

*The Outnumbered Poet*

Poets and Poetry Readings

...no such thing as a short poetry reading.

—MARIE HEANEY

No one will ever know who first summoned the courage to stand up and recite verse to an audience—spontaneously or with calculation, premeditation or perhaps even inebriation. Long centuries have left a trail of scops and skalds, *jongleurs* and troubadours, bards and minstrels, *reacaires* and blind singers who saw fit to share their stories in rollicking ballads or alliterative epics or to sweetly proclaim their loves in more passionate and pithy lyrics. One thing we can assume is that audiences were often bored or sceptical or downright hostile; and much oral literature has no doubt disappeared down the drain of that boredom. What is certain, however, as we drift through the fog of history—which in this case may be the aromatic log-fire smoke in the halls and castles where (among harps and hounds and sweaty warriors) many oral epics will have originated—is that some tales were cherished by those who heard them; cherished to the extent of being memorised and passed down—as *The Odyssey*, *The Táin* and *Beowulf* have been—and finally made available in the written versions and annotated scholarly editions which we take for granted today.

Even if a True History of the poetry reading is an impossibility, I want to mention a few illuminating moments that I have encountered in my own random research. Here, for instance, is George Mackay Brown imagining the atmosphere in a hall in medieval Orkney as a new ballad is about to be aired:

The fire leapt high in the immense hearth. The ladies sat as near the candles as they could; their needles drew long

coloured threads through the linen. Servant girls hurried to carry platters, and empty flagons, and gnawed bones, down to the kitchen. The ballad singer, dappled with flame, stood near the hearth; he could not begin until the great ones had taken their places... The earl moved to his oak chair beside the fire. The hound flowed after him and lay down at his feet with sad abject eyes, fallen dewlaps, lolling tongue. The canons and the factor and the sheriff sat down again. The ladies, gently, with a clean swish of linen, sat down... The earl inclined his head; now he was ready. The ballad singer stepped forward. The ladies inclined their heads. [One] left her needle dangling from the half-finished fleur-de-lys on her linen and inclined her head and listened. All listened.

What is conveyed so acutely there is the anticipation created by the presence of someone who is gifted both as poet and performer; and Mackay Brown helps in clarifying one of the central issues I want to raise here: why do genuinely talented poets dissipate so much unrenewable energy on readings and reading tours, instead of remaining within productive reach of their desks? Clearly, Mackay Brown's answer is that poets—even the best of whom may be unsure of, or insecure about, the value of their work—can witness for themselves the power of their words when they meet with a responsive live audience. In Mackay Brown's account, the balladeer is a "person of no consequence" who—having suppered on porridge and ale—would sleep that night "between the sergeant of guard's bed and the palace carpenter's bed". Yet, "while the ballad lasted", the "great ones of Orkney were his utterly, he could make them laugh or weep as he chose, or beg for more like dogs. His slow formal chant probed them to their innermost sanctuaries; showed them, beneath their withering faces, the enduring skull; but hinted also at an immortal pearl lost under the vanities and prodigalities of their days".

If there are modern echoes in Mackay Brown's sandstone hall, there are some too in the letters of the Younger Pliny. A common complaint (in Ireland, where over two hundred public poetry readings a year are organised, and in Britain and America where arts impresarios seem to think about organising poetry events with the same frequency that young men are said to think about sex) is that far too many readings take place. Pliny (a lawyer and



Martial (born 40 AD), as epigrammatic as he is sardonic, encapsulates his ire in couplets, lashing out both at bad writers and bad reciters: “Two hundred lines a day the nitwit writes/ And yet he shows some sense: he won’t recite”; and “The verse is mine; but friend, when you declaim it,/ It seems like yours, so grievously you maim it”. Such withering scorn for those who insisted on making, proclaiming and maiming poems in ancient Rome was matched in modern Italy when Leopardi was writing his journal-like *Pensieri* and proposing that audiences should consist of professional listeners who, on twenty-four hour call, would be available for hire to any reader who could afford their fee (with special provisions to cover fainting fits, convulsions or mere nodding off by the rent-a-crowd). Flann O’Brien alone can rival Leopardi for the retch-inducing revulsion with which the idea of a poetry reading fills him. One of O’Brien’s *Irish Times* columns recounts how a man saved face—through losing it—as the only dignified reaction to a babbling bard:

I was once acquainted with a man who found himself present by some ill chance at a verse speaking bout. Without a word he hurried outside and tore his face off. Just that. He inserted three fingers into his mouth, caught his left cheek in a frenzied grip and ripped the whole thing off. When it was found, flung in a corner under an old sink, it bore the simple dignified expression of the honest man who finds self-extinction the only course compatible with honour.

