



## POETRY READINGS: A FIELD GUIDE

I recently attended the reading of a friend at a huge bookstore in Austin. They stood him behind a display that included an antique typewriter, a quill, and sheets of fake parchment on which had been written the first lines of famous poems. They didn't switch off the Muzak, the phone at the checkout desk rang incessantly, and the shrieks of children echoed up the stairwell. As he read his poems, customers in that crowded store approached him curiously, as if he were one of those eerie mechanical mannequins popular at tourist sites. They would track his gaze into the rows of fold-up seats, empty but for me, the listening dummy. At the heart of that bloated, indifferent store, it felt indeed as if we were an exhibit, the last reader and listener in the world.

This was a good poet and a good reader in an unfortunate circumstance, but isn't it true that most poetry readings cause one to wonder if it isn't time to let this strange species of performance slip into extinction? Let's be honest, poetry readings are often equivalent, at one end of the spectrum, to extreme sensory deprivation, at the other to having God rub the audience's face in its own mess shouting, "Bad humans! Bad humans!" Why is it that so few poets think about the importance of leaving their audience wanting more—or at least not wanting to self-harm? We've all experienced it. A lively, engaging, funny person takes the podium. We adore her; we're ready to adore her work. And then it's as if someone has pulled a string in the back of her head to release the "poetry voice" from her abruptly expressionless face. Like body odor, this problem is simple to remedy, but clearly poets are too embarrassed to tell other poets that a voice as monotonous and abstract as the signals of a life-support machine cannot but render one's poems—and audience—comatose.

What I'm attempting to inaugurate here is something of a taxonomy, so that poetry lovers may more quickly identify potentially harmful readings. Also, who can deny that we have long needed to develop the same kind of categorical sophistication for poets that we now have for those suffering from mental illness? In this way we can offer help to these writers and hope for their audiences.

A general point first: all English accents must be purged, even on the rare occasions when the poet is in fact English. They sound absurd. This behavior, which I fear may be a

non-adaptive genetic anomaly, afflicts a small subset of my first phylum: the Personae.

A particularly populous genus here consists of men who fear that being a poet raises a question mark over their masculinity. We've all encountered these bearded, grizzled, older male poets who've built their artistic lives—like their backwoods homes—with their own bare hands. These are hunting men, who butcher their kill with the same coarse tenderness with which they make love to their women (which they do *a lot*). I once drove one of these men to give a private reading in the luxurious home of a woman who, together with a number of her friends, had sponsored his visit to a certain writing program in Texas. This duty was anathema for the poet. Already half drunk, he looked out at that audience of wealthy women with contempt. In the question-and-answer session that followed, he insulted their pretensions, the conventional sterility of their lives, their wealth and privilege. They loved it. This dismayed him. He went to get another drink but the women followed en masse. Desperate, he growled out Kinnell's "The Bear," spitting that creature's gnashed, blood-sopped turd right into their faces. And they *loved* it. Shivering with pleasure they crowded in. No longer the hunter, he'd become the hunted. These women wanted only what he claimed to want for them: to gorge upon the vitals of life. Only it was *his* vitals, *his* life, and the coward fell loudly asleep.

The equivalent here for women is the Sexpot, which is becoming increasingly common. I saw one read last year when I was home in London. She'd complained in a recent interview that people were focusing too much on her looks and the sensual subject matter of her work, which threatened to compromise her identity as a serious artist. She turned up to the reading in a pair of thigh-high boots, a leather miniskirt, and what looked like a bustier. Her blonde hair, which fell almost to her waist, was pulled forward over one shoulder. She read in a voice at once husky and honeyed, the little creature of her tongue blindly attending her lips. Between each poem she took a moment to heft that glorious hair behind her neck and over the other half of her body, in this action shrugging our gaze like so many flies from her naked shoulders. In the middle of one particular poem, which raised the question of individual responsibility in the face of our growing estrangement from metaphysical consciousness—beautifully metaphorized in an explicit act of

bondage—the woman friend I was with leaned into me and whispered that the poet might be better off with a pole than a podium. Of course I told the old bat to keep quiet.

Equally numerous and as successfully diverse as the Personas are the Interlocutors. This phylum is defined by what goes on between each poem—the patter. Notable here are the stand-up poets, who get us rolling in the aisles just before they launch into a poem about the Holocaust. So much here depends on the type and quality of the poems, and how they are delivered. In general poets should avoid making themselves too engaging when they're not reading their poems. We've all been to those readings that are like watching an entertaining videotape that periodically freezes and crackles, where we can't wait for the living poet to reemerge from the static mire of his work.

There are also Interlocutors who become unraveled between poems. I once read with just such a poet. We agreed on a maximum of twenty minutes each. To assure me, he showed me the four short poems he was going to read. He elected to go first, seemed confident, but when he reached the podium this usually articulate man developed an astonishing stammer. Staring up at the ceiling and rocking on his hips like an autistic Elvis, he repeated every word of his already lengthy introductory explanations: "The the the the idea idea idea idea for for for for this this this this poem poem poem poem . . ." Like a shaman he entered us into mythic time. We touched eternity. At last he would get to the poem itself and read it flawlessly, briefly resolving our world upon that axis before flinging us up once more into the widening gyre of his next introduction. As a result his reading took close to an hour. As I got up to read, the place thunderously emptied, a number of chairs upended in the general panic. Only a few stalwart friends remained, and of course the poet himself, blissfully smiling at me from the front row.

It strikes me now that this man is actually a hybrid of the Interlocutor and the equally common Sesquipedilector, which I shall get to later.

