

NOW PLAYING

# SOME

—PROUDLY PRESENTS—

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JACK ANDERSON JOHN LOVE  
DAVID IGNATOW HUGH SEIDMAN  
TERRY STOKES JUNE FORTRESS  
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Poets on Stage: The Some Symposium on Poetry Readings

release press

## SOME/RELEASE PRESS

Editors: Alan Ziegler, Larry Zirlin, Harry Greenberg

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### A NOTE ON SOME/RELEASE PRESS

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\* \* \*

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## An Introduction To This Book

One night the three editors of *Some* were discussing possibilities for forthcoming issues. One of the editors didn't have his mind in the sessions; he was thinking about a poetry reading he was to give the next day. He had given readings before but hadn't *thought* much about them. But now, as he drifted away from the work at hand, he thought about the fact that the next afternoon he would be reading his poems to an *audience*. Some of his poems would reveal to strangers and friends alike things he had not told anyone. (Of course, these secrets would be presented on a "wall of literature," and he could remain behind that wall). There was also material that was mostly incarnated from the imagination—images that had emerged excitedly yet silently onto the page. How comfortable would they be wearing sound?

These musings interested him, and since the major criterion for *Some* is interesting material (and he was feeling guilty about not contributing to the meeting), he suggested: why not an issue of *Some* devoted to poetry readings? The meeting was transformed into a tentative discussion of the new project.

During the first half of the reading the next day, he was "on"—shooting quick, funny poems at the audience and connecting. Between sets, a poet he respected complimented him on his ability to "perform and get laughs." Like many writers, he turned this into a challenge: well, you can perform but can you communicate the darker, quieter side of your poetry; can you sweep your audience into a silence of heightened feelings; can you deal with the absence of easy responses like laughter?

So he went back out and read dark quiet poems. The audience responded at the end with a decent amount of applause, but he was uncertain how he "had done," how much had gotten through. Also, had he let down the audience by not being as entertaining the second half?

He and his co-editors put these and other thoughts and questions into a form letter that they sent to about 60 poets. It was emphasized that contributors could ignore any or all of the suggestions in the form letter; they could go off on their own journeys into the realm of poetry readings, an area that is becoming more widely travelled but is for the large part uncharted.

Poets read in bars and universities, in parks and museums. There are those who publish in small magazines and read their poems mostly in front of friends; there are Major Poets who appear



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before their followings and the curious in large halls. All poets, we figured, would have anecdotes, fears, triumphs, musings, and feelings to share. We would provide the forum; they, the form.

Several poets reported they were having trouble verbalizing their feelings about poetry readings; one alluded to some wild times in the Sixties which discretion suggested best not be dragged into this decade. But the pieces started to trickle in. Although we had been afraid that we would reach a point of diminishing returns—when poets would keep repeating each other—we were pleasantly surprised at the variety of responses. (Since some poets based their responses on the form letter we sent out, readers of this book may notice structural similarities, as well as the echo of certain of our phrases, such as “poet as myth” and “Henry Youngman.”)

This project took a long time, and we apologize to any contributors who find their material dated—people tend to change their minds about such open-ended subjects.

No introduction to an anthology is complete without a note about what it is not. There were many poets we asked to contribute who we regret could not do so; there are many we did not ask who we should have. We have stayed mostly within the bounds of “standard” poetry readings; much is said and much more is left to be said.

A.Z.

## Alan Dugan

Dear Some:

You propose an elegant subject which should be pursued. A professional poet can make his/her living by publication, by oral publication, by reading aloud, by teaching, by getting grants, or by having a wealthy patron. My late father-in-law, Ben Shahn said of artists, as a favorite saying: "A professional artist either makes money, has money, or marries money." Otherwise one has to work at some shitty job for someone else, — which is valuable as experience, but a waste of the time of your life.

The first time I recited, at a college, I had forgotten how overheated academic interiors can be and sweated because I was wearing a jacket and was too nervous to take it off, and therefore performed badly. The students and teachers were good to me, saying, roughly, "Well, it's over, it's your first time, you'll do better next time," which I did.

When I read aloud now (by the way, I dislike the "reading" when used to denote oral performance. As you read this you are reading. If you say these words "these words" out loud you are speaking. I realize that language is in a constant state of transformation, but there *has* to be some tension between received language and new language, or else we're in danger of lacking communication.) I try to break the audience-versus-performer structure by trying to get a laugh by reading a superficially funny poem. If I get no response from an audience thinking, "What am I doing here sitting through this civilized agony," I ask for a request for a poem, and there is always someone brave enough to make a request, usually for my most anthologized poem "Love Song: I and Thou," which I'm sick of. This can break the ice so that it's no longer performer-audience, but performer-people, not mass reaction, but, as Gertrude Stein said, an audience is one plus one plus one.

Some of my poems are too recondite or complicated to admit of recitation to people who are not familiar with them on the page, so I recite poems which are hearable on the surface, unless asked otherwise. When the poem is dense I feel I have to explain. For example: a couple of weeks ago I worked with a group of ninth graders at a high school. The brilliant and well-informed thirteen-year-old girl who was my introducer had mimeographed one of my poems about prize-fighting, "On Hurricane Jackson," in hopes it would interest some of the wild boy/men in her class, but



## Jack Anderson

### Reading Poems Aloud

I found myself trying to explain my references to Sparta and the Pan-Hellenic games, and wound up saying, lamely, something like, "Well, if you don't know your Greek History, you could look it up." (A couple of the captive boy/men responded, nevertheless, with some hilarious anti-jock poems.)

Politics: I always say some political poems in the course of a reading aloud, while trying not to push it, which is difficult for a far-leftist like me not to do. I figure the listeners might want to experience oral poetry, lyric poetry, of which politics is only a *part*, so I say anti-war poems, pro-peace poems, anti-capitalist poems and anti-bureaucracy poems in the midst of poems about the larger issues—the classic issues—of love and death for us animals and what the universe is like and why.

I've had some of my best times at the read-ins against the U.S.A.'s unconstitutional military intervention in Vietnam during the Sixties because I met a lot of interesting people of character who, though innocent of politics, were nevertheless brave in a just cause—and I qualify "brave" by "just."

About the term "the poet as myth"; it's too bad. "The Poet as Suicide" is the current fad among grad-students as a thesis-subject for an M.A. There must be thousands. We've gotten applications saying, roughly, "I'm writing a thesis on why poets commit suicide so I'd like to come to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown so I can finish my work by interviewing living poets." I'm being cynical, but I just hope that poets don't feel they have to validate themselves by committing suicide.

I hope you can bring off your project: it is an interesting and valid sociological subject.

Yours truly,  
Alan Dugan

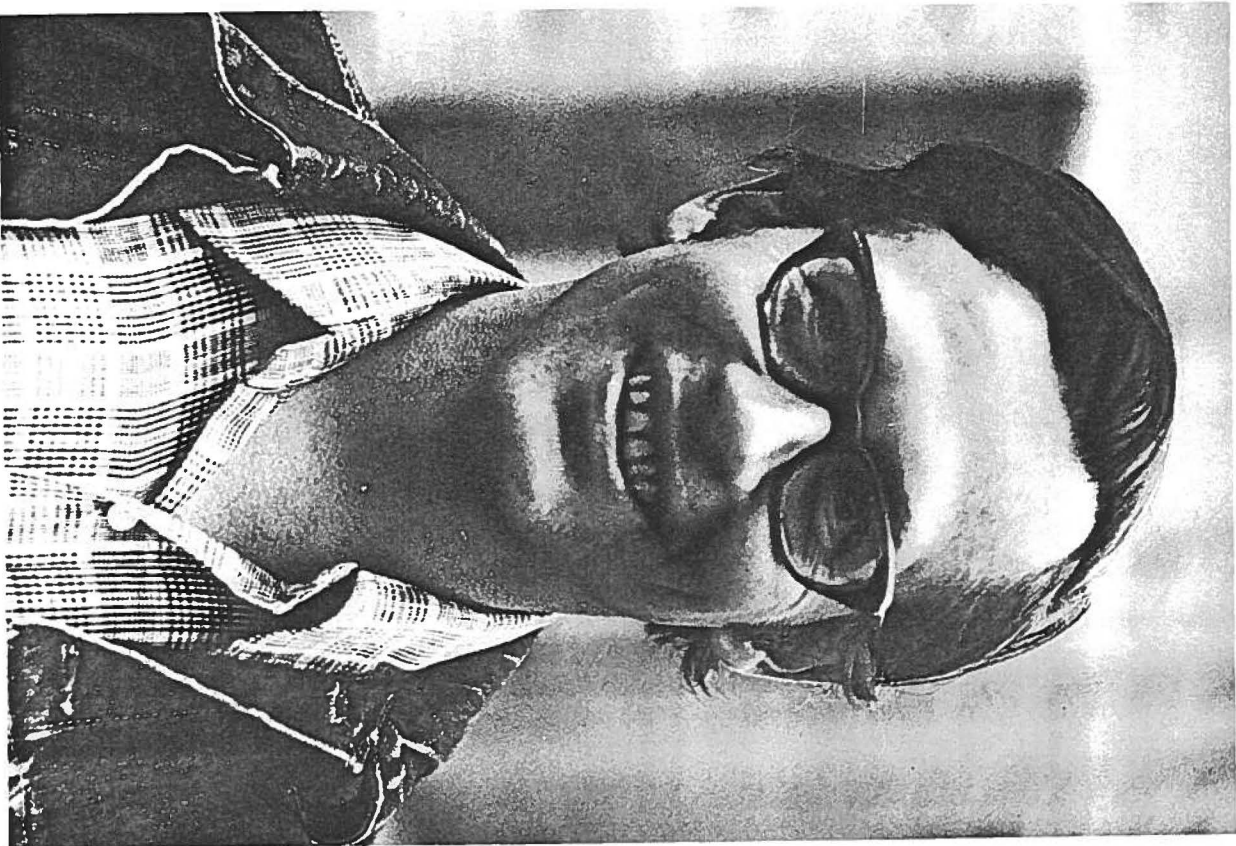
People interested in poetry usually tend to be interested in poets, too. Though critical purists may insist—and rightly—that a poem should exist as an autonomous object, it is hard to suppress curiosity about the person who made the poem: what does he look like? what does he sound like? No wonder poetry readings are popular.

The sheer fascination of associating poem and person often prevents even dull readings from being total disasters. Yet some readings are clearly better than others. As poet and reader, and as a listener to fellow poets, I find that the occasions I most enjoy are those which are quite frankly treated as performances.

That word "performance" is anathema to many poets, who regard it as synonymous with "falsity" or "insincerity." It need not be. To recognize a poetry reading as a performance is simply to recognize the necessity of presenting one's self and one's poems in the best possible light.

But I want to do that honestly. I do not want to deceive anyone. And as a member of the audience for other poets, I do not want to be deceived. Thus I deplore a platform manner so outrageous that it distracts from the actual poetry. Conversely, there is no reason why a poet should minimize himself or his work. I have encountered a few poets—including very good ones—who are dreadfully incompetent readers. They mumble, they drone, they mutter and sputter and, finally, they massacre their poems in public. These occasions are embarrassing. One accomplishes nothing by making one's poems sound dull.

My notions of performance are partially influenced by the oral interpretation classes I had as a theatre student at Northwestern University and by my own experiences with poetry readings in general. I prepare all readings in advance. If I am asked to give an hour reading, I want to have an hour's worth of poetry on tap. Or if the time limit is a half-hour, or twenty minutes, or whatever, I want to be ready for that eventuality. Moreover, I arrange my poems in a provisional order. The spectacle of poets pawing frantically through manuscripts trying to find some elusive sonnet or lyric always makes me fidget. I prefer to have poems arranged together according to thematic similarity or as deliberate contrasts. Nevertheless, having devised a sequence does not necessarily require me to stick to that order. Sensing the mood of the occasion, I may make considerable substitutions. Audiences



are unpredictable. Some are just not favorably disposed toward serious poems on certain nights and will titter at death, anxiety, alienation, and apocalypse. Others are so lachrymose that they would weep at the Marx Brothers. Specific atmospheres may require minute or extravagant adjustments. But at least I have the security of a basic pattern for the reading so that I do not have to panic or fumble.

There are certain types of poems—for instance, Pound's *Cantos*—which do not readily lend themselves to oral performance. This makes them neither better nor worse than other poems. There also exist, I suspect, poems which seem more effective when read aloud than they do on the printed page. Provided that the gap between performance and text is not so great that an oral reading verges upon fraud, these poems are not reprehensible: the oral tradition, which includes the old Scottish ballads and the best new rock lyrics, is an honorable one. I suspect that most poets, though, hope their poems are equally effective on the printed page and in the oral performance.