Leopardi is no less dramatic in his response and certainly no less splenetic; he calls “the habit of reading or reciting one’s own compositions to others” a “coarse and barbaric” vice:

Today, when everybody can write and when the hardest thing to find is someone who is *not* an author, this practice has become a scourge, a public calamity, one of life’s newest hardships... In all good conscience, I believe there are very few things that reveal the puerility of human nature and the extreme blindness, indeed stupidity, to which self-love leads a man—and which also reveal the illusions we have about ourselves—as does this business of reciting one’s own writings. For we are all aware of the unspeakable annoyance we feel when listening to someone

else's work. And yet even when an author sees that those he has invited to a reading are terrified, pale with fright, and desperate with excuses, and even when they run and hide from him, still the relentless iron-browed author goes around town seeking and tracking down his prey like a hungry bear. Having caught them, he then leads them to his chosen destination. And during the reading itself, his unhappy audience soon begins to yawn and stretch, twist and turn, giving dozens of signs of their mortal agony—but not for *this* does he stop, nor does he allow any respite.

Daniel Corkery, in *The Hidden Ireland*, graphically recreates the “Courts of poetry” which flourished in eighteenth century “taverns”, the bardic schools and the Gaelic chieftains’ halls having by then been reduced to rubble and ruin. For all we know, some of the participants may have resembled the dreaded “open-mike” poets of our time who, in Vona Groarke’s wry words, “wish to read their own poems to an attentive audience, and to leave immediately afterwards so they don’t have to hear anyone else’s”. For the most part, though, the poets of the Gaelic “Courts” seem to have been intensely engaged in the proceedings. Corkery demonstrates that, beyond the “extemporising wit” and the friendly rivalry, more than mere recital was at stake; and we learn—in defiance of Leopardi and Flann O’Brien—just how valuable poetry readings can be in eras of oppression and deprivation:

Besides this reciting of verse and the discussions that followed, those gatherings enabled the poets to borrow manuscripts from one another as well as to examine such manuscripts as might have been discovered since the last Court was held. They had no publishers, it must be recollected, no laws of copyright, no press, no printers: it was, therefore, in those Courts that many a famous poem was heard for the first time.

Thomas Lynch, the American poet, once wrote that “For poetry readings the general rule is that if the poet is outnumbered it is a success. If outnumbered by a dozen or more, it is a huge success.” But, in perhaps the most memorable poetry reading in Irish literature, the poet was not outnumbered; the performance, recount-

ed by Tomás Ó Crohan in *An t-Oileánach* (*The Islandman*), was perfectly balanced and consisted of one presumptuous poet and a captive audience of one. The day in question, Ó Crohan tells us, was warm and cloudless on the Great Blasket island; he had set about cutting a much-needed store of turf for the cold and clouded winter months ahead, when “the poet Dunlevy came up with a spade under his oxter, to cut a bit of turf for himself”. Soon, however, Dunlevy ordered Ó Crohan to take his ease:

I didn’t care much for what he had to say, but I was rather shy of refusing to sit down with him. Besides, I knew that if the poet had anything against me, he would make a satire on me that would be very unpleasant, especially as I was just about coming out in the world. So I sat down beside him.

“Now,” says the poet, “perhaps you haven’t got the first poem ever I made, ‘The Black-faced sheep’, that was my first, and I had good reason for making it as far as provocation goes.”

Would you believe it—he started to recite every word of it, lying there stretched out on the flat of his back!... I praised the poem to the skies, though it was vexing me sorely from another point of view—keeping me back from the profitable work that I had promised myself that morning should be done. The poet had put a stop to that with his babbling.

As we leave the past for the present—and Great Blasket island for the mainland or mainstream of poetry—it seems as though contemporary poets might be divided (rather like black-faced sheep and goats) into those who cannot be persuaded to step up to the reading podium and those who cannot be coaxed down. My guess is that the strong, silent poets are greatly outnumbered—shouted down, some would say—by those indefatigable stentorians who travel the country or even the world like missionaries, taking their work to wherever two or three have gathered in poetry’s name. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger writes, “One is led to believe that neither Gutenberg nor Hertz nor Marconi ever lived; that printing had never been invented; that we lived in a world without radio, without the technologies to duplicate and transmit”.

