t-shirt or the cover of a book on postmodernism from the early 1980s.

Pinsky deals with 9/11 more successfully in "The Forgetting," a poem that joins William Carlos Williams' "The Crowd at the Ball Game" as one of the finest American poems about thoughtless crowds and their ominous power. After meditating on the way the past forms us despite our failure to remember it, Pinsky moves from this general topic to a very specific, and very political moment: Amiri Baraka's public reading of his poem "Somebody Blew Up America"

I was in the big tent when the guy read his poem about how the Jews
Were warned to get out of the Twin Towers before the planes hit.

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.

Forgetting, here, is both our excuse and our guilt, our redemption and our sin. Pinsky's poem moves beyond hasty and over-simple blame and judgment—a game he leaves to poets like Baraka—and offers something more like maturity's distanced and balanced comprehension.

Although Robert Hass was more of a Bay Area campus radical than Pinsky back at Stanford, his poetry has rarely been as civic-minded and political as that of his classmate. If one were to judge by the poetry alone, one might think of Hass as more the California hedonist than the left-coast politico. But in *Time and Materials*, some of the most ambitious poems turn to public themes. Not all of the civic poetry plays to Hass' strengths, though. The eight-page environmentalist poem "State of the Planet," for example, was commissioned by the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory and it shows, reading like a poem written on assignment for the benefit of a worthy cause. One understands why Hass structures the poem as a letter to the Roman poet Lucretius, whose *De Rerum Naturum* took a scientific perspective on the universe and urged us to take responsibility for our actions. Too often, though, the addresses to Lucretius feel like they're giving exposition that Lucretius wouldn't need to hear. This, combined with the device of para-

phrasing the contents of an imaginary science textbook Hass places in the backpack of a passing schoolgirl, results in a very didactic poem indeed. It isn't bad, not by a long stretch, and the poem's didacticism was appropriate to its first venue of publication, the science pages of the *New York Times*—but here it all comes across as terribly *worthy*.

On the other hand, Hass has written one of only two wholly successful poems on the fiasco in Iraq. “Bush’s War” stands alongside Eliot Weinberger’s “What I Heard About Iraq” as a major poem about a war that has produced almost no successful poetry (I put the poems of Brian Turner’s *Here, Bullet* in a separate category: they are the poems of a combatant, powerful precisely because the poetry is in the pity). Hass begins the poem in an uncharacteristic location—the Dahlem district of Berlin—but with a very characteristic vision of peaceful abundance and fructification:

There are two kinds

Of flowering chestnuts, red and white,
 And the wet pavements are speckled
 With petals from the incandescent spikes
 Of their flowers and shoes at U-bahn stops
 Are flecked with them. Green of holm oaks,
 Birch tassels, the soft green of maples,
 And the odor of lilacs is everywhere.
 At Oscar Helene Heim station a farmer
 Sells white asparagus from a heaped table.
 In a month he'll be selling chanterelles;
 In the month after that, strawberries
 And small, rosy crawfish from the Spree.
 The piles of stalks of the asparagus
 Are startlingly phallic, phallic and tender
 And deathly pale. Their seasonal appearance
 Must be the remnant of some fertility ritual
 Of the German tribes. Steamed, they are the color
 Of old ivory. In May, in restaurants
 They are served on heaped white platters
 With boiled potatoes and parsley butter,
 Or shavings of Parma ham and lemon juice
 Or sorrel and smoked salmon.

From here, we travel through the horrors of the Second World War—firebombings, the massacre of Polish officers in the Katyn Woods, Hiroshima, Auschwitz, Dachau—and beyond, to the Gulag, to Vietnam, and to the events of 9/11. Hass' meditations on the causes of this history of violence ring true: he tells us “there's a rage / To injure what's injured us. Wars / are

always pitched to us that way,” and he warns against the murderous self-righteousness of “the us who are injured / or have been convinced that we are injured”—a rage he sees behind the bloodshed of 9/11 and the occupation of Iraq alike. But the poem is most remarkable for its ending, where Hass is able to balance the moral urgencies of our moment with the aspect of eternity. On the one hand, he is as outraged and frustrated as a civilized man should be in these times, saying

It's hard to say which is worse about this,
The moral sloth of it or the intellectual disgrace.
And what good is indignation to the dead?
Or our mild forms of resistance?

But even as he rages, he also sees from a perspective beyond outrage, where death and violence, cruel and horrible and unjust though they may be, are also parts of the cycle of existence, in which destruction lays the groundwork for new growth. Here, at the end of the poem, Hass returns us, after our harrowing journey through war and slaughter, to the opening scene of peace and plenty:

Walt Whitman's

Sweet death, the scourer, the tender
Lover, shutter of eyelids, turns
The heaped bodies into summer fruit,
Magpies eating dark berries in the dusk
And birch pollen staining sidewalks
To the faintest gold. *Bald nur--Goethe--no,
Warte nur, bald ruhest du auch.* Just wait.
You will be quiet soon enough. In Dahlem,
Under the chestnuts, in the leafy spring.

Life goes on, in the wake of death, and has its sweetness, but this is no easy redemption: the magnificence of the poem lies in its balancing of indignation and philosophical distance, and of tragic awareness with the love of this world and of the pleasures of our only life. That's the stuff of a mature poetic vision.

