Images of psychiatrists have abounded in television and cinema, albeit largely in the form of various crude stereotypes (1). However, although madness, suicide, and innumerable other gradations of psychological misery have obviously been prominent subjects for literature since its beginning, intelligent explorations of psychiatrists per se, in their modern manifestation as professional therapists and medical doctors, have been harder to come by in serious fiction.

In contrast, other kinds of physicians have been depicted powerfully and often sympathetically in such major works as Sinclair Lewis’s Arrowsmith, Albert Camus’s The Plague, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s Cancer Ward. It is difficult to think of any works of comparable stature having a psychiatrist as a significant character. Although Dick Diver in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night is a psychiatrist (who rather obliviously falls in love with and marries his patient), it can be argued that the novel is essentially a tragic love story that happens to contain vague notions about 1920s’ psychiatry (2). The psychiatrist in Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest is a cipher. The view of psychiatrists in Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar is mostly resentful, but does allow for some ambiguity. One must advance to Pat Barker’s recent trilogy Regeneration, The Eye in the Door, and The Ghost Road, based on the work of World War I (de facto) psychiatrist W.H. Rivers, for a sophisticated and generally sympathetic treatment of its subject.

Interest in the medical bildungsroman—a tale of the development and maturation of a physician—has been a significant part of the burgeoning interest in medicine and literature. It has been recognized that medical students, residents, and physicians may identify powerfully with fictional doctors (3). Fiction has ethical implications that are inseparable from its aesthetic impact (4). In this sense, it is regrettable that there are so few complex and credible role models, either positive or negative, of psychiatrists in serious literature. Samuel Shem (5) has lamented the paucity of psychiatrists as both authors of and characters in fiction and has speculated that realistic psychiatric practice offers insufficient dramatic possibilities. He also noted that psychiatrists have themselves very rarely produced significant literature (a point to which I will return).

In contrast to prose works, the poetry most commonly associated with psychiatry has been confessional, written by sufferers of mental illness. Most famously, American poets John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, among others, wrote vivid and powerful evocations of depression before ultimately succumbing to suicide. However, psychiatry and mental illness have been relatively rare topics for poets lacking firsthand experience with them. A notable exception is Robert Pinsky’s long expository poem “Essay on Psychiatrists,” which comprises a self-proclaimed outsider’s reflections about psychiatrists and their patients. This poem stimulates discussion of psychiatric issues that are of particular interest to medical students and residents. What does it mean to be a psychiatrist, and what are the public perceptions of psychiatry? What is the nature of mental illness, and what is the relationship of psychiatry to other domains of knowledge and wisdom about what it means to be human?

Pinsky, a prominent contemporary poet and recent Poet Laureate of the United States, published “Essay on Psychiatrists” in his 1975 collection Sadness and Happiness, and it was recently reissued in The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1966–1996 (6). Surprisingly, the work has, to my knowledge, gone...
largely unnoticed in the psychiatric literature. The poem contains 464 lines of free verse, divided into 21 titled sections of various lengths. We will focus on the poem’s content, which comprises a constellation of incidents, reflections, and observations related to psychiatry. Pinsky’s themes include, first, a broad consideration of the psychiatric project, and, specifically, the values embodied in psychiatrists, patients, and the work they do together; and, second, a comparison of psychiatry and poetry as means of understanding and approaching life.

I will argue that this poem, although not narrative in the conventional sense, does function as a poetic bildungsroman of sorts. Instead of exploring a slow development of identity (as George Eliot famously did for a young physician in *Middlemarch*), Pinsky generates a multifarious collection of images and potential identities of psychiatrists drawn from the media, from the culture-at-large, from literature, and from his imagination. These images collide and struggle with one another throughout the poem, to culminate in a final, yet tentative, literary judgment about psychiatry and its practitioners.

What follows will necessarily be a limited examination of the poem, given that I am specifically interested in the poem’s implications about the contested values of psychiatry. Although I will touch on the contribution of Pinsky’s language to the poem’s impact, I will focus less upon poetic devices than upon the theme of the work. There are, doubtless, many other possible ways to approach the poem, which, much like Alexander Pope’s more famous “Essays,” may be approached on distinct aesthetic or theoretical grounds.

Literature has lent itself to a number of uses in psychiatry, chief of which, in terms of volume and significance, has been psychoanalytic literary criticism; that is, the application of psychoanalytic principles to authors, as well as fictional characters. An example of this is Norman Holland’s analysis of a poem by Emily Dickinson (7). In contrast, the literature of general medicine has more often been used to instill empathy for the experience of illness, as well as to facilitate a broad examination of what it means to be a physician (8). The latter is my objective here; that is, to use this poem not to illustrate specific psychiatric theories, nor to demonstrate stark ethical dilemmas, but rather, as an instrument of professionalism, to catalyze an inquiry into what it means to be a psychiatrist. Because the piece represents a kind of literary critique of psychiatry, I wish to respond to it on its own terms, not to beg the question by subjecting it to a psychiatric critique of literature.

Pinsky’s ambivalence about psychiatry is plain throughout the poem (for simplicity’s sake, I will refer to the narrator as Pinsky, since no other identity is suggested, although this identification obviously may not be valid). Notable at the outset is his alacrity in declaring, of psychiatrists, that he has “never (even this is difficult to say / Plainly, without foolishness or irony) / Consulted one for professional help (p 265).” The statement, which implies that what follows should be considered untainted by diagnosis or medication, reflects the contested authority and interpretation associated with psychiatry.

In discourse about psychiatry, uniquely among medical specialties, one’s perspective and judgment are inevitably called into question; it is necessary to declare where one stands in the diagnostic situation. Pinsky does acknowledge that many of his friends have consulted psychiatrists, a fact that appears to prompt his interest; however, he does not mention ever having known a psychiatrist personally or socially. Evidently, psychiatry is quite foreign to him, and he speaks of psychiatrists distantly: “it seems urgent to try to speak / Sensibly about them, about the psychiatrists (p 265).”

The poem teems with psychiatry’s stereotypes, some challenged and some seemingly accepted. The first lines seem to recognize and protest the prevalence of clichés:

> It’s crazy to think one could describe them  
> Calling on reason, fantasy, memory, eyes and ears  
> As though they were all alike, any more  
> Than sweeps, opticians, poets or masseurs  
>  
> (p 265).

Pinsky casts about for metaphors for what it is that psychiatrists do. Do they clear the mind of debris (like sweeps), enable discernment (like opticians), or soothe and stimulate (like masseurs)? As we will see, Pinsky seems to decide that psychiatrists most resemble poets, and it is in that sense that his ambivalence will crest.

Apparently, some stereotypes are more easily dispelled than others. Pinsky rejects notions of the “shrink,” the “religious analogy,” and the “Viennese