Among the select sect of important modern poets who felt inhibited or repulsed by the idea of reading to a live audience were Philip Larkin, James Schuyler and George Mackay Brown. The Orcadian Mackay Brown, whose description of a medieval recital I quoted earlier, was himself too shy to read in a local two-room school let alone in an earl's hall. The neurotic New York School Schuyler eventually relented somewhat and gave his first public reading at the age of 65, just a couple of years before his death. For Philip Larkin, readings were devilishly difficult to endure and he cited a variety of strictures for his anti-reading purpose, as he railed against "inaudible muttering of stuff I dare say is all right on the page". Wallace Stevens, a Hartford rather than "Bradford millionaire", believed that "poets, like millionaires, should be neither seen nor heard"; invited to read for the Museum of Modern Art, he insisted "I am not a troubadour and I think the public reading of poetry is something particularly ghastly".

Philip Larkin sensibly cautioned against relying on a "vocal rendering" alone of a poem, reminding us that the eye as well as the ear is a receiving station for poetry, "naturally" picking up "punctuation, stanza-shape, where one *is* in the poem, how far from the end". I happen to agree strongly with Larkin on this point. Poetry simultaneously communicates on visual and semantic levels; an entire architectonics of poetry has evolved, encompassing the space around the words on the page, and including line breaks, line lengths, line layout and much else along those lines. As a result, the question arises not whether a particular poet is willing to read aloud but whether his or her poems are capable of being read aloud without losing a great deal in translation between page and larynx. The shape of a poem is part of its character and one can imagine what an impoverishment it would be to know Louis MacNeice's "Prayer Before Birth" or William Carlos Williams's "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"—not to mention some of George Herbert or John Donne, Edwin Morgan or Marianne Moore, Apollinaire or Mallarmé—only through the ear.

There are poets aplenty who reduce everything they write to dull slabs of undifferentiated text or to a predictable succession of inflexible quatrains, laid one on top of the other with all the charm and allure of trowelled breeze blocks; but gifted poets deploy their word processors to use every last comma, stanza pattern and white space as a resource in the poetry chain in much the

way that wily meat processors, in the pre-BSE era, less commendably used every last tongue, tonsil and thymus of the animals they slaughtered. It would be regrettable and retrogressive if poetry were now to privilege ear over eye when it could give pleasure to both, nurturing retina and cornea as well as tongue and tonsil, and illuminating the lamp-lit page no less than the spot-lit stage. Rosemary Tonks, a talented Englishwoman who took early retirement from poetry back in the Sixties, summarised the visual position well: “There is an excitement for the *eye* in a poem on the page which is completely different from the ear’s reaction”. One of the fundamental premises on which readings are often commended—namely that poetry is an oral art, which must be heard by the outer as well as inner ear, and that readings therefore mark a return to poetic roots, a kind of bardic homecoming—is a *half*-truth at best. Those book-buyers sighted at readings with the text open before them are conceding as much by following each poem on the page as it is read.

Significantly, it is books—not CDs or cassettes (the contemporary poet is a sluggish seller in the spoken-word category)—that are mainly sought and bought at poetry readings and these sales are a major incentive for publishers to organise tours. Audiences, having had their interest stirred and appetites whetted by the “heard melodies” of the reading, want to become better acquainted with the author’s printed work and it is this work which is still treated as definitive. Does the fact that readings can lead to readers explain why—ignoring the potentialities of DVD and broadband Internet and digital radio and desktop publishing—poets still take to the road? Or are there reasons, other than the obvious hopes of a sales boost or—like George Mackay Brown’s balladeer—an income boost and ego boost (those elemental, eternal but scarcely elevated incentives)—why poets, a race whose mantras abound in reminders that *vita* is *brevis* and rosebuds need urgent gathering, are prepared to drop everything for the sake of reading their work in public?

To begin with, I would suggest that poets read with alacrity because they like to present their poetry on their own terms, showing—without critical invigilation—how it works, both at the level of meaning and music. The reading allows poets to, in every sense, put a gloss on their own verse, expounding references and hinting at deeper meanings (real or imagined). Furthermore, a reading is an ideal medium for bringing out the music and the

rhythms of a poem: what hamburger specialists term the “mouth-feel”. Rhythm was to the fore in the pre-TV era of the “variety concert” when “recitations” were quite common. Someone—an overdressed and ankle-socked child or a twinkle-eyed waist-coated elder—would step forward and entertain the crowd in a parish hall with some popular poem in which the unmissable rhymes would be stressed and the sing-song rhythms thumped home as soundly as the punch line in a cautionary verse. This tradition is carried on by today’s performance poets, poets described by Jonathan Galassi as presenting “a kind of karaoke of the written word”, poets—sometimes accompanied by live jazz—for whom the shaping of a poem is not something that needs to be done by the book.