Since my own poems are generally conceived in terms of a real or imaginary speaking voice, few cannot be read aloud. At my readings, works containing humor, satire or fantasy (such as "The Invention of New Jersey" or "The Party Train") are usually successful; I consider comedy to be in no way inferior as an art form, and so do not hesitate to make people laugh. Poems with characterization or dialogue (such as "Going to Norway") also go over well. Yet I have had good luck with pure mood pieces, such as "Winter Twilight." I have written a few poems which deliberately exclude oral performance, poems which presuppose a silent, solitary reader. Naturally enough, I do not program them. Once, the sponsor of a reading insisted that I read one of these poems, "Where You Are," aloud. I finally consented, but felt idiotic doing so. Poems which could be read aloud but which I hesitate to read aloud include long pieces (for fear of boring listeners) and works of an intimate nature (I blush easily). Regarding the latter, I suspect I am too timid. One poem, "Pornograph," parodies a certain style of pornographic literature. At first, I never read it. Then I tried it out on selected audiences. Because no one fainted, I now schedule it fairly often. Yet I would still avoid programming it at small Midwestern Catholic women's colleges—which may only mean that I underestimate such institutions. Programming is partially affected by the place where I read. Thus at colleges where I am relatively unknown, I mix new poems with anthologized pieces, while at St. Mark's-in-



the Bowerie, where I have appeared many times, I concentrate upon new poems.

Should I read someone else's works, I might not hesitate to pref-ace poems with interpretive comment. Since I hope my own poems are self-explanatory, I resist making explanatory remarks. (Other poets I know offer elaborate anecdotes or sermons between poems.) Nevertheless, I suspect that poems need to be introduced by little statements which, if nothing more, direct the reader's attention from the previous item to the next in such a way that all the poems do not blur together.

So much about poetry involves solitude. One writes alone, and even when a poem is published a poet may not know how it affects anyone else. A poetry reading allows a writer to share his work directly with others. I like reading my poems aloud. I hope my audiences also like hearing them.

\*

#### WINTER TWILIGHT

The sky looks half-erased,  
washed out.

On a park bench in the shadow  
a woman sits  
plucking the hair from her head.  
Then she unrolls her face  
the way she might unroll a stocking.  
Only the head itself is left—

white  
blank

an egg.  
She leans back,  
breaks the egg against the bench.

Now darkness can begin,  
and soot, and plunder.

#### WHERE YOU ARE

This is where you are.  
Please note.

You are reading a poem  
Beginning, "This is where you are."

Now get up

And walk three times around the room,

Then drink from a faucet

(If you can find a faucet).

Do not use a glass.

Stick your mouth directly

Into the stream of water.

Feel the water.

Its coldness, its wetness.

If there is no faucet near you

Or if the water is not potable,

Observe sky

And whatever may fill it

(In the margin you may write

The names of three things

You see in the sky)

And try to decide

Whether our present condition

Is best described

As peace or war.

What is the difference

Between this and "this"?

Please take note

Of where you are.

Did you really walk around the room

As requested?

Have you written anything in the margin?

Are you sitting, standing,

Or reclining?

You are reading a poem

Which will end,

"Of all this is."

But you are not there yet.

You are here.

You are getting there.

Now explain precisely

What the point

Of all this is.



## Colette Inez

There's something heroic about Poetry Reading *Mavins*. They endure while lesser souls around them succumb to coma. But for them, I suspect, the poetry reading as spectator sport would match in attendance a public flogging at an ashram.

A pity. Not that reading as a medium will ever challenge JAWS in box office appeal, or on the Soviet scene match Yevtushenko's draw of 10,000 SRO Siberians, but readings mean exposure. Better still, they can spell survival income for some deserving poets who might otherwise be reduced to janitorial service. But moola aside or none forthcoming, they can be instructive, inspiring, even fun.

Perhaps as a resident of both sides of the podium, I qualify for passing along a few tips which for me—during 60 or more appearances over the last few years—have at least served to keep audiences awake. (The first prerequisite and perhaps the most challenging.) Incidentally, I used to approach readings like a reluctant stripteaser secure only in the belief that the audience would find my body flawed. Now I go on like a seasoned ecdysiast combating a few intestinal butterflies at first, but generally convinced I will not disgrace my ancestors—all non-poets, as far as I know.

Okay, here goes:

1) *Forget the business about the immortal integrity of the written word*, the fallback position of some readers who drone on with bottomless epics better reserved for the eye, not the ear. Reading poetry is part show biz and demands pacing, a sense of delivery, pause and incidental patter. I'm not saying ham it up, but more on that later.

2) *Mix it up*. Solemnity with wit, the longer poem with an epigrammatic quickie if you have one in your repertoire. Reserve a sharp poem of tested power for the curtain closer.

3) *Some poems are winners*. I find that cadenced poems with strong visual imagery work well. Long works with abstract themes and complex wordplays will leave them twitching. No funeral processions or sombre poems, never.

4) *Try yourself on you*. Dry run your style on a tape recorder, and with a cold ear, tune in for flaws. Does the delivery do the poem justice? Would you as listener give yourself a passing grade?

5) *A short introduction as scene setter* should proceed those of your poems which would be enhanced by this tactic. It



## John Love

### A Vision Expressed By A Series Of False Statements

personalizes the work, humanizes the poet, and gives necessary respite between poems. Be serious, funny, preposterous in turn—whatever says something about you, your sense of yourself in the work you've written. But hone down those nifty anecdotes lest what follows becomes a letdown.

6) *Be a clock watcher* and cheat your audience by about 5 to 10 minutes out of every hour. A hard rule for the poet/ego tripper, certainly, but how much more satisfying is the clamor for encores.

7) *Avoid the numbers game*: This, my thirty-fourth poem will be followed by only eight more long ones, etc." Read without computing.

8) *Histrionics are out*. Elocution, trills, oratory, turns me off. I begin to suspect that behind all that chromium is a lot of defective metal. At the opposite pole, and just as ranking, is the flat, toneless reading that suggests the poet is really an android.

9) *Get a fix on your platform manner*... headbobs as you duck for a written line, flailing arms, meandering eyes, whatever might distract or hypnotize your audience. But you needn't get finicky about mannerisms. I'm somewhat of a hardcore headbopper and have been known to stammer. I know one poet, Conrad Hilberry, who does a lilting twostep to the podium and back; it's wonderful. Diane Wakoski singsongs her poems and it's a joy.

10) *Don't over-apologize*. If you skip a line, stumble over a word, start again or sail on.

11) *If it fits into the agenda, extemporize a mid-reading break and ask for questions and comments*. If you meet nothing but silence, ask yourself a question. If that stimulates nothing, find out if your audience is conscious by tipping over the podium.

12) *While you may have no control over scheduling, see if there's enough flexibility in group readings to get the final berth*. You have then the chance of truly electrifying an audience narcotized by the other readers who failed to subscribe to *Some*.

with a few observations by  
Saul Stadtmanner, husband  
and captive P.R. Mavin

I had a dream that John Ashbery was reading the entire *Double Dream of Spring* to a catetorium full of high school kids in Brooklyn. Paper Concorde swooped over kids who were drawing cartoons of Ashbery as a bionic aardvark, and wadded-up paper baseballs landed in the Afros of kids who were fast asleep on pillows of Geometry books. In the back row Jose was giving Clarissa an anatomy lesson. Ashbery could barely be heard over the hundreds of animated conversations about the Bermuda Triangle, zombies, and UFOs. Suddenly the scene changed: Ashbery was reading the Manhattan phone book at the Guggenheim Museum. A packed house of hushed admirers and graduate students perked to hear his every syllable.

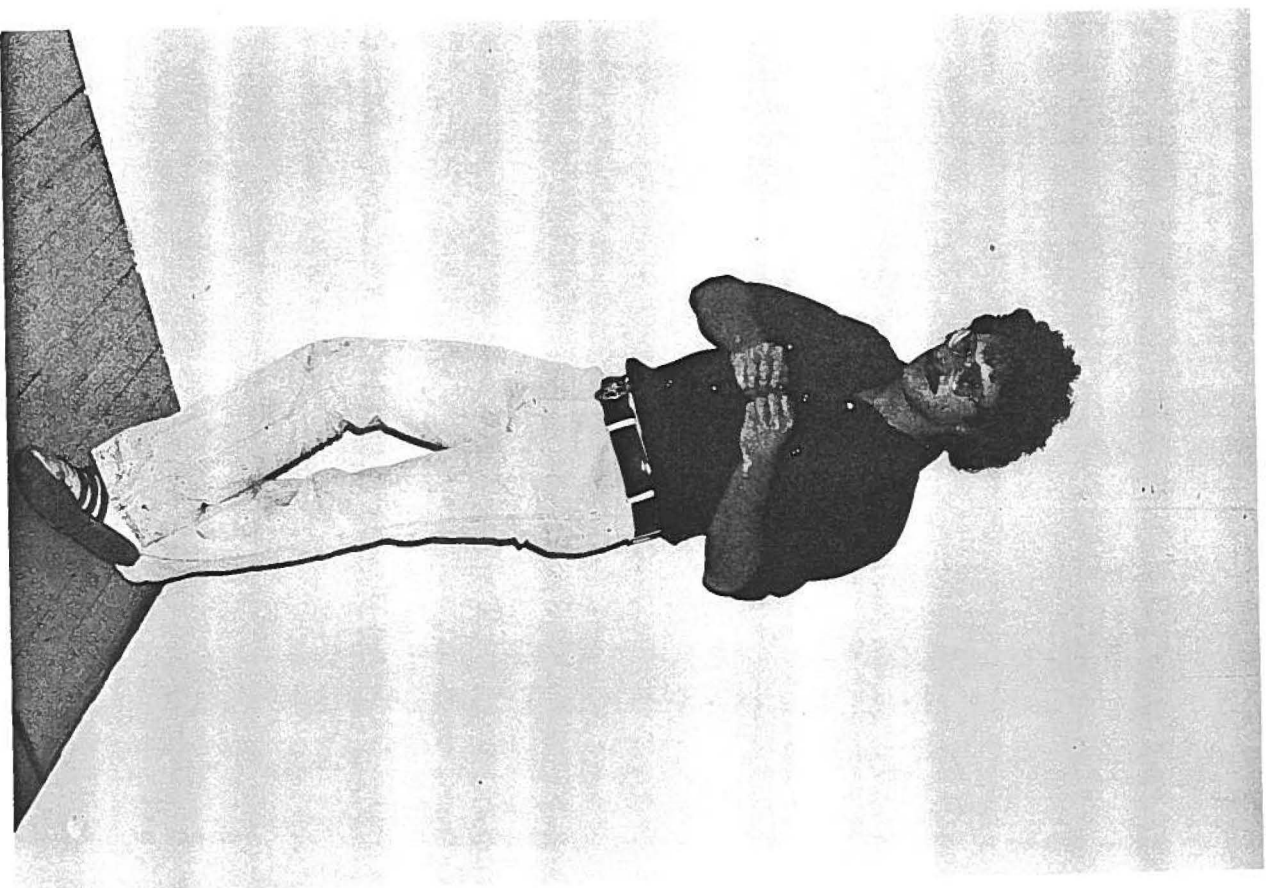
I had a dream that Robert Bly was reading Kabir at Eleanor Roosevelt Junior High, 182nd and Amsterdam. "The musk is inside the deer," he said with a flourish of his poncho, "but he wanders around looking for grass." Suddenly loud guffaws rocked the room, an Adidas sneaker went sailing toward the podium, and the scene switched to the Donnell Library, where Bly was getting a standing ovation from David Ignatow and Harvey Shapiro.

I had a dream that Ezra Pound, before he came to rest in the Venetian Lagoon, was reading the *Pisan Cantos* to a lunchroom full of English teachers in New Rochelle. The teachers were yawning and passing notes to each other about car payments and salary increments, and kept checking their digital watches.

I had a dream that Pablo Neruda was reading "Nothing But Death" to the advanced bilingual class at I.S. 52 in the Bronx, home of the Savage Skulls. He got to the part about the caskets sailing up the river of the dead, the river of dark purple, when Hector turned to Maria (his main squeeze) and blurted loudly: "Man, that's boring! He got all those crazy pictures in his head! This guy is mental!"

\*

Roethke spoke of reading poetry to audiences as "the killer": the idea being that turning your mind inside-out in front of people can be terrifying. "We always try to hide the secret of our lives from the general stare." He must have had a premonition of the national Poets-in-the-Schools program... that poets someday would be reading their work and the work of others in front of people who didn't necessarily want to be there.