First I want to address the problem of an alien species entering a long isolated ecosystem, which, as we know, can be ruinous. I once went to a reading at an old-fashioned and extremely expensive private college. The professors were of the kind that are kept hermetically sealed between classes. Some of them were probably hundreds of years old. In general the visiting writers, as you'd expect, were of the

canonical ilk. However, the wealthy alumnus who had sponsored the reading series had stipulated that one poet per semester had to be selected by the students (it's better to consult a Ouija board or cast bones). The beautiful chapel where the reading took place was packed, the professors and their spouses filling the front rows. The "students' choice," a woman with wild, ashen hair, wearing an ankle-length hemp dress, took the podium. She immediately introduced her partner, a Willie Nelson look-a-like who emerged from the front row clutching—you've guessed it—a set of bongos. In many of her poems she was, apparently, channeling spirits, her eyes fluttering back in her head, various voices howling through her like the wind through the Badlands. At one point, like an infant, she screamed, "Mama! Mama!" Throughout it all that man banged on his bongos with an expression that I think was intended to suggest profound spiritual absorption, though it seemed more the result of sniffing glue. When the reading was finally over the front rows looked decimated, those professors like so many vampires tricked into sunlight.

Of course in the right environment—say a coven of white witches or a padded cell—this reading would have been perfectly acceptable. There is, however, a particularly pernicious genus of poet, the members of which should never read: the Abstruse Inflictors. It is not necessarily the case that the work of an Abstruse Inflictor is in itself bad: it is simply not appropriate to read. Such poets should give a lecture, or show off other talents, such as playing the spoons or remarkable double-jointedness. In the past you could spot them reasonably easily. They were mostly male and tended to look like D.H. Lawrence in his last years, gaunt and fiercely bearded. Their gaze in particular was unmistakable and conveyed with deadly clarity the simple message: *You bastards, you're going to get it now.* More recently, however, they are becoming increasingly difficult to identify, and there are almost as many females as males. Just a little while ago I was fooled by an utterly innocuous-looking poet who was giving a reading at City Lights in San Francisco. As it turned out, his poems were so filled with arcane references he took fifteen minutes before each one to apprise us of all the allusions and provide the translations from the Latin, Aramaic, and Urdu. Throughout his explanations, a barely repressed self-satisfaction distorted his lips. It looked very much as if he were savoring our discomfort, swishing it around his palate like a fine wine.

Even one poem from an Abstruse Inflictor is one too many. But this isn't the case for most poets, which leads us then to that all-important question: how long should a poet read? Of course this depends a great deal on the type of poems and the audience. However, if we want people to continue attending poetry readings—and perhaps we don't—it is essential that a poet doesn't read too long. Those who invariably do are the Sesquipedilectors, of which there are a few kinds. Some are richly blessed with self-love. Since the work of these people is inevitably about themselves, it is inconceivable to them that it could ever be in excess supply. Others are, to put it gently, too utterly poets, with all the attendant social obliviousness that implies. Though they can count angels upon a pinhead, they can't differentiate the eternal suffering of the damned from a fancy spa. But perhaps the most deadly are those who hate themselves, who punish themselves through us.

I encountered one in this latter group while I was teaching at a university in upstate New York. He was that semester's poet-in-residence. I'd been given the task of escorting him to his reading. It was a raining, blustery day, and he seemed convinced that no one was going to turn up. "Oh well, the fewer poor jerks listening to my garbage the better," he said. Assuming he was just nervous, I offered blandishments. In fact the room was packed. I was pleasantly surprised to see a number of my own undergraduates—one girl in particular, who had previously responded to poetry with something close to physical revulsion. The poet began by telling everyone that they must be completely "loco" to come out on such a night to hear his "crappy work." It was clear he'd made a big impression on his own students, and a little group of them were cheering him on, which gave him a childish look of flushed-faced joy. He began. His poems were exactly right for that young audience: anecdotal, irreverent, and funny. The whole room kindled. Even my reluctant student began to smile and engage. As the reading approached forty minutes, the poet called out, "Four more and you'll be free." As he came to the fourth, he glanced at his watch and said, "Ten more minutes tops, and you'll be out of here in time for *American Idol*." Those ten minutes stretched to fifteen, to twenty. Even his cheerleaders were finally silenced as the reading became a mangle through which he cranked our sensibilities. And the horror was that he seemed completely aware of this. He began to read his poems compulsively. It was like watching someone with an eating disorder, a look of voracious

desperation about him. All those in the audience who might have decided a half hour ago that this poetry stuff wasn't so awful after all now sat with glazed eyes, taking from this experience what good poetry gives us in its music and beauty, and bad in the fact of its existence: that suffering is at the heart of life, that we are forever chained to our seats on the old slave passage through God's uneven and interminable oeuvre.

But does it have to be this way? For me poetry is the premier, the most exacting and potentially rewarding art, and I've attended a number of wonderful readings. They are, however, as any honest person will have to admit, a distinct minority. Are these bad readings, then, merely the last shudders of that glacial shift from the work of the oral poet, who had to vividly engage his audience or risk being stripped naked and beaten (which I'm all for), to work written for the page, for an abstract audience of editors, prize judges, search committees, and last—*least*—those shadowy readers of our future books? Is my desire for an actual human being standing in front of me to say something stirring, beautiful, and brilliant—*and to say it well*—just vestigial? It seems to me that if we don't find some way to train, rehabilitate, even render extinct some of the more pernicious of the species I have described above, we should indeed begin a fund for that museum exhibit: the last living reader and listener in the world.

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