In performance poetry venues like the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York, improvisation is a form of inspiration and the instant, the ephemeral and the topical are loudly cheered or heckled by the audience (a performance poet without a live audience is like a DJ without a turntable). Body language is as important as the English language for these poets; more in love with “process” than “product”, to borrow Michael Schmidt’s distinction, they have to be able to think, and their rap-like rhymes to clink, on their metrical feet. Even among the best mainstream poets, who are my principal concern here, the poetry slams may have registered some influence. There are poems in James Fenton’s *Out of Danger* that clamour foot-stompingly for performance. Derek Mahon—tongue wrapped in cheek, one assumes—told an interviewer in 1996 that rap was “the best poetry being written in America at the moment; at least it rhymes. As always, the future lies in the streets”. In March 2003, Paul Muldoon praised rap music for its “great valorisation of the word”, welcoming the fact that it has the rhyming couplet as its “basis”.

Of course, a poet doesn’t need to be enraptured by rap to write either rhythmically or rhymingly. W.H. Auden has been the pre-eminent exemplar for Fenton and other English poets—such as John Fuller, Glyn Maxwell, Sean O’Brien and Simon Armitage—who have adapted traditional means to contemporary ends. Their ability to stitch everyday speech seamlessly into inherited forms, like ballads and sonnets, makes for lively listening. In a sense, however, it is the free verse contingent—including, paradoxically, those poets concerned with the shape of the poem on the page—who have most to gain from reading aloud, because

their rhythms may be less readily identifiable than those of poets who adopt strict forms. In either case, though—whether the poetic dress-code is formal or casual—it can be a truly instructive and penny-dropping experience to find some fundamental revelation concerning the aural pattern or tonal range of the work being transmitted by the poet’s reading. While the poem on the page remains primary, its oral presentation administers a subsidiary but complementary illumination, a decisive tuning of the ear which is sure to condition future encounters with that poet’s texts. Had Gerard Manley Hopkins been a performing poet rather than a cloistered cleric, it would not have taken so long for his work to make its claims literally heard. Think of his plea that his poetry should be read “as if the paper were declaiming it at you”, his insistence that “My verse is less to be read than heard...it is oratorical.”

Apart from equalling rap-artists in their eagerness to draw out the sounds and rhythms of their work, poets may—again like rappers (who compete in poetry slams and vie annually at the World Heavyweight Championship Poetry Bout)—read in order to “prove” that they are made of superior stuff to their fellow-poets. “Give me a platform”, they imply, in the spirit of a modern duel, “and I’ll show you who really counts in contemporary poetry”. Richard Murphy, in his memoir *The Kick*, records the following dialogue with the poet, Desmond O’Grady:

“I heard that you and John Montague read together at the Poetry Center in New York. How did it go?”

“I won,” said O’Grady, “I won.”

“Did you regard it, then, as a competition?”

“I did. It was. I won.”

Another potential flash-point, raising tension to World Heavyweight levels, emerges during the pre-reading sparring session when two or more poets, scheduled to share the programme, size each other up. For some reason—perhaps owing more to the wine of Cana than any sober judgement of Solomon—poets seem convinced that the most important reader is invariably saved till last. This leads to all kinds of unseemly poetic jousts and feints and tantrums, which can reverberate for years like a rights-of-way dispute among neighbours or opposing sides taken in a civil war. Elizabeth Bishop’s request that she be

allowed to read first, so that she can relax and enjoy the performance of her co-reader James Merrill, is far from typical. As someone who could not possibly care less where I am positioned in the few readings I give—but who strongly suspects that the audience is more optimistic and attentive, fresh and receptive for the opening reader—I was surprised some years back to find myself unwittingly embroiled in a classic jostling for position. Here is a snatch of the dialogue, quoted verbatim, which arose when I launched one of my books at a public event with a well-known poet as my co-reader:

ME: Would you like to read first or second?

SHE: Well, you're the big man tonight, so you should read first.

ME: Whatever you wish. You're very welcome to go first if you prefer.

SHE: OH! SO YOU WANT *ME* TO BE THE WARMER-UP!