Menacing, involuntary audiences. People under 18 harboring the most primitive notions about poets and poetry. Skateboard champions who can't sit still. Sons of hardhats wearing RANGERS T-shirts and snide grins. Jaded TV addicts. Miniature Fonziees. Stoned-out Led Zeppelin disciples. Speedy young geniuses who invent solar-powered submarines during Social Studies. Expressionless neat kids who stay in a polite coma all day, who seem to be extras off the set of "Valley of the Chalk People." Young girls in tight white Levis with looks of impossible longing, as if they're suffering an exile from a miraculous disco. Gigglers and pranksters. Doodlers and Magic Marker wizards drawing spaceships, colliding galaxies, death rays, and Farrah Fawcett-Majors in heat. A room in a public school in America is a room of glares, sneers, snickers, and bored yawns. Is this the toughest room a poet will ever play?

Most poetry readings—in bars, cafes, and auditoriums—aren't a terror. They're relaxed gatherings of friends, usually people who have some direct or indirect connection with one of the seven ruling families of the Poetry Mafia. A quick mental scan of the audience proves this, revealing: several subscriptions to *Field, Kayak*, and the *American Poetry Review*; fifteen failed CAPS applicants; six CCLM members; an N.E.A. fellowship winner; two MacDowell colonizers; twelve small-press editors, including one who produces a literary magazine printed inside fortune cookies—people whose brains crackle with images of Columbia writing seminars, the Poetry Project, the Gotham Book Mart, and the use of elision in the work of W.S. Merwin.

In a world of entertainment, of Peter Lemongello packing them in at the Rainbow Grill, poetry audiences are a rare and subtle breed. They come to listen to language do its stuff. They don't come to see exploding strobes or guitars that vomit blood. They come to hear words. As Pound might have said in that faculty lunchroom: "Literature is nutrition of the impulses." A poetry audience is a friendly group of the convinced and faithful, come to listen to one of their own kind.

That's why the "involuntary" audience really is terrifying. They didn't pay to see this show; they don't get all warm inside at the mention of "poetry." They sit with blank looks. It means facing a group that doesn't share your basic premise... something like a WASP walking into the 2nd Avenue Delicatessen and ordering a rare pork sandwich, a glass of milk, and a side of mayo.

I walked into a class of tenth graders in Pearl River, New York, and asked them to write their "image of a poet." They wrote, verbatim:



... a poet is an elderly sissy who tries to be famous and sophisticated by using syllables to sound smooth.

... I think a poet is an egghead petunia who wears a sheet over his body and walks through the fields talking in rhymes.

... I think a poet is a boring old guy with a wrinkled mug who stays inside all day in Greenwich Village on Welfare, with a sack of pencils and a bunch of scribbled-on papers all around his desk.

... A poet—I don't come upon many. I would be shocked if I saw one. It would have a beard, be messy and weak. And also old.

... A poet is someone old and strict with a harsh voice, a tall hat, a long black robe, carrying books in his hands and when he reads them it would sound funny because of the way he says them.

... A poet tries to get his feelings across with inspirations. First he figures them out, then he sells them to a company. He has long red hair and is lonely.

... A boring person who stays indoors and writes about experiences he has never experienced.

... A dull dreary person who is bald and you can't understand him, continually mumbling to himself in a kind of daze of thoughts.

... a carefree middle-aged person who reads a lot and is therefore quiet.

... About 62. Stuffy. Got time to look around. Owes money.

One girl wrote at the bottom of her paper: "Do you think you can profit from going around speaking poetry? Doesn't it take up and bore your whole life and girl relationships?"

At one point I asked the students to write a definition of an image in poetry. One kid wrote: "An image is a vision expressed by a series of false statements."

Suddenly you realize that the poems your friends will applaud in a bar won't necessarily work here. "The poet's job," Williams wrote, "is to body that sacred and secret presence into the world, but nobody will know what he's talking about."

Poets in the parks encounter the same thing: puzzled looks on the faces of lunchtime passersby, amused surprise... as if someone had slipped a page of Gertrude Stein into their copy of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

But: does it matter if a bunch of fifteen-year-olds, or a bunch of officeworkers, can't understand poetry? Does that mean we should all re-write our poems, or write a separate set they can relate to? Or

have different sets of poems specially written for different people? With all the people in the world, it could become ridiculous... poems for retired Japanese home-run kings, poems for orthodoxists who grew up in Vermont, poems for Republican librarians, poems for imprisoned ventriloquists...

This is a big issue, bigger than the both of us. Why doesn't somebody write an intelligent essay in *Field* about this? The issue is: is poetry, spoken poetry, a "popular" art? Should it try to touch a large audience of all kinds and sorts? Or does its very nature, as compressed imaginative language, mean that it's meant for the few? Should spoken poetry move toward the popular arts (music, theatre, movies, bullfighting, base-running) or toward the private arts (decoupage, bonsai, needlepoint, ships-in-bottles)? Should poetry try to seduce people away from TV bowling? Or should the audience be an elite, incestuous club: *The New York Review of Each Others' Books*?

Do you get smarter when you're dead? I don't know, but here are three dead poets who attack this issue with smarts:

Frank O'Hara, in "Personism: A Manifesto": "But how can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them? Improves them for what? For death? Why hurry them along? Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not... nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them. I like the movies too. And after all, only Whitman, Crane, and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies."

Ezra Pound (in a bad mood), in *Poetry*, June, 1916: "Therefore we read again for the one-thousand-one-hundred-and-eleventh time that poetry is made to entertain. As follows: 'The beginnings of English poetry... made by a rude war-faring people for the entertainment of men-at-arms!...'

(The works of Homer) were made for no man's entertainment, but because a man believing in silence found himself unable to withhold himself from speaking.

Such poems are not made for after-dinner speakers, nor was the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*. Still it flatters the mob to tell them that their importance is so great that the solace of lonely men, and the lordliest of the arts, was created for their amusement."

Ezra Pound (in a better mood), in *The Serious Artist*, 1913: "You are a fool to read classics because you are told to and not because you like them. Also you are a fool not to have an open mind, not to be eager to enjoy something you might enjoy but don't know how to."

Now art never asks anybody to do anything, or to think anything, or to be anything. It exists as the trees exist, you can admire, you can sit in the shade, you can pick bananas, you can cut firewood, you can do as you damn well please."

William Carlos Williams: "I wanted to write a poem that you would understand, because if you can't understand it, what good is it? But you have to try real hard."

Hector and Maria may never like Neruda, and who's to say that's a tragedy? They can't get into it, no matter how powerful it is. They'd rather go see Bruce Lee in *Hurt Me Deeply*. Yankee Stadium will never fill to the upper decks with poetry lovers. Baudelaire compared the public to a dog: it hates the scent of a rare cologne, but loves to chew garbage.

"Nobody should experience anything they don't need to." True, but everybody should have an accurate idea about what's available to experience.

Some people—kids especially—simply don't know what's happening with writing. They've got no idea what's in there. Never touch the stuff.

Sometimes when I look out at a classroom of kids I have the haunting feeling that out there somewhere is a replica of myself, who in the famous long ago thought of poetry as an agony somewhere between prune juice and poison ivy. I remember that time in the September of seventh grade: there she was. Miss Haines, five-foot-one, in a granny dress with a brown sparrow print, hair in a bun, spectacles, about a hundred and forty-six years old, dragging us to the dreary shores of Gitchie Gunnee and the Big Sea Water. Or on a sing-songy Midnight Ride, leavened with some knee-slappers by Ogden Nash. Nearly anything held more mystery for a twelve-year-old: a Frisbee, a treehouse, *Lassie*, dreams, even Suzy Mendenhall across the aisle. I was one of the dummies who didn't need to experience *The Legend of Sam McGee*.

It's not pop evangelism that sends poets into the schools and parks and onto the public stage, but simply an impulse to let people know what's happening this side of *Hiwatha*. You don't want to bully anybody, collar people on the streetcorners or barge into an uptown bodega shouting early Lorca. You don't want to

force-feed anybody; you simply want to free those replicas of yourself from a horrifying time-war where elderly sissies in long black robes prance through the fields mumbling rhymes. There are words they ought to know about that can give them a kick, that may actually incite them to continue to continue.

The "involuntary audience" can feed the poet some kicks, too. It's refreshing to know, as you look at faces, that *not one person* in the audience has ever read Charles Olson's *Projective Verse*, been to a meeting of the James Joyce Society, or submitted poems to *The New Yorker*. Their innocence of the literary who's-who, the style-schools and movements, makes them ideal listeners. You save the quirky inaccessible stuff for later. (Berryman on Stevens: "Mutter we must as best we can. He mutter spiffy.") You save the spiffy stuff for later, because an audience like this has got a healthy restlessness. They have a low threshold of boredom (Yeats: "The more vivid their nature, the greater their boredom.") They've got no time for subtle enjambments or literary in-jokes. They'd really rather be outside, but if they have to listen to poems they want it up front: a story, a song, a strong mood, a dream.

They're full of energy and they want a talky, energetic poetry. Body electric. They like visual language: kids in school (I don't know about people lunching in Bryant Park) can usually write images of their own that would make Yannis Ritsos run to sharpen his pencil.

They're sharp critics. They hate depressing poems of staring-out-the-window-at-the-rain, or lemme-tell-you-about-my-operation-and-generally-sad-life. They like poems about real experiences: a brush with death, gettin' burned by your girl, the dullness of the workaday, sex on the mountaintop, a *deja-vu* for lunch. They love humor, "that delight that death teaches" (Edson). They like poems about mysterious stuff: they're as interested in ESP and UFO's as Yeats was in magic, astral projections, and invisible folk who come out of the mountains at night. They want music in words, exactly the thumping pulse Roethke loved.

Poets should welcome such an audience. It throws responsibility on them, makes them clean up their act. "You've got to try real hard."

An incredibly generous government is giving poets the chance to meet this open audience: readings are being funded in libraries, restaurants, nursing homes, cafes, galleries, schools, parks, and museums. With so many poets on stage, it would seem that before long the primitive ideas about poetry would be erased, and we'd become a nation of poetry consumers: poetry in Bloomingdales, poetry at half-time at the Super Bowl, poetry books made into



## Stephen Stepanchev



movies, Poetry Burgers, where would it stop?

That'll never happen, even though more poets than ever are trying hard to touch the untouchables. It won't happen because every poet, even the most tame, will defend to the death the right to create stuff that won't play to the balconies. Writing has to be invention, experiment, curiosity, and discovery—or else it's dead furniture. "Troubadour" comes from the word for "finder" etc. And experiment means you try everything once. This can include maddening incomprehensible imagery, walls belches swoons ralliegories and whispers of whatever feelings come knocking. "Cling to the inner calypso" (Knot). If you seek new places, those places are often confusing, stark, or overwhelming; "and when he reads them it sounds funny and you can't understand them."

I had this dream. I don't remember it too well, some guy standing in front of this huge cafeteria full of America: New Jersey in the pit, Ohio in the second row, then Texas out on the left, California way in back and Alaska doing the lights. He was talking, but talking special: pictures would come into the air, and hypnotizing music, and the people were actually listening. These were kids and workers. One of them, in Michigan in the twelfth row, turned to another and said Hey, this is better than the movies.

As for poetry readings, I have mixed feelings about them. I like to hear a poet reading his own work, even when he reads badly, because there is an unmistakable authenticity in his rhythms, the shape of his phrases. On the other hand, very little poetry comes across on a first hearing—unless one has read the work beforehand. In the nineteen fifties and sixties, when the beat poets and the political poets were dominant in the coffee houses and universities, poetry was oral and accessible but failed to engage anyone profoundly.

I read my poems in public occasionally, when I am asked, and I enjoy the experience. I try to lead the audience into my poems with a comment or an anecdote. But I like to think that hearing my poems is never the same as reading them carefully to oneself. However, I must concede that some audiences surprise me with their attentiveness.

## Marge Piercy

I consider myself a performer in so far as I am performing the poems. They are written with a certain rhythm and shape and method of bodying forth the poems so that they touch and enter people present. I know that sometimes I do this task better than at other times. I try to do a good job of the saying out of the poems. They are written with a certain rhythm and shape and emotion and I try to realize those elements. For me the poem on the page is secondary; the poem uttered is primary. The ear or the mind's ear is the organ of the poem. The eye is basically the interpreter of the notation so that the poem can come to life. The poem is not necessarily knowable on first hearing. But it is experienced.

I do not write many funny poems. I use them in a reading primarily to give relief from the heavy poems. I do not hesitate to read complicated poems or very long poems. I have read the entire "Laying Down The Tower" sequence from *To Be Of Use* several times, eleven pretty dense poems. I read a few poems that take ten or fifteen minutes to read. Often I end a reading with a long poem. I think that if a poem is emotionally clear and coherent, the imagery, the language, the thought can be quite complicated and it will carry. It is the strength that carries it. But I am concerned that the poem move well as utterance. I find a lot of poems written in a language for the eye and brain almost impossible to speak. I do not like an excessively literary language, poems that smell too much of libraries and other poems.