III. Poetics of Accumulation

When T.S. Eliot thought about mature poetry, of course, he had something else in mind: the conscious awareness of something we all inherit, but few of us possess deliberately: tradition. Many of Pinsky's best poems in

Gulf Music set out to show us the workings of tradition, by making clear just how our everyday experience is the product of the accumulation of centuries of culture and history. Pinsky is, in Eliot's sense, a mature poet guiding us to maturity by making us consciously aware of the tradition-saturated content of our experience. Consider "If the Dead Came Back," in which Pinsky asks us to consider what it would mean if the dead "came back not only / In the shape of your skull your mouth your hands" but also in "The voice inside your mouth the voice inside / your skull the words in your ears the work in your hands," as in fact they do. He draws our attention to how even the defeated and the all-but-forgotten traditions survive, accumulating inside the culture of the victors

In legends like the conqueror's guilty whisperings about
Little people or Old Ones and not only in Indian angles
Of the cowboy's eyes and cheeks...

The idea of culture as accretion and accumulation has been an important thematic concern of Pinsky's at least since *The Figured Wheel*, but in *Gulf Music* there's a new emphasis on the idea of rescuing the history of cultural accumulation from a kind of forgetfulness, on bringing the unconscious tradition of accretion to our attention. In the title poem, for example, Pinsky lays down some lines that may seem like an un-Pinskian venture into nonsense verse: "homme-la-la. Woh ohma-dallah," we read; or, later, "eeloo hotesy-ahnoo, hotesy ahnoo Mizraim." What we're really dealing with, though, are verbal representations of the rhythms of that great gulf-coast invention, jazz. And just as jazz itself was the product of the accumulation of different musical traditions, Pinsky's jazz lines turn out to be accumulations of the different histories and cultures and voices of that most polyglot of American regions: "homme-la-la" references the French presence in New Orleans, while "dallah" gives us the African-inflected voicing of "dollar," which is a symbol of the commerce—including the commerce in African slaves—that drove the accumulation of cultures. While any referents for "eeloo hotesy-ahnoo, hotesy ahnoo" elude me, Pinsky gives the context for "Mizraim," citing a family story about a southern ancestor who came to America from Russia in 1908:

Becky was a teenager married to an older man. After she
Met Morris, in 1910 or so, she swapped Eisenbergs.

They rode out of Arkansas on his motorcycle, well-a-way.
Wed-away. "Mizraim" is Egypt, I remember that much.

The flight from captivity is enacted over and over, in flights from Egyptian Pharaohs, Russian Czars, and jilted patriarchs, and these experiences enter our collective culture, helping make us who we are. By first making “Mizraim” appear as part of our collective music, experienced pre-intellectually as sound, and then giving the word these historical associations, Pinsky takes us on the journey from passively received tradition to consciously held tradition. Here, as in so many of the poems of “Gulf Music,” he reminds us of the forgotten historical accumulations that have made us who we are.

In Hass’ *Time and Materials* we encounter a poetics of accumulation less at the level of theme and more at the level of style. Most of the poems in the book come out of Hass’ established style: we find moments of imagistic compression balanced with moments of eloquence, we find the gentle priapism and the Californian pastoralism that have been Hass’ calling cards since *Field Guide*. But there are poems in *Time and Materials* where we also find energies and accents new to Hass’ work, poems that gather into themselves the characteristic gestures of other poets. In “The World as Will and Representation,” for example, Hass takes us into territory where he rarely ventures, childhood tragedy and trauma, recounting how,

When I was a child my father every morning—
Some mornings, for a time, when I was ten or so,
My father gave my mother a drug called antabuse.
It makes you sick if you drink alcohol.
They were little yellow pills. He ground them
In a glass, dissolved them in water, handed her
The glass and watched her closely while she drank.

He goes on to say how the best efforts of his father were in vain, showing us how, after the father’s departure,

Slumped in a bathrobe, penitent and biddable,
My mother at the kitchen table gagged and drank,
Drank and gagged.

The stark, precise, low-affect presentation of childhood’s most painful moments seems less like a poem by Hass than it does a poem by Hass’ Stanford classmate James McMichael, whose *Four Good Things*—a book Hass reviewed enthusiastically—explored exactly this terrain in exactly this kind of understatement. Hass’ poem is all the more powerful for its McMichael-like refusals of affect and rhetorical augmentation.

In a very different poem, “I am your Waiter Tonight and my Name is Dimitri,” Hass meditates on war and violence in a style—syntactically ex-

travagant, self-reflexive, casual in its juxtaposition of high and pop culture—that owes much to John Ashbery. Ashbery, in fact, is referenced in the first line, a gesture more like the sort of thing one would find in an Ashbery poem than a typical poem by Hass. This passage is typical of the texture of the poem:

I frankly admit the syntax
of that sentence, like the intestines slithering from the hands
of the startled boys clutching their belly wounds
at the Somme, has escaped my grip. I step over it
gingerly. Where were we?

I don't know what's more Ashbery-like in those lines: the sudden juxtaposition of dark and light tones, the overt reference to the poem itself, or the intimate-yet-abstracted address to the reader. Hass has assimilated a whole poetic ethos into his repertoire, and the wonder of it is how naturally it seems to come to him.

If Pinsky, in bringing to consciousness the often-unconscious tradition, is fulfilling one of Eliot's requirements for the maturing poet, Hass, in seeking out new energies and refusing to let his work ossify into a single characteristic style, is fulfilling another: it was Eliot, after all, who wrote that "immature poets imitate; mature poets steal." Hass isn't slavishly following others, but accumulating new gestures, building on an established style, refusing to rest on his impressive pile of laurels.

It was Stephen Spender who, back in the 1960s, looked at the young generation and said:

Although the young today do have reasons for distrusting the older generation, anything that is worth doing involves their having to get old. What they are now is not so important as what they will be ten years from now. And if ten years from now they have become their own idea of what it is to be old, then what they are fighting for now will have come to nothing.

The youth of the sixties feared aging would bring a complacency about civic affairs, a smug refusal to re-examine the past, and an unwillingness to accumulate new influences. Were the young Hass and Pinsky able to look into their own futures, they'd have known they had nothing to worry about.