As I recall that scene, I am reminded of a further episode in *The Kick* when, as a young poet on his first reading tour of the United States, Richard Murphy found himself paired with (or, rather, pitched against) the American poet, James Dickey, and felt the full air force of the former radar operator's ego. A big, belligerent, bear-like man, described by J.D. McClatchy as "a swashbuckling showman" of the reading circuit who "commanded piratical fees", Dickey was far from amused when Murphy (on the grounds that he was unknown and nervous) opted for the final turn on the reading platform. In Murphy's account, Dickey—who, with shades of O'Grady, "regarded our joint reading as a contest he intended to win"—swore "that he was not going to be a curtain-raiser for any goddamn unknown Irish poet. He had claimed as the senior man the right of reading in the place of honour, which was last".

Whereas Philip Larkin resisted the lure of the reading tour on the grounds that "I don't want to go around pretending to be me", for many poets precisely the opposite is true. Even the paltriest talents, when far enough from home, will delightedly escape into the persona of Important Poet, of Inspired Sage, so long as the audience—if any—is indulgent, ingenuous or ill-informed enough to collude. The most affirming and exhilarating

moments in poets' lives include being met at the station by some star-struck student from the College Literary Society or at the airport by the name-board-holding designated driver from the Literary Festival and eventually escorted into the venue.

But, having made a grand entrance, the size of the attendance may prove disconcertingly small ("Maybe we'll wait another fifteen minutes; we can usually count on at least four or five regulars"); and, later, the lodgings in the organiser's spare room may be less than commodious ("I shall never forget the look on Elaine Feinstein's face when she came in. She barely spoke to us", Connie Pickard recalled in a memoir of her Morden Tower series where the lucky reader could expect to be plied with nettle broth while over-nighting at "whatever flat, shack, palace, joint or hovel that we had managed to rent or squat in"). On the other hand, if—*mirabile dictu*—the audience happens to be respectable in size and the festival well-funded enough to offer a night in the kind of glitzy hotel that supplies bathrobes as well as bath cubes or to host a pre-reading dinner in a restaurant where wine glasses glisten like little chandeliers, then poetry suddenly seems worthwhile. The shrivelled readership, the single-figure royalty cheque, the insecurity of publishing tenure, the bitter anthology omissions are all forgotten. Doubts dissipate and a heady sense of elation takes hold in the hotel room as the poet rips the plastic hygiene cover from the tumbler and throws open the mini-bar like the door of a Dodge City saloon. "Hello!", one of the poets at the Kuala Lumpur World Poetry Reading inscribed ecstatically in Bill Manhire's souvenir programme, "Be happy, unhappy, be whatever you want. You are a poet".

In 1965, in a colourful yet considered article entitled "Barnstorming for Poetry", James Dickey confessed that, while "he might live more vividly" in the condition of Touring Poet, lionised by students and inhabiting a persona his wife would never recognise in an identity parade, it is not a condition in which he can actually write. For many poets, reading means *not* writing: it means packing suitcases instead of filling notebooks; it means revelling in loud applause for your past poems while deferring, maybe even suppressing, the poems that remain to be written. As Robert Phillips suggested (a trifle optimistically, I would venture, given the general standard of poetry), "If half the poets out there reading their old poems would stay home and write some new ones, our literature would be vastly enriched".

Rosemary Tonks went even further as she contemplated the decline and fall of Dylan Thomas, one of those modern poets (others include Robert Frost, Allen Ginsberg, Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg) who developed the familiar model of the touring bard. Tonks maintained that every time Dylan Thomas stepped on stage, “he knew that he was giving up another poem, practically, which he could have written. You either read and you give talks and you become a public person, or else you write consistently and every day and think on a certain level”.

There can be little doubt that poets who give readings regularly are better-known than those who simply publish in literary periodicals; and they are more advantageously placed to “create the taste” by which they hope to be appreciated. Very few of us would attend readings if they were habitually given by actors rather than poets, because actors tend to over-dramatise poems and rob them of their subtleties and silences; as Clive James said, they “ruin the poem by trying to put emotion in, instead of just contenting themselves with getting it out”. Clive James’s friend and Sydney University contemporary, Les Murray, rejoices in readings as “a mechanism for widening the circle—ten times as many people will come to a reading as will buy a book. You’re reading over the heads of the elite”. But how can the canonised major figures, including the immensely gifted Murray, whom reverential audiences want to see and touch no less than hear, be expected to invariably present themselves to modern Courts of Poetry, as if responding to some Parnassian *babeas corpus* order? Should they, like Enver Hoxha or Saddam Hussein, employ look-alike stand-ins? Or should there be poets like Renaissance painters “from the studio of”, or “school of”, master poets in order to satisfy demand? To what extent did the reputations of underrated contemporaries like F.T. Prince or Thomas Kinsella suffer because they were not noted readers of their work? And, conversely, why has a flair for reciting not saved the poetic reputations of the much-recorded and now little-anthologised C. Day Lewis and James Stephens? Is there not a risk of placing far too much emphasis on the contemporary? If readings become the major point of reception for poetry, are we not in danger of restricting our taste to the poetry of our own time? If poetry ceases to be an art which we reach for primarily on the page, who will read the poems of our own contemporaries when they are not around to introduce them engagingly in person?