I am not able to make the distinction between the personal and the political that seems to come easily to people who have not lived their lives involved in struggle and group process. My writing and my readings are political as my life is. I do not know where the barrier between political and personal is supposed to be located. I do know that much poetry classified as apolitical supports the status quo. I find a political dimension in poems which treat women as stupid cunts, as myths about physical being, as fecundity, comfort, the earth, the ding-an-sich, or elemental grub-biness. I find poems political that assume the white knight is good and the black knight evil. I find poems political that assume the nuclear family is a constant. I find poems political that carry in their rotten heart that ultimate aesthetic image of our culture, from comic book porn to men's mags to *Evergreen Review* and literary journal clottings, the mutilated, raped, dismembered body of a woman, as decorative object. I do not differentiate between my political poems and nonpolitical poems; I am not



sure which are which. I read the ones I think will work on the audience, will connect with them and carry them, open them. I talk a little between the poems and sometimes what I say is more political and sometimes it is less so. Basically I talk to give a breathing space between intensities.

Inert audiences depress me. I don't get much out of reading to superliterate audiences who make me feel like hors d'oeuvres. I want audiences who are able to respond. What I would like in dream: the audience as participants, as celebrants with me, the congregation in a black church who says "Oh tell it, sister!". I like to see women swaying to the rhythms of the poems, moving as they listen. Changes on the faces, something happening, the temperature in the room rises and I can feel the audience, we are moving on the same wind. Sometimes the stage is set up so far from the audience I can't get that sense on my skin of their presence and I miss it. My best readings are those when I can enter the poems, when I read most fully but worry least about how I am doing it.

I learned a lot during the middle and later '60's from a number of black poets, including Sonia Sanchez, Don L. Lee, June Jordan: learned a relationship I wanted with an audience, of having a constituency. I learned that "a ritual of unity makes something of what it pretends." For women, a woman celebrating our female experience in strength of pain or joy and affirming what we experience that is denied by the whole culture can make us at least briefly sisters feeling together a vision of what we have been and what we would be. That sometimes happens in a mixed audience if the men are open to being touched. What works if the reading works is the production of energy quiet but real. That is vital feedback for me and for some people a momentary knowing of forces in themselves too often choked. We remember together what we are supposed to be doing.

Poems I don't read? Some of the activist-to-activist poems like "The Organizer's Bogeymen" from *Hard Loving* or "When will we sit down together?" from *To Be Of Use*. I don't tend to read these unless it's a special audience, from worrying that the nature of the poems might exclude many present.

I'm not comfortable reading too many love poems, although I always read some. Especially I am careful not to read too many poems of bad experiences in love relationships. I think that makes people go off in their heads and the energy level drops. For instance "The thirsty lover" in *To Be Of Use* or "Absence becomes a fact" from the same or, from *Hard Loving*, "Becoming strangers" and "I still feel you." I might read one or two but not

many. Often a year might pass without my reading a particular one of these poems. Some poems that I still like from my first book, *Breaking Camp*, don't read that well because they are just too damned literary. They are too much in the head and the eye. Or they assume more of a discourse of common information than genuinely exists. "Visiting a dead man on a summer day" from *Breaking Camp* would be a good example; also "A married walk in a hot place."

There are about one hundred or more poems I read regularly, that is sort of the body from which I generally draw poems for any given reading. There are some poems I read maybe over two thirds of the time.

Reading has affected my poetry by making it much stronger. I have cleared out a lot of deadness and affectation. I hear the poem supercritically the first times I read it and I often revise after reading. Anything dead, inert, wordy, vague, dishonest, prose seems to stand out when I say the poem to an audience. The poems I read most frequently are some fairly direct and simple and some dense and complex. They all make an effort to be as open and clear as they can.



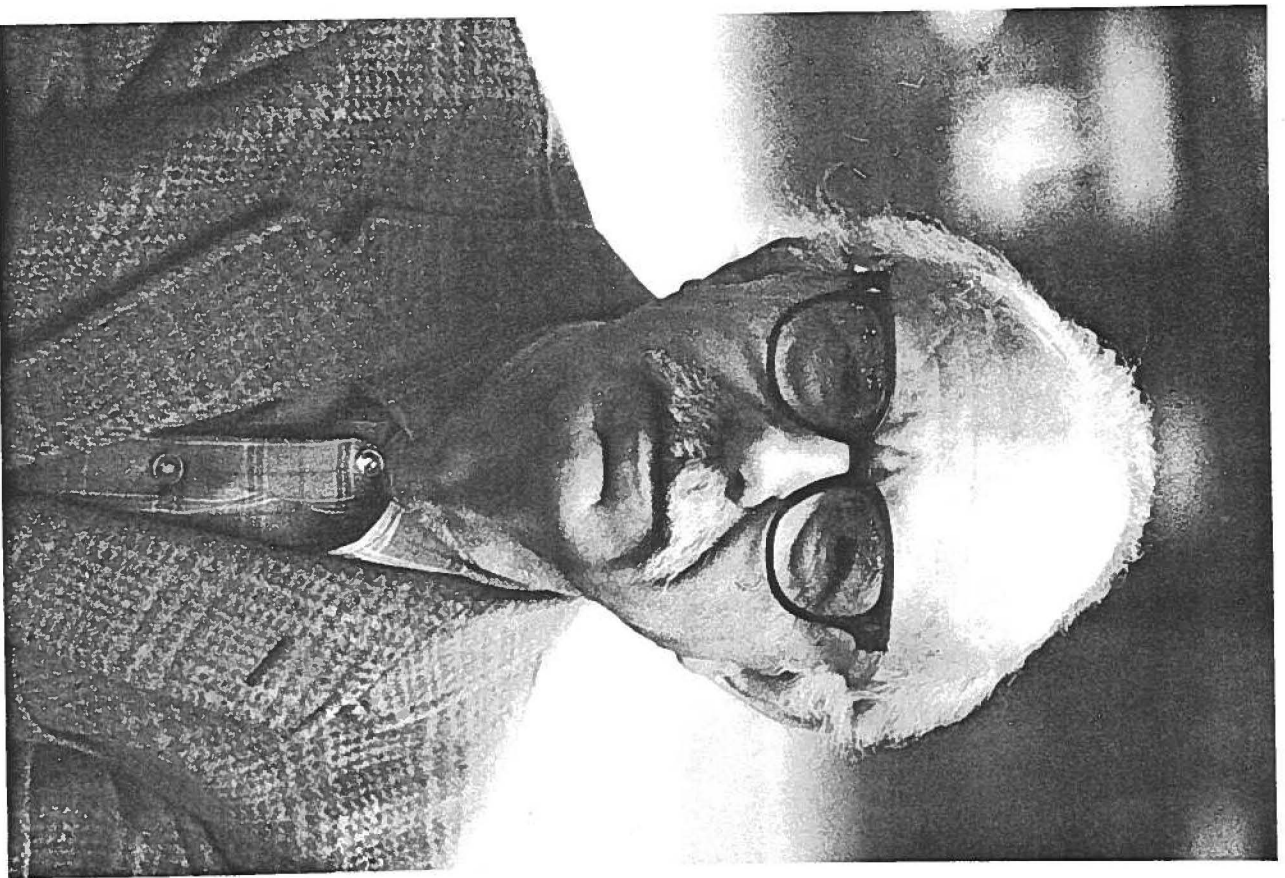
# David Ignatow

## Once More

I enjoy giving poetry readings. First, they bring some money into my pocket. Second, they usually sell my books and third I like to travel and see the sights. It helps me to see what is going on elsewhere in the writing of poetry. I give readings that are combined with seminars on the writing of poetry. Occasionally, I come across a student whose work is unusually fine and that is a compensation for the rest of the work I have to look at. Some schools have better reading facilities than others, and sometimes the poet finds a ready, large audience.

I find that most who attend readings seem to need to attend. They look upon the poet with some expectation of finding something precious in his words that could bring more value to their living. I sense this especially when after the reading people from the audience come up to say how moved they were, how glad they are that they came, how much it means to them to hear a certain poem or group of poems read, or how startled and illuminated they became by hearing poems they never before heard or read, and they look at the poet with such open warm eyes. It makes someone like me almost want to shrink within because that look puts such a burden on one and yet respond I do in the affirmative. I say how glad I am that they came to make me feel good too. In short, I see a give and take, I need the audience equally as much as it needs me.

When I go out to a new reading I hope that I will succeed as in the past, and I try. I often try to figure out the mood or the composition of the audience by age and by interests, so as to read poems appropriate that would get the kind of response that would make a successful reading. In a way, each reading is an actor's performance, if one wants to look at it critically or technically. On the other hand, each reading is a kind of convocation of the dedicated to the life and spirit of the letter. This is what the poet generally keeps in mind. Otherwise, there is nothing. Of course, it's exhausting, finally, but during rest periods it's refreshing simply to remember the successes, and the desire and need to go back on the circuit asserts itself once more.



## Janet Sternburg

### THE POETRY SERIES at the MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB: Notes on readings and writing

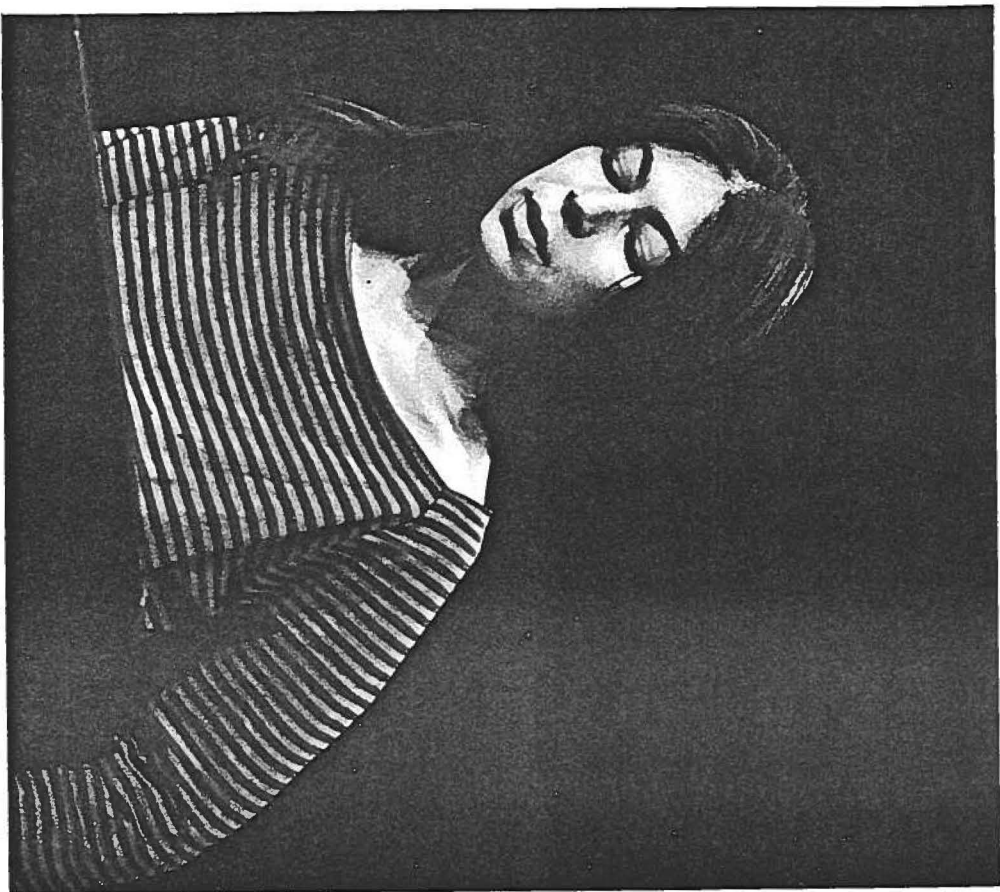
The following is a collection of thoughts about directing the Poetry Series at the Manhattan Theatre Club. First, some basic information about the Series. Now in its seventh year, the Series presents ten events annually: readings by poets and fiction writers; staged readings; readings conceived around a theme. A sampling of events from the past few years includes: dramatic readings of the work of Louise Bogan, Rimbaud, Marina Tsvetaeva; readings of journals and autobiographical work; a memorial reading for Charles Reznikoff; a reading of science fiction in poetry and prose; an annual New Poets program. A very incomplete list of writers who have read their work includes: Harold Brodkey, Rosellen Brown, June Jordan, Maxine Kumin, Nancy Milford, Steven Millhauser, Toni Morrison, Linda Pastan, Gerald Stern. Among the evenings in the 1978 season are: William Gass and Susan Sontag; Italo Calvino's *Cosmiconics*; Jane Alpert reading her prison journals; a tribute to H.D. The Series also offers writing workshops to the community.