Some idea of how circuitous the poetry circuits can be is revealed in two fairly recent biographies—*Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* by Bruce King and *Les Murray: A Life in Progress* by Peter F. Alexander. The Walcott biography includes many sentences such as the following:

During November [1978] Walcott read at Trinity College (15), was in Toronto (17-18), returned to New York for (20) Brodsky's reading at the YMHA, and read (29) at the University of Hartford. He read and lectured (5-6 December) at Brown University for Michael Harper; his last class was 14 December, just in time to return to Port of Spain for [a production of his play] *Pantomime* at the Little Carib Theatre. He was in Tobago 18-24 December, then returned to Trinidad, and returned to Tobago with his daughters 27-9 December. After readings and blocking of [his play] *Remembrance* in Port of Spain (30-31 December) he returned to Tobago for a week in January.

A princely poet like Sir Walter Raleigh can scarcely have needed as much sustained stamina to explore the Americas as today's poetry courtiers need to fuel and fulfil their reading commitments across the American subcontinent. Yet, faced with the conclusive evidence of Walcott's 325-page epic *Omeros* and Murray's 10,000-line verse-novel *Fredy Neptune*—not to mention their voluminous combined output of lyric and narrative poems, essays, anthologies and plays—one must concede that no amount of airline food or dining with college Presidents can hamper the creativity of the truly driven. The Les Murray biography, which travels faster and even farther than the Walcott, remarks:

It would be tedious to detail [Murray's] journeys, but in these years they included conferences or readings at the Rotterdam Poetry Festival in June 1989, to Tasmania and Western Australia the same year, rapid flights to Japan, Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States in 1990, a trip round the Kimberleys in August 1990... a long trip through the United States and Canada in 1991, a visit to Britain and Denmark in 1992, Britain and France in March 1993, two trips to Europe in 1994, two more in 1995, and so on without respite.

"Over Mount Fuji and the North Pole / I'm bound for Europe in

a reading role”, as Murray chants in a poem from *Dog Fox Field*. Murray’s “The International Poetry Festivals Thing” and “Waking Up on Tour” are further examples of a sub-genre of poetry—consisting of readings-related poems, mostly irreverent—to which Louis Simpson, Sean O’Brien, Wendy Cope, J.D. McClatchy, Peter Reading, Peter Finch, Rodney Jones, D.J. Enright, James Kirkup, Seamus Heaney, Michael Hofmann, Ifor Ap Glyn, Martin Cook, John Brehm and Vernon Scannell are among the contributors. Denise Levertov, one of many American poets whose campaign against the Vietnam War was waged from the poetry podium, wrote a poem about losing her audience at a reading in a Maryland church where she preached to the unconverted. The poetry reading is now firmly established as an instrument of protest, though a true poem will contain its own inner protest against being too crudely deployed as a propaganda weapon.

William Hazlitt asserted that “An orator can hardly get beyond *commonplaces*: if he does, he gets beyond his hearers”; and I fully share the concerns of those who fear that readings may oversimplify poetry and encourage the writing of verse which—fortified by the falsetto voice which is reserved for delivering poetry—is diverting to a live audience but which makes a thin and trite impression on the page. I can, however, conceive of no reasons (other than highly puritanical ones) why a good reading, like a good poem, cannot be both witty and weighty or why a reading—any more than a poem—should be a solemn affair in which earnestness and sobriety are valued above exuberance and verve. Yet, I am mindful too of the dangers of the patter eclipsing the poetry, a danger illustrated by the story of Fred D’Aguiar reportedly introducing a poem at such length in Middlesbrough that he decided it would be pointless to read it; and by the woman who unfairly chose Glyn Maxwell (a poet who can both challenge and entertain) as the target of her effusive encomium that “I loved the bits you read between the poems”.

One of the more dubious inter-poem interpolators was the American, William Stafford, who—if conferred with the least “ah” of encouragement for a poem—would punish his audience’s good deed with a list (often a revealingly long one) of all the unenlightened magazines that had rejected this particular gem. Indisputably major poets, however, have no need of self-pity; the respect and eager anticipation with which they are treated by audiences allows for a straightforward reading, unembellished by any overt element of “performance” and unencumbered by any

anxiety about winning listeners over. Katha Pollitt observed that Elizabeth Bishop read her work without “posture” or “irritating mannerisms”: “I thought she was great, because what she was saying is... these poems are made objects, they are written on a page, and that is where their real life is”. Seamus Heaney—who draws the largest audiences of any English-language poet—has warned against trivialised readings based around “charming, entertaining poems, which sell everybody short”. In a diary entry in *A Year of the Hunter*, Czesław Miłosz—another Nobel Laureate—describes an event in Oregon at which his co-readers indulge in “wise-cracks”: “since it is a good audience, I don’t make any concessions, I read what I want to, eliminating only poems that are too long, and I elicit a good response”. Of course, prominent poets will have the enormous advantage over their more obscure colleagues that those attending their readings are likely to have some degree of familiarity with the work they are hearing.

When it comes to poems which are unfamiliar because they are totally new, X.J. Kennedy urges poets not to treat audiences as “laboratory gerbils, at the mercy of your experiments” and contends that the responses of a collective audience are quite different to that of a solitary critic, because public readings place listeners in a “theatrical situation”. “In re-writing”, Kennedy concludes, “the poet is ill-advised to listen to crowd reactions”. Yet it is noteworthy—given the level of her interaction with the oral and folkloric traditions—that Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill is among the many serious poets who seek to assess their work-in-progress more objectively and self-critically by exposing it to a live audience. The public reading, in Ní Dhomhnaill’s view, is the “litmus test” of a poem and “every weak line stands out”; if the poem fails the test, revisions and renovations will follow. Other poets whose snag lists were drawn up under the influence of readings, and who refurbished their poems in consequence, include the scarcely folkloric Robert Lowell (who, upstaged by the Beats, wanted to uncramp his style by making his verse “clearer and more colloquial”) and Donald Hall (who contended that “by the very enunciating of [a poem], the poet may see flaws in it”)—it is as if the walls of venues answered back a disinterested sounding of each poem. Pliny the Younger, in a letter about revising poems, claimed he could tell the difference between an audience’s “critical judgement” and their “polite assent” from glances, nods, murmurs and other “signs”.

One extreme example of a poet's reliance on public readings relates, appropriately enough, to a poem on a public theme: Galway Kinnell's September 11 dirge, "When the Towers Fell". Speaking to Alice Quinn of the *New Yorker*, where this—arguably overworked—poem was ultimately published, Kinnell explained its evolution. Describing "When the Towers Fell" as "a poem that I wrote in part by reading it aloud", he recalled that he read it in a "rudimentary first version" to his writing students at New York University:

At every reading I gave thereafter, I read the poem, at whatever stage and in whatever state it was in. In a public reading, one wants very much for the poems to come out perfectly—and so all one's antennae are up and registering what is amiss. In my hotel room after the reading, I would work away at failed passages. Then, a few days or weeks, later, perhaps, another reading, and another revision. And so on. I read the poem in all its stages in the ten-month course of its composition, and it helped me very much to do that.

But even to interpret what an audience is saying is a far from elementary skill, because confused signals are the norm. Tom Lubbock, in an *Independent* newspaper report from the Hay-on-Wye Festival of Literature (which forensically analysed a reading of my own), tellingly noted that "while an audience can laugh if amused, there are no conventional noises for being moved or provoked to thought".

Like the messages conveyed to poets by their audiences, readings too are surrounded by a certain ambiguity: torn between an oral and written sense of poetry, between presenting poetry and promoting the poet, between light entertainment and serious enlightenment, between acting up and playing down. Furthermore, it is impossible for audiences to keep up for long with new and unfamiliar work of any sophistication or complexity without feeling themselves to be, in X.J. Kennedy's words, "a one-pint measure into which the poet has tried to dump ten gallons". (Once, at a late-night festival reading I was giving, I noticed that a man in the audience—probably well-fortified with pint measures—was in deep sleep. I consoled myself with the fact that he had been asleep before I started; besides, I was a last-

minute substitute for someone else and clearly therefore it was *that* writer's reading he had intended to sleep through!) It takes only one dull or narcissistic occasion—marked by interminable introductions to unstoppable poems—to turn me fiercely against readings; and it takes only one moving or spellbinding reading, during which hitherto elusive work suddenly quickens into life, to make an instant convert of me.