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January, 1978. Right now. The announcements for this year's Series have just come from the printer. Cartons have been delivered to the mailing house; one carton is sitting in my apartment. I'm looking at the announcement. The planning is done—but do these words on paper mean that actual events will take place? For a moment I'm tempted to think of the Series as purely conceptual. But then I remember Neruda's poem—the one in which he's looking at sea birds and thinking of poems as letters which the birds carry—and I remember what I believe: that the events are one more point of contact between words and people, and that words are ongoing.

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Four years ago when I was offered the job of directing the Poetry Series, I accepted in part because I wanted to understand





what a reading was about. I had recently returned to writing poems, after a long silence. I had read about the oral tradition; certainly I felt the music of words. But for me the poem lived first and foremost on the page. I sensed that I was missing something. This direct encounter between reader and listener: I needed to find out what makes it essential.

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1961. A college auditorium. White hair, quavering voice. Robert Frost, in a room filled with awe so thick it almost overwhelmed the poems. Wanting to move with him into the poems, but the poet so far away, behind a distant lectern, almost a disembodied voice.

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No, that wasn't what I wanted to do. Not that distance. Instead, to work towards making contact. Both as a poet, and as a planner of readings.

\*

And were they separate, these two parts of myself? I found that I had set up oppositions: writing as my private world, the Series as public; writing as freely chosen, the Series as my "outside work," a necessary part of trying to make a living. Traveling back and forth between these poles, I felt (and feel) a strain, and the need to bring them closer. If writing is a reciprocity between oneself and the rest of the world—a flow of receiving, making, and giving back—then readings could be the natural extension of that same impulse.

\*

How many times, at home reading, have I spoken a poem or a paragraph of prose aloud? Countless times, wanting to hear certain rhythms, sonorities. And talking to a friend, exchanged the phrase "You must read this..." Also the feeling (sometimes on the subway) of wanting to look up from what I'm reading and say to someone I don't even know "There's something here, in these words, that I think will matter to you."

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The subway. Of course. Because the subway is the great evidence of plurality. From that plurality comes the writing, the expressive vitality of the culture. And then anger, and sadness: that so little of this writing has been able to find its way back to its source. A key part of the reciprocity process has been damaged, and when something can't be given back and taken in, we lose replenishment. So that whatever we're building which might help repair those damages, that effort is essential.

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Sometimes I dream about a reading series that would go on in a large space, every week. Within this series, smaller series: a Poets' Theatre; evenings of translations, poems from Czechoslovakia, from Ghana...; tributes to writers; readings for and by children; a series of women poets, and another of marathon readings. A series that could include the spectrum from the classic reading to evenings that would combine the energies of poetry, fiction, theatre, music.

Now that I write this out, I see what I've been trying to do all along at the Manhattan Theatre Club. But what makes this a dream (apart from the all too obvious reality of an extremely limited budget) is its scope—far larger than ten readings a year. To make a series like this happen (remember, I'm still in the dream, apart from other realities of time and energy) could mean two things: a collaborative effort among writers, all working together to make events happen; and an audience coming from all over, choosing from among this abundance, this plurality of the written word.

\*

What about this issue of choosing? Speaking, that is, as someone who runs a series. It fascinates and troubles me—as I think it must for any poet who also runs readings, or a magazine, or a press. The tension of course is between the particular demands of what one is doing (for example, planning a reading; one needs to pick poets who complement each other), and the knowledge of how much more fine work there is, work that one can't include. (Or at least, says the collective voice of the letter we all know, not in this year's Series or that next issue...). Demands of theme, of resonance, of balance: everyone is stuck with them, and with their tensions. (And what about those poems that one likes but that won't fit into the concerns of the new manuscript?)

Looked at broadly, choice—in whatever area of aesthetic concern—often comes down to “taste”, and I’d like to argue for a revived and expanded definition of that word. Recently I read an article in the New York Times in which the writer, commenting on the demise of the *American Review*, took exception with the policy of that magazine’s editor. The writer argued that the magazine was based, to what he thought was its detriment, on personal taste; he argued for the alternative base of a coherent cultural position arrived at through an ongoing exchange of ideas. It seems to me that the latter type of enterprise is limited by its need to choose art that somehow fits into its position. And that an enterprise based on personal taste can mean one or several people are willing to stake themselves on a genuine response to art that moves them. I suggest that we’re all stuck also with our own taste; that one’s obligation is to stand up for work the embodies what we care about; that we’re also obligated to back up that taste with the greatest possible depth and breadth of experience—of other people, their work, and of one’s own work. It’s the self—continuously experiencing and connecting—that creates its own cultural life.

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From my journal, March 1977. This is going to be quite an evening. *New Poems from Leningrad*: Russian poet Konstantin Kuzminsky, who recently emigrated here, bringing with him other poets’ suppressed manuscripts; Paul Schmidt, actor and translator, who met Kuzminsky at the University of Texas. Paul phones me from Austin: he and Kuzminsky will perform the first half of the reading in full formal dress. the second half in cowboy suits—Paul jokes about a night of Russian/Texan Dada. I decide to dress up for the reading, a long Thirties’ dress. It’s time to introduce them: Kuzminsky and Paul are backstage, the lighting director is set with his cues, the house is full. I give my introduction, walk to the edge of the stage, put my weight down on the step—and the step gives way under me, I topple with it, my skirt catching on a protruding nail.

In that second of falling, time is suspended—so much so that an entire episode comes flashing back: summer, I’m nine, riding my bike down a steep hill, half-way down I see that the path is blocked by a bunch of kids walking their bikes up the hill, there’s no way to make my way through them, I can’t brake, I fall, hard. And when the kids come crowding around, I discover that the top of my bathing suit has come undone.

All this through my mind as I fall off the stage, hearing the audience’s collective gasp, and thinking perhaps I’m lying here exposed... a hand is stretched out. I scramble up, checking down to make sure I’m intact. I am. Kuzminsky and Paul are standing on the stage, concerned and at a loss for what to do next. My adrenalin is pumping, giving me cues: “I’m fine,” I assure the audience, and proceed to give a one-line introduction so that Paul and Kuzminsky can get on with the reading. Finally I’m in my seat but it’s hard to concentrate: the scene of a few minutes ago keeps replaying itself. My embarrassment rises; so does the ache of a wrenched back. During intermission, Richard Howard comes over: “I just want you to know—that was a noble thing you did.”

And I, still flustered, say “You mean falling and then getting up again?”

“No,” he says, giving me first a puzzled then a quizzical look, “I mean putting together this evening.”

The Poetry Center has always seemed a special, almost sacred place to me. I think this feeling is shared by many of the poets who read there during the three years in which I was Executive Secretary. Although there were times when poets responded to our pleading invitations by saying "Sorry, not this year," or "New York gives me the jitters," or "I thought I'd just stay home and write this year,"—most were willing and pleased to work out details of dates, appropriate poets with whom they would share the platform, introducers, the modest honoraria and even more modest travel expenses. This generous attitude toward The Poetry Center was, I think, in large part due to its splendid history. Backstage, the guest poets often thumbed through the album of autographs or reminisced about attending readings many years back. Although each guest would have his or her own list, everyone seemed to take pride in standing on the same stage where T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams and E.E. Cummings had read.

We were very formal in our approach to poetry readings. We requested that the poet appear 45 minutes prior to the reading (oh, how my heart thumped at the 40 minute countdown!). Microphones were tested. Last-minute water (juice? tea? scotch?) was furnished. Suitable lighting was arranged. Above all, we tried to make our guests feel comfortable at what seemed a tense time for many.

There was grumbling from some members of our audience over elements of this formal approach—no eating, no smoking, no taking of photographs in the hall, no being seated in the middle of a poem. A poetry reading has always been a spiritual experience for me, and I envisioned our hall as a sanctuary where poetry lovers who would generally sit alone at home with their books of poetry could commune with the poet awhile. We could all come closer to the meaning that a poet gives a poem with inflections, pauses, silences. Even one distraction seemed one too many.

Of course, part of the unique spirit of poetry readings is in the group experience. It is a special moment indeed when an audience bursts into unexpected applause after a single poem has been read, or leaves the hall, classroom, or cafe sighing in unified delight. I have attended readings in more than 15 spaces around the City, from Madison Square Garden and Town Hall to St. Adrian's, Dr. Generosity's and the Donnell Library. Each space

and each coordinator of readings create a different atmosphere. The group experience varies depending on size of crowd, acoustics, seating arrangement, etc.

The Poetry Center had a choice of two spaces—the wonderfully dark-wooded Kaufmann auditorium, which seated 850, but looked warm and full with 300; and the brightly lit Kaufmann Art Gallery, which seated 100 and, often, 125 uncomfortably. Above the considerations of space, however, there was and is the vision of The Poetry Center as a holy place—the vision of its creator, William Kolodney.

I worked at the "Y" for two years prior to my appointment to The Poetry Center, and during those years I faithfully hovered over Galen Williams' desk, eager to participate in any sort of busy-work. Galen has a most wonderful way of involving people and making them feel important. One day she asked me to write a note to Galway Kinnell: "Sign it with *your* name," she said. What joyous work that was for me!

And so it was that several months after Galen had retired to become Director of Poets & Writers, Inc., Nathan Kolodney, the Director of The Poetry Center, selected me to fill the position. Shortly after my work began, I imagined that my ego was being bolstered by the fame and talent of the poets and writers I was meeting. I had prepared to store away those brief and treasured encounters so that years later I could tell, maybe even write, anecdotes about the greats. It didn't take me long to realize that I knew very little about our guests. However, there are a few very general tales: Calls coming into the office insisting that we were the Poultry Center and asking for information on chickens; a report from a young poet about a particularly successful and prolific Sunday in which he had written 33 poems; requests for my help in poetry therapy; poets who were asked to read for 30 minutes going on for 1-2 hours; poets who were asked to read for 30 minutes going on for 30 minutes and leaving the audience starving for more; overflow houses and folks screaming to get in; cancellations; cramps, colds, too much to drink. There were moments when I tried to look my most official, only to find my mother rapidly approaching the guest, saying, "Hi, I'm June's mother."

Occasionally I would meet a poet whose work had moved me by its beauty and sensitivity, and I would nearly be knocked flat by his or her arrogant or rude behavior. More often, poets who had never been invited to read cornered me with accusations and threats—"anti-semitic, anti-woman, anti-experimental poetry,



## Mark Weiss

anti-good poetry.” They vowed to report me to my superiors, go to the highest authority, shame me in any way they could. I handled these accusations and threats as gracefully as I was able, swallowing a few tears.

It was always difficult for me to reject someone who wished to be considered for a reading. I tried to stay as far from politics as I could, and I think our list of guests reflected diverse tastes. I mention only a few poets who appeared at The Poetry Center (1971-74): W.H. Auden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Duncan, Galway Kinnell, Pablo Neruda, Anne Sexton, Gary Snyder, William Stafford and Diane Wakoski. If we were, in fact, cliquish, wouldn’t that have been an interesting clique?

I tried to attend readings all over town and keep in touch with administrators of other reading programs in an attempt to create joint sponsorships and avoid duplication of invitations and scheduling on the same evening. Our series was truly enriched by cooperative events with the Academy of American Poets, Center for Inter-American Relations, Columbia University, Goethe House, P.E.N. and St. Mark’s Poetry Project.

Last and foremost, I deeply enjoyed my work at The Poetry Center and have found the same sense of fulfillment in my current position in the Literature Department of the New York State Council on the Arts. If I help put some money into poets’ pockets and provide forums for poetry, I am glad. If a fine collection of poetry appears, or a fine poet is presented in a public reading, I am clearly one of the many who benefits.



These days I write oral poetry—I want it read aloud. The text is really a reading score. This means not just me as performer, but the reader in his own space, reading to the walls or the cat. I assume (with Duncan and Olson, confirmed by my own body experience—think of orgasmic breathing) that the way you breathe has a lot to do with determining the way you feel, and if I persuade you to breathe my way for a while you get an idea of my body-feelings/emotions as of the poem in question. It can even make you high! Try Duncan’s Pindar poem, for instance.

So readings are a pretty important form of publication. Case in point: Six months of trying to read Creeley without the slightest understanding of his line broke open for me the first time I heard him read.

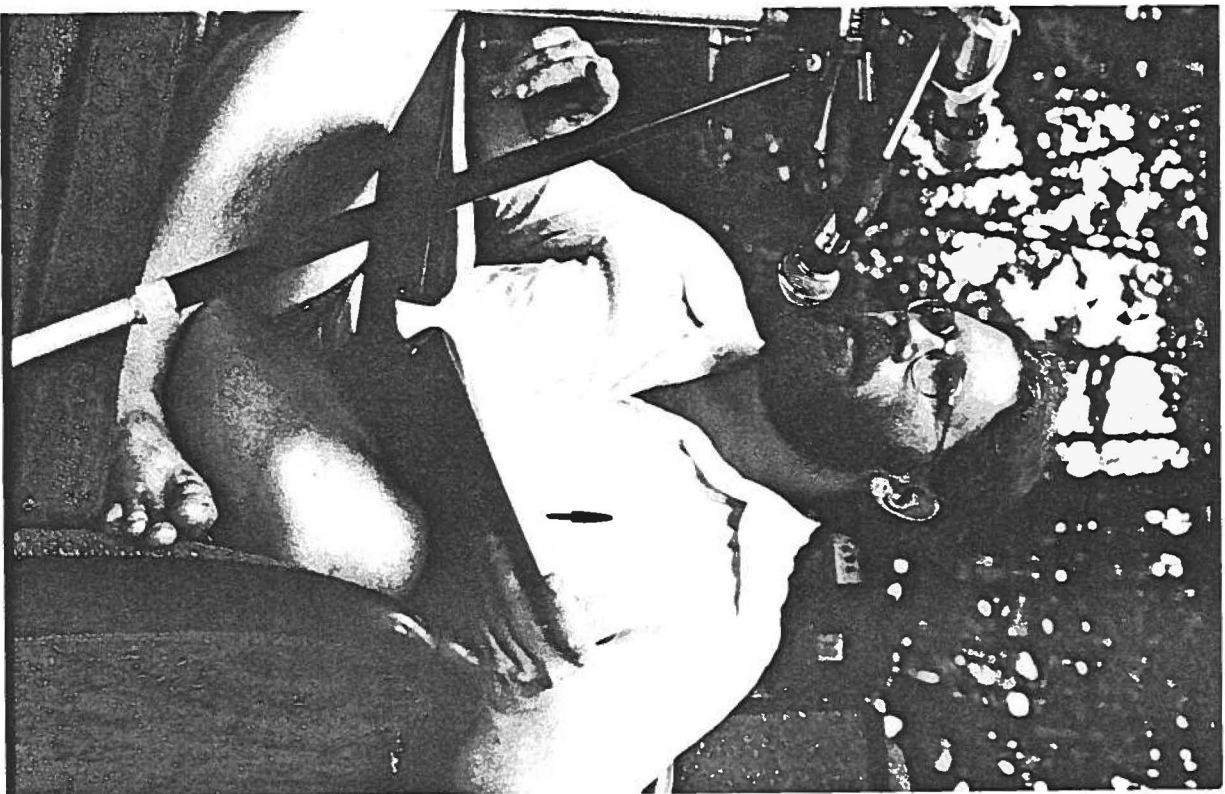
So if what I want is communication, out loud, from my lungs to yours by way of your ears, the most intimate I can get—I show you how to take me into your body. Inevitably, you add your part to the song/dance/fuck—you communicate with yourself (learn about you) through intercourse with the poem.

My stuff is mostly very close to where I live: I don’t feel really good about a poem unless in the process I discover/recover something about who I am I didn’t know before. Reading in public is like dancing naked in front of the people (like King David). When they don’t stone me to death, when they even get into it, I confirm and intensify the self-acceptance that the act of the poem was. When did I ever get that kind of acceptance before? It makes a lot of hard things o.k.

Audience response—except when I’m being funny, they don’t make much noise. In a way, this is a compliment—if they’re not sleeping, they must be listening. I don’t know what I’d prefer—maybe an occasional sigh. People have cried at my readings. That’s wonderful!

I’ll read any poem that I like. Some of the stuff gets pretty abstruse, but I tend, even then, to be extremely clear in the expression and the sound of my line, so this doesn’t become a problem. Sometimes I start with a light one or a shocker, to wake people up. This one works pretty well that way:

it was the coldest day of my paper-route  
when I shat on the neighbor’s abandoned front lawn  
wiped my ass with leaves and masturbated  
left a steaming heap of myself in the cold air



**that was the naughtiest I ever was, and I never told anyone  
how I singlehandedly gave Westchester back to the indians**

That's not playing for laughs. If they think it's funny, the crowd laughs. All I do is read it. I'll go from this poem to really grim stuff without difficulty—all it requires is warning the audience we're changing gears—my manner gets that across. I've seen poets who settle for the easy laugh even when it's a misconception of their stance. That cheapens the whole event. I like being loved by an audience, but only in the poem's terms.

I have one mannerism: I keep time with my right hand. Probably distracts the hell out of people, but it's that or wiggling all over, and I'm too inhibited for that. Rothenberg wiggles. Duncan actually counts beats, mouthing numbers and conducting.

I used to read in English. Now I read in American.

I worry sometimes about the significance of my very local (within my skin) poetry in a world where people are starving, but I try to persuade myself that in a mass society the only politics that means anything is the assertion of my individual humanity. It's a weak counterpoise, but it's the best I've got.



# Phillip Lopate

## The Secrets Of Reading

Before the reading I keep to myself. I even invite a kind of moodiness, by taking long walks and singing to myself a melancholy song, mixed in with, if I can remember them, the words of my poems. I don't talk to anyone; the idea is to take myself off to a state of isolation which will build up my need to relieve myself in front of everyone. I have a hard time believing that I am so special; least of all that I have been chosen, in a bardic sense, to be a poet. But ritualistic preparation helps. I get superstitious before readings. Once I took myself into a very raunchy Burger-King in Berkeley because I thought the greasiness would alienate me in a homelike way (the California eucalyptus vistas were alienating me in the wrong way). I stared at the bikers and a peace and resignation, of being "alone forever," stole over me; I was able to read.

I never drink alcohol beforehand. This is because I work with the nervous tremors in my stomach, and alcohol dulls them. I go to the reading site and say hello and try to be social, but it barely matters what words come out; I am still holding onto my mood, chary of small talk.

Now enters an element I feel shaky about confessing: competition. I am generally asked not to read alone, but usually with another poet, possibly two, or in a jamboree. I try not to read first. I will do everything in my power to evade that first spot:

cheat, charm, flip coins. But of course I lose from time to time, and try to make the best of it. If I am lucky enough to be "not first," I have a chance to study the competition—and the audience. I see what goes over, what they seem to want, how much they may need cheering up. And I listen to the other poets. If one reads his grandmother poem, I may decide on the spot not to read mine—or contrarily, to give them my grandmother poem because mine is better. Mostly, however, the other poet provides me a contrast to work against and I start psyching myself up like a motor boat, thinking to myself, I-can-do-better, I-can-do-better. Once, I had to follow a really dull poet and I was afraid the audience's energy level had been brought so low by this "dim punishment" I would never reach them. My performance was particularly manic. The competitive/fratricidal element in me disturbs me more and more, especially when I read with friends, and I have begun to ask to be put with near-strangers or total strangers or to read alone.

When I stand in front of an audience for the first moment I have a nose-dive feeling, like a kamikaze pilot. Despite my having read dozens of times, I am always scared. I like to stand up. I work with whatever can keep me buzzing: my legs, my face, my voice, the space around me. I want to feel everything. I am looking for body clues. If I am very nervous I may tell the audience, "I'm frightened"—out of a genuine desire to be closer to them. I improvise something that will put them in my shoes. At times I feel more Mandarin and don't want them in my shoes. In any



case, performers' remarks often pop into my mind—remarks that are funny Catskill standup comic—and I use them. Where do these remarks come from? They are always there...they spring from the comedy of this situation. I think deep down that poetry readings, with a baboon in front and a solemn bunch of listeners who look like they all have hangovers, are intrinsically comic, ...if not masochistic (when you think of the tiny percentage of good poetry to awful and mediocre).

I believe one has a responsibility to give these poetry-goers, who have sacrificed a potentially happy and sexy evening at the movies, a good time. I see nothing wrong with approaching the job of reading poetry as an entertainer. I alternate sad and funny poems, long and short, difficult and easy, and if I feel the audience is in a giggly mood I change my original order and put several amusing poems together to give them a real laugh before moving on to something more "serious," which by then they want. Now may be the time for the long poem about Death. What would a poetry set be without one Death poem? The audience would feel cheated. I would feel cheated. Once I read before a stony faced group of Olson followers and I had to fish out all my obituary poems. Usually what I do is this: start out with no order at all (except the first and second) and try to pick up from the audience's stirrings what they might want to hear. Something in their faces or silences tells me: "that one next." Then I segue like a discotheque disc jockey. I am not completely sure how I sense their threshold of tolerance, but it is something like standing in front of a classroom and knowing when the students are engaged or distracted. The teacher-as-performer and the poetry reader-as-performer are close together in my life. This attention to the audience's wants may sound crowd pleasing; but I much prefer it to the kind of reader with a puritanical streak who reads his verse as if he were punishing his listeners for their frivolous lives, or feeding them a bad-tasting medicine that is "for their own good." Still I would not like to give the impression that the intuited whims of the audience control all my choices: they are merely one factor influencing them, along with my own desire to air new work, and the voice of my stomach. My stomach tells me when I am ready to read one of those long-lined, meditative, chanting poems. Because it is from my stomach that I pull the oceanic lines out, and then return to that painful gut-cry for my next lines. I need to feel personally moved.

The worst thing is when I have embarked on a so-called "heavy" poem and realize I'm not into it. The feeling just isn't there. It's like losing an erection in sex—only I wonder if the

audience can see it so clearly, as a lover would. So I plunge on, trying to find a momentum by reading faster, louder, trying to induce the pain in my stomach...so many words to go, pages to go, I might as well be reading apartment ads. I try to visualize the images as they must have first looked to me—no, it's better just to finish and find something else. This deadness often comes from having read a poem too many times in a reading season and being secretly bored with it while coming to depend on it as a blockbuster.

Watch out for the blockbusters.

Knowing this, I am drawn toward risk-taking in order to keep my readings fresh. I read early on a few new poems which I have never tried in public, or a poem which I think will be disliked by one segment of the audience, or I sing a song or make an ass out of myself—anything for a risk. The most exciting reading I gave was at a painting loft, where I read an entire set of new works. Since I read fairly frequently I have to repeat some of my old poems to loyal members of my audience; but this time I had just finished a burst of poetry-writing and had the luxurious experience of offering one surprise after another. I couldn't wait to get to the spotlight. The two readers before me had both read sedately on a high stool (like an Off-Broadway show about G.B. Shaw). I realized there was no reason whatever why I could not roam over the entire loft space, and I did. I shouted, I lurched, so much that I almost lost my balance a few times yet regained it. That night my stomach was at the helm. Everything I said or did seemed to get laughs. But the truth is, I was very far away, nearly unconscious...I had the sensation that I was a step away from falling into a construction pit, I felt scarily out of control—not exactly, more as if I had entrusted myself to something larger than me that was in control. The lines came pouring out of my mouth. When it was over I felt I had come quite close to madness. Or perhaps I had gotten a taste of the expressive potential that is in me, in everyone—and for once I had let myself surrender to it.

When it was over people complimented my reading, but strangely many of them seemed to think I had pre-rehearsed the whole thing. "You've really got the performance aspect together." Or, "You're some performer—Groucho Marx!" Little did they know that they were watching someone on the edge. Perhaps it's better that they didn't.

Yet I can't help speaking out against the resentment and condescension which some fellow poets show toward a poet who makes his audience laugh. They act as if only a vulgarian would stoop to entertain. They compliment me always with the same

patronizing word—"energy"—not recognizing that I have as much formal control and ideational content as they do, though I choose to express them comically. If I write comic poems it is not because I want to please but because I think comedy is the truth—the closest I can come to an accurate view of the world. Nothing gives me more of a pain in the ass than the tendency in the poetry world to equate accessibility with pandering, and obscure humorlessness with depth.

I owe so much to the audiences who have listened and appreciated my poems these past years. They taught me how to hear my own voice. Their responses told me when I was communicating and when I was being precious. I came to internalize their needs for surprise. At one time I gave somber thought to the question of whether poetry readings were polluting poetry, by encouraging writers to go for the discursive or the easy laugh. I became wary of a tendency in my own work for a poem to reach maximum effectiveness in a live reading. I asked myself if the poems could stand alone on the page. Apparently they could, because people who read them in faraway magazines and had no chance of hearing me, sent the editors favorable reports. Nevertheless I brooded. Was I an "oral poet"? A "popularizer"? All these doubts led me to pay more attention to the surface of the poem as a print experience, and influenced me toward a firmer, tighter diction. Still, I am always happy to stumble across a funny line; and when those large, tatty "oral" poems like "The Little Magazines" come to me, I do not disdain to write them down.