But what converts me is not simply the public reading—without which poetry would still survive and thrive, as the poetry of Pope and Wordsworth has survived and thrived without recordings of their spoken voices—but the private reading, the one in which the poet is sometimes barely outnumbered, if at all. For poetry to endure as a vital art, what has mattered are not those Albert Hall-filling exhibitionists of the 1960s, nor the stadium-filling rhetoricians of the Soviet era (beginning with Mayakovsky and his “booming street heckler's voice”). Instead, I think of my courageous coeval, Irina Ratushinskaya, in the train to a prison camp in Mordovia, calling out her poetry at the request of semi-literate but enthralled zeks—poetry which had offended the Soviet authorities by merely behaving independently of them. I think of the tormented Osip Mandelstam, gauntly staring out behind a mask of grey stubble as he recites his poems in the transit camp near Vladivostok where he will soon die; he is being listened to “in complete silence” by some criminals who have saved him from starvation with their tributes of sacrificed food. He has ended up in this camp as a consequence of another private reading, at which he had bravely but incautiously delivered his satire on Stalin. Or I think of that scene in the Inferno of Auschwitz where Primo Levi desperately tries to translate from memory Dante's Ulysses canto for a young Alsatian prisoner “as if I also was hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am”.

These inspiring but exceptional examples have very little to do, of course, with the conditions in which readings are routinely held in freer societies, societies in which people vote with their seat and remain at home, couched in their living rooms. Asked what he looks for in a poetry reading, the poet and editor Rupert Loydell said “the bar and the way out!” Yet, when a bemused Hans Magnus Enzensberger enquires “Why do people take pains to forgo their dinner, to crowd into the subway, to hire a baby sitter, only to listen—beside others in a hall with insufficient fresh air

supply—to [texts] which can be purchased without much effort at a good price in the nearest bookstore and read at leisure at home?”, one can answer plainly or idealistically or cynically. In conclusion, I will attempt all three. A vague curiosity; an expectation of stimulation, elevation or entertainment; a desire to be within earshot and eyeshot of a celebrity poet; the need to do duty to a fellow-writer—in plain terms, all of these form part of the admixture of motivating factors. More idealistically, though, I like to think that—consciously or not— every time we attend a reading, we are confirming our commitment to poetry as a source of verbal fascination, a force for civilisation, a fount of revelation, allowing access to language so nuanced as to be capable even of audibly registering gradations of silence. The “death of the author” has been frequently proclaimed and the death of poetry frequently prophesied but these convivial gatherings are a live poets’ society, marked by solidarity and community, not a hushed séance or a wake.

Undoubtedly, however, there are all too many occasions when cynicism is justified and we would be well-advised to lie low, bolt the door and cancel the babysitter; better off to do anything, in fact, rather than squander our time and test our patience at one of those sordid occasions where vacuous and fatuous poems are read slickly and soulfully, and where the only stimulation stems from watching the poet grapple with the cap on the mineral-water bottle or lose the battle to locate the whereabouts of the next poem. “Bring back hanging” was the laconic post-reading prescription of a disillusioned woman of my acquaintance who had travelled sixty miles to hear an over-hyped poet read in Dublin. If I were Arts spokesman for a political party I might be persuaded to include a Readings Regulator or a Readings Code of Conduct among my election promises. Yet I don’t think we should we act as judge, jury—and indeed hangman or hang woman—by appraising readings on the basis of their most odious excrescences only.

On those rare but incomparable occasions when the audience is deeply moved, even transfixed, by the reading and an “other-worldly evening” occurs, I recall Marina Tsvetaeva’s rapturous lines: “The poet acquires his speech from afar./ Speech carries the poet beyond the stars”. A world without readings would be a more isolated, insulated, desk-bound and indeed page-bound place for the poet to inhabit—and a poorer one for any of us who

owe to readings crucial insights and discoveries in the form of poems we have come to love, often by poets whom we had previously misunderstood or ignored. Nonetheless, the most important, consistent and trustworthy voice in poetry remains a silent one: the voice we hear in the inner ear when, alone, and free from the pressures of communal conformity, we read and react for ourselves and—in an unmediated meeting of minds on the printed page—catch that indefinable sound which Thomas Lux has striven to define:

It's the writer's words,  
of course, in a literary sense  
his or her "voice" but the sound  
of that voice is the sound of *your* voice...  
caught in the dark cathedral  
of your skull, your voice heard  
by an internal ear informed by internal abstracts...  
The voice you hear when you read to yourself  
is the clearest voice: you speak it  
speaking to you.

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