\*

### THE LITTLE MAGAZINES KEEP COMING

The little magazines keep crawling  
under the door like deformed hands on wheels  
they can't help it if they whine and their paper skulls  
are battered in by child-abuser mailmen  
the little magazines keep coming

"I want my little magazine to be  
a simple collection of poems," says one editor fastidiously  
so he asks everyone at a book-party to send him their poems  
and a year later he is sorry  
but he must go to press  
because he has a grant

### from the Coordinating Council of Little Magazines!

"It's not enough to print a nice collection of poems"  
he tells his wife in the middle of the night  
while she sleeps  
"I must find some way to jazz it up.  
Reviews, or photographs, those little line drawings  
at the bottom .... No no, what I need is  
A critical stance that will set the world of poetry right  
and who cares if I make enemies?"

The little magazines come creeping under the door  
like carnival freaks, half-men  
unlovely but ambidextrous and hard to ignore.

Eunuch-unicorns neglected progeny of monks and nuns  
This one calls itself a journal of Poetry and Protest  
This other prints poems in comic strips on newspaper  
and asks to be recycled  
Here's one opens up like an accordion!  
For awhile all have blue covers with chaste brown ink  
or uncut pages, or play like phonograph records

Offset or letterpress?

the trudge back to mimeo  
Mimeo can look very dignified  
in a pinch

though it's harder to collate  
and where's the money to come for reams?  
Stamps manila envelopes the cover printed separate  
at extra expense  
And still to be won over, the bookstore owners  
with leather faces like the buttocks of jaded degenerates

Dog days—poverty disguised as art—the shabby swollen gums  
Baby is screaming wife is complaining but one is taking  
the magazine to the printers!  
At last, in that shirt-sleeved  
inkstained machineroom  
with piles of paper underfoot

## Joe Brainard

discussing the layout man-to-man with the printer  
one can breathe

"I plan to give each poem its space to swim round in.  
Tall, tall pages, I'm thinking, with lots of White!"

One anthologist is self-effacing;  
reserves his mark for the Editor's Note  
Meanwhile another decides: I'll print  
lots of my poems, that way they'll know what I stand for."  
A third scorns nepotism and cliques of all descriptions  
"No one has me in his pocket,"

he boasts like a candidate

Two friends, both magazine editors, have a quarrel  
"Watch for the next issue!" one of them snarls.  
"How petty," thinks the other, "to use his journal for  
vendettas!"

Two friends, two spiders

But when you think of their blighted childhoods  
And I beg you to think of his childhood for a moment  
When he daydreamed through choruses  
that he would one day be great  
and strike out the side, all twenty-seven batters in a row

And the day came when he realized  
that his shoulders would grow no larger  
That day when he began his literary career  
For as Wilhelm Reich says, There are some bodies  
which it is already too late to do anything with ...

Then let tolerance have the final word  
and let the little magazines come in,  
for they are harmless  
and they can play in the corner if they want  
so long as they don't get the rug dirty with their drooling!

## ON READING

BOTH MY AIM AND MY  
DESIRE IS TO PLEASE.

WITH MY FRIENDS IN  
MIND MOST, I ALWAYS READ  
NEW WORK.

I BELIEVE IN NOTHING  
WHAT A READING SHOULD OR  
SHOULD NOT BE IN GENERAL.

ABOUT 50% OF WHAT  
I HAVE WRITTEN WAS  
WRITTEN BECAUSE I HAVE  
A READING COMING UP. \*

\*(TURNS ME ON)





## Allen Ginsberg

On June 3, 1976, during a taping session for an article for *The Village Voice*, Allen Ginsberg mentioned that he had just recorded an album of his songs and had been spending time with Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review. The following conversation ensued. (Footnotes were added by Allen upon reading the transcript.)

A.Z.

**SOME:** Did Dylan let you do any singing on the tour?

**GINSBERG:** Actually he's done me a favor, he was dubious about my singing but he kept pushing me to recite poetry, till finally in Fort Collins<sup>1</sup> I did, and in Salt Lake.

**SOME:** Why did he have to talk you into it?

**GINSBERG:** I sort of had this fatuous<sup>2</sup> idea of myself as a singer, they have enough singers and musicians and rock and roll stars there. He was interested in the poetry part—I was shy about that, partly scared, I couldn't figure what you could say to 27,000 people, what could engage the minds of that many people in the hysteria of a giant rock and roll thing. One day in Fort Collins as Dylan came off in the intermission, casually over the shoulder he said, "Why don't you go out there and read a poem?" So I went out there and read a very brief poem called, "On Neal Cassidy's Ashes" because that's Denver area (half the audience did know who Cassidy was)—seven lines, one exact, clear, sharp, solid, brilliant image, in the middle of this rock and roll hysteria saying, "All ashes, all ashes again."

### ON NEAL'S ASHES

Delicate eyes that blinked blue Rockies all ash  
nipples, Ribs I touched w/ my thumb are ash  
mouth my tongue touched once or twice all ash  
bony cheeks soft on my belly are cinder, ash  
earlobes & eyelids, youthful cock tip, curly pubis  
breast warmth, man palm, high school thigh,  
baseball bicep arm, asshole annea<sup>3</sup>d to silken skin  
all ashes, all ashes again.

**SOME:** How did the audience react?

**GINSBERG:** Well, cheers. I couldn't tell whether cheers of recognition, derision, or just to have somebody talking. I wasn't



announced, I just went out and bellowed words out over a microphone and when I got off Roger McGuinn shouted my name and then the band went into their thing.

*SOME:* I think it would be entirely appropriate to read poetry in that setting.

*GINSBERG:* It turned out to be—Dylan's imagination was just right, I hadn't realized. Then I read again in Salt Lake, a poem which was just right for a Mormon, mystic town:

### HOLY GHOST ON THE NOD OVER THE BODY OF BLISS'

Is this the God of Gods, the one I heard about  
in memorized language Universities murmur?  
Dollar bills can buy it! the great substance  
exchanges itself freely through all the world's  
poetry money, past and future gold plated currencies  
translated by the mind's Urim & Thummim into  
owl eyes identical on every one of 90 Billion Dollarbill vibrating  
to the pyramid-top in the United States of Heaven—  
Aye aye Sir Owl Oh say can you see in the dark you  
observe Minerva nerveless in Nirvana because  
Zeus rides reindeer thru Bethlehem's blue sky.  
It's Buddha sits in Mary's belly waving Kuan  
Yin's white hand at the Yang-tze that Mao sees,  
tongue of Kali licking Krishna's soft blue lips.  
Chango holds Shiva's prick. Ouroboros eats th' cobalt bomb,  
Parvati on YOD's perfumed knee cries Aum  
& Santa Barbara rejoices in the alleyways of Brindaban  
La Illah El (ill) Allah Who—Allah Akbar!  
Goliath struck down by kidneystone, Golgothas grow old,  
All these wonders are crowded in the Mind's Eye  
Superman & Batman race forward, Zarathustra on Coyote's ass,  
Lao tzu disappearing at the gate, God mocks God,  
Job sits bewildered that Ramakrishna is Satan  
and Bodhidharma forgot to bring Nothing.

But it had to be fast, sharp. And there was no announcement (before or after) who I was or anything, I just went out and knocked that language out. So the review in the paper said that a gentleman in a tuxedo got up and recited a poem in the inter-

mission. I had gotten a five buck shantung silk tuxedo from Salt Lake Salvation Army and wore it on stage.

*SOME:* Did the reviewer think it was just somebody from the audience?

*GINSBERG:* No, they understood it was part of the show, like "an interesting part of the show was when a guy in a tuxedo came out and recited a poem."

\* \* \*

*SOME:* Many years ago, Dylan read a poem to Woody Guthrie in the middle of a concert and the audience responded enthusiastically.

*GINSBERG:* Everybody wants to hear Dylan talk, anyway.

*SOME:* The spoken voice in the context of a music setting can be very startling.

*GINSBERG:* Well, I must say I was a little scared because I figure after all the rhythm and harmony and powerful enunciation of vowels and consonants on Dylan's part, how talked poetry could engage people's consciousness and rivet attention. At best, poetry is soft spoken actual speech like someone talking to himself very quietly, but saying things so clear that it is literally comprehensible and the sound is clear and the mind is clear. In rock and roll, the mind is not necessarily clear. So the poetry can have the clear mind talking directly, and not raising the voice. It would be interesting in the middle of Rolling Thunder to get to *that*. Another thing is the oratorical "Howl" or "Sunflower" like that "Holy Ghost" poem I did in Salt Lake—in an oratorical rock and rolling voice. But to do Reznikoff or Williams style work that doesn't have rhyme, (Whitman is still oratorical)—it's an open field for experiment, but Dylan seems to want experiment.

*SOME:* It's such a great opportunity to get the work out there.

*GINSBERG:* And to develop a form, maybe there is no poetic form yet developed for an audience of 27,000 people. That's a whole new physical setting: there's the form of coffee house and there's the form of the Greek amphitheatre, and there's the form appropriate to the movie theatre, and there's a form appropriate to vaudeville, a form appropriate to the YMHA hall, and a form appropriate to the university cafeteria, ballroom, auditorium, lounge or classroom, or a form appropriate to the Australian

aborigine tribal community chanting led by the Songman with song sticks. So there's all different forms appropriate to different situations. Now the situation of quiet speech—quiet, sensible non-manipulative speech to planet crowds is something that hasn't been quite taken up yet. It's been taken up on the radio with fireside chats or on television to a certain extent, but the in-person just-talk to so many people and without raising the voice has not yet been experimented with.

**SOME:** The closest we've had to large poetry readings have been when the Russian poets come to such places as Madison Square Garden, but they raise their voices.

**GINSBURG:** Yes. I've worked with them and I know them and I know their style. First of all, it's only crowds of 5,000 or 10,000 or 15,000, and they are people attuned to poetry. But here, it's crowds not yet attuned to the tradition of spoken poetry in vast crowds. And it's not crowds of five or ten thousand, it's crowds of 20 and 30 or 40,000 people, a Shea Stadium or Yankee Stadium crowd potentially, Astrodome crowds, Be-In crowds—events like Woodstock might be 100,000. I've been in front of 100,000 people, but in a foreign language—in Prague, May Day '65. What I did there was chant, just reduce to pure sound, syllables of "Om" and "Ah" and that worked out. But to speak in America to large crowds is different. Dylan, I think, saw the space there before I did, and tried to encourage me to do it, which is an amazing piece of generosity on his part—intelligence—or just natural mind, Dylan has common sense—freedom—ease, ease. So, he's talking about continuing working on that.

**SOME:** Is he going to keep on touring?

**GINSBURG:** Well, we talked about it a couple of weeks ago, he said he's a gypsy and he wants to go on touring for the rest of his life, absolute wandering, and I said, "Well, I have to go home and take care of my father." He said, "Listen, when you're an old man, we'll take care of you on your death bed." He said, "We're gonna be gypsies, go around the world and tour forever, never never never come home again." It was late at night, and we were all drinking.

**SOME:** Are you going to hold him to it?

**GINSBURG:** No, I'm sure he was just babbling poetry.

#### FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Fort Collins Colo., Site of *Hard Rain* concert, May 23, 1976.

<sup>2</sup>Actually I was kidding. By June 3, 1976 I had finished recording *First Blues* album under direction of jazz historian John Hammond Sr., with musicians I'd worked with since late 60's Blake Songs album, and the 19 yr old cherubic David Mansfield of Dylan's *Rolling Thunder* group

<sup>3</sup>Read at Salt Lake May 19, 1976, Rolling Thunder Review. This version as altered for Mormon Salt Lake Context—Urim & Thummim are Mormon revelatory gold plated artifacts.

## Charles Haseloff

# Les Book Review

5, 1976



I approach readings with all the *subtlety* and ambiguity of a seven-headed ghoul. *FIRST HEAD* is that of the *Egomaniac!*—Whoopie. My name's going to be in print. In the paper, too. Whowie. This calls for a flyer to be distributed by Hari Krishna people on subways and streetcorners everywhere. There'll have to be skywriting along Jones Beach announcing that CHARLES HASELOFF WILL APPEAR AT THE TRUCKSTOP ON TENTH AVENUE, ETC. Linda Lovelace will introduce.

**SECOND HEAD: HUSTLER—AT LAST. POWER. FAME. ACCEPTANCE.** The Biggies will have to print my poems now—*Partisan*, *Paris Review*, even *The New Yorker*. Rrrrrrrch. The compromises one has to submit to. Still, I'll finally be able to get a reading at Madison Square Garden with the latest Visiting Russian Poet.

**THIRD HEAD: SOCIALITE—**Will John Ashbery come to my reading? He didn't mention me in his *Vermont Notebook*. Kenneth Koch? Mama Leone? Joe Brainard? Joe's probably on some exotic cruise. Adrienne Rich? She's busy diving. Erica Jong? She's flying. Diane Wakoski? Out riding. Her motorcycle. Joel Oppenheimer? No chance. There's a Met game on that night. Allen Ginsberg? He didn't even go to pick up his National Book Award. Time to call on my friends. Poet friends? Friends? Michael? He's unmuuzzling his ox. Bum Steer. Big Z? At the printer biting a check for Roy Rogers. Carter? Allan? Time to think of relatives. Mother's sick. Friends. Friends! David asked me to let him know for sure whenever I'd be giving another reading. Jean, too. Barbara will come for sure. That's three. Three's a crowd... to begin with.

**FOURTH HEAD: HAM—**What'll I wear? I'll have to buy some new clothes. A pair of cowboy boots. Every poet I know worth his poems these days wears big cowboy boots. I'll have to study my gestures, my hand motions, facial expressions, body language. Eat raw eggs to lubricate the vocal cords, practice my howls and growls, moans and groans. And I'll have to lose weight. Damn development around my waist. There'll be all these eyes touching me all over... the...



*PENIS: DIRTY-OLD-MAN*—all over with their lustful shamelessly critical eyes. Will there be teeny-boppers? In miniskirts? Squatting in the first row? I'll have to be impertinent, horrendous. Poetry just isn't enough. It takes personality, performance, phallus. I'll have to grease my fly, zipper, too, and the mike. Keep an eye on the rear exit.

*FOURTH HEAD: HAM* (cont'd)—I'll start out with something soft and furry, get everyone to relax. Then slowly edge up toward the heavy dark stuff. . . . The Soul! (Shiver, shiver). Increase the temper slowwwwwwwwwly. Massage their resistance, their fear, slowwwwwwwly, till they start to relax, to flow. Then let them wait a bit. Build up tension, before I hit them with the love/hate death/life stuff. Some silence first. No anecdotes. Not now. Maybe earlier. Not in the middle of love-making. Yes, I'll have to make love to them, right there on the stage—touch them, all of them, where it counts—the dark hot wet soul. . . . but first get their hands, feet, lips. . . . kiss them gently, slowwwwwwwly, get on my knees even, purr and moan and stroke, stroke, stroke their buttocks and thighs, then. . . . But first I'll have to get them to trust me, make them come to me with their faith and longing, get *them* to moan and groan, get them to ask for more and more and more. . . . of ME. And then I'll make them wait. Make them say please. Drive 'em wild. And then, WHAM, give it to them, give them all of ME. All the way.

*FIFTH HEAD: PARANOID*—Why is everybody yawning? Going to the bathroom all the time? Talking? Applauding in the middle of poems? I bet they're going to walk out on me. I swear. I'll have to cut it short. "We will now have a 20 minute intermission, after which I will read two more poems, one short one and one long one." No folks, don't leave. It ain't that long, only relatively long. Really just a little longer than the short one. Only ninety-nine lines. Please don't leave. I tell you what. I'll only read Parts one, two and three of the long one. Please don't leave.

*SIXTH HEAD: BUSINESS MAN*—I should be able to make 25 bucks out of this. Fifty with the basket. Should I hold out for more. \$100? Those bastards. Who do they think they are? Who do they think I am? What is this anyway? Philanthropy? Let's see, should I place the basket by the door? By the mike? No, that's too indelicate. Better yet, I'll take it around, stare them right in

the eye.

*SEVENTH HEAD: ANGEL*—Angel speaks with tongues of fire, water, earth, air. Angel is holy. Angel is pure. Angel worships the soul of poetry—the penumbra of poetry, the penis umbra, the clitoris umbra, the beasts and plants and breasts and brain of umbras of poetry—the dark hot infinitely glorious radiant soul of poetry—ultimate organ of passion and knowledge.

6/74

## John Wieners

Bernadette's Feast Month 1974  
Saint Marie-Bernard

February Sunday FIRST

Referenced: OUR LADY OF LOURDES  
698 Beacon Street, Kenmore Square  
BOSTON Mass.

### DEAREST THE THREE:

In response, as I was a rather untoward performer at PINCEYTON UNIV. twice, there in the STATE of New Jersey, 1965, 1966; and so gratefully allowed to display inadequate verses before a solemn, intelligent congregation both times, that I heartily espouse PUBLIC READINGS.

1) I see myself in or at those events of public acknowledgement, primarily straightened as to responsibility, and the profession I have chosen, as dictate of my emotion. Performing reverently as an entertainment to the minds, preferences, and bodies of the paid crowds, and guardians of that host. NO COMEDIAN, without WORK grows to public acclaim, unless he welcomes stringent edification, from decades of attention unto his own self. I merely hasten to add, I have never been a comedian. Only, *mais oui*, an answerer in all cases, to *votres* question. No performer ever receives immediate feedback, strangely.

2) No, I do not stay away from poems that are onerous for an audience to grasp. Laughter is the best way for dispelling impatient premeditated obstacles to comprehension.

3) Gratification on the stage is handled through the stagehands, the artist and his guests.

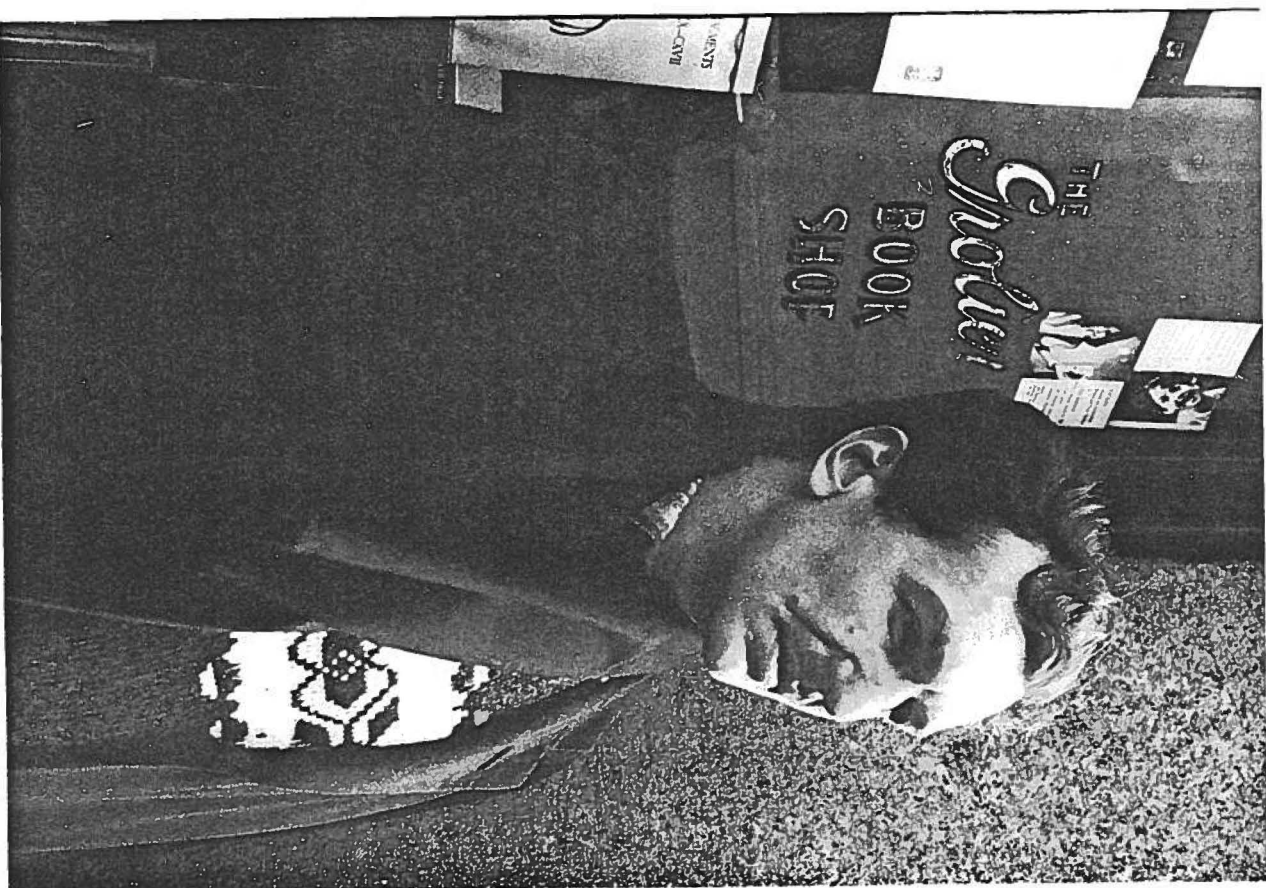
4) It does matter that one accepts his material destination graciously.

5) Dramatic or theatre-type devices always in order.

6) Yes, there are some poems that go over especially well at readings.

7) Yes, at times, there are poems that one does not believe go over particularly well either way.

8) Yes, I have thousands of verses that I do not believe suffer either publicly, written at home, upon the stage, itself, or at other times, left for the audience, through material, solicited through themselves, and in religious evaluation, seeming professional including theatrically.



9) Enclose verse on occasion of your questionnaire. It has never been read, consciously and legally. My most successful poems, as you know, are in the libraries, at your disposal.

#### MY OWNLY FATHER IN HEAVEN

whom I never knew, HIS good, sanity  
pauses at his MENIAL labors for Other City

CH ORES, chooses now in arc'd citadel bellry  
to honor the bells, terrestially, prayerfully ally

this Sunday certainly, as his son remembers Him, none  
the less, my only Father, recollect your debts' renown.

Frank, I was told, by Baldy Laffan, a murdered his name  
revealed on crutches and cane, still amputee, legless shame.

10) Oh, yes, and or no; politics, poetry go hand in hand. Witness the gay revolution of the Seventies: and the good work on all fronts by liberal authors, poets and publishers upon Recordings, Tapes, Cassettes, Telephones, Television, Universities through-out each day, evening, month of the 1960's. Referring meaning "anti-war" has always or accurately only been poetry's message...s.

11) First readings well-received, enthusiastically. At Black Mountain College, North Carolina, Charles Olsen's classroom. 1955.... 1956. Exposing things in public excellently handled, and always thrilling! I grew as a reader without qualm, because I believed my art would supply mercantile doubts' remission. "Henny Youngman etc?" not completely solo, & to quote HIM, "THAT'S AN UNDERSTATEMENT." God bless Henny Youngman..... curse DdIP..... Yes, my ledgers are full of material of all sorts dealing in quietly, honorable fashion to the methodology of mass-media. Just turn on a radio, if you wish to receive an example off the cuff, as this. THE POET as myth: a favorite occupied ZONE, WHICH MYTH? Classify 10) I love personal uses in stententious instances.... gratefully forbade reason's desperation, to acquit itself. Mr. Suicide JB: COLONNA CALUMNY.... Most every poem in legerdemain niches fitness. 12) PLEASE SEND SOME#4, blessedly in need of YOUR EDITORSHIP.

YOUR CARD REPLACED THROUGH CANDID SS. early Fifties.

South Shore Milton, 02187

Johnny Ducky Panna's Boy

## Gerard Malanga

### In Public

I approach public readings without hesitancy. I approach public readings with confidence—with the confidence of turning it into what will amount to an enjoyable experience for myself and the audience. The size of a seated audience doesn't bother me in the least. I've participated in group readings where the audience numbered 2,000; I've given solo readings for 10 to 300. The main concern is to perform well in what I have to offer, and offer myself in the most dignified way through my poetry. I know I've made people feel I'm having just as good a time reading as they are listening, because of the response I've received at the end of the reading. I include the audience in what I'm feeling in every instant in my poems when I read aloud. I've attended readings by many poets who literally drove their work into the ground and knew it, too, although they probably didn't mean to. The worst feeling in the world is when you and your audience both know you're bad. When an audience loves you, there is no greater exhilaration.

I don't see myself as a performer but as a poet *performing* work. I'm not really concerned with "entertaining" people or "playing for laughs." I never pandar an audience. The clearest form of immediate feedback is something that can't be explained. Giving a reading is something you do in order to know—something you can feel with your whole body. It comes to this in what Olson suggests by way of proprioceptive theories in Projective Verse, which is really the sensibility—the mind of the poet—within the organism—the body of the poet—by movement of its own tissues. It doesn't necessarily include words. I gave a reading once at Better Books in London, and at the end no one applauded—no one could applaud—not because they didn't like the reading, but they were too stunned to do anything else. The clearest form of that immediate feedback was the utter silence that came right at the end of the reading.

Nothing of what I write is easy, so there's really no getting around reading poems that I feel might be difficult for an audience to grasp. I just read them regardless of whether an audience will comprehend them or not. If what I read reaches out to one person in an audience of any given size, then it's all been worth the effort of standing up to read. And there's always been at least one person, usually someone I don't even know, whom I've touched.

On occasion I include one of my diary films as part of the program. I read for about 15-minutes followed by the film followed





by a brief intermission, and I conclude with a 20- or 25-minute reading set. Other than that I've never felt the need to use dramatic or theater-type devices to amplify my reading. It's my actual presence that counts for the reading. The main thing is to look as well as I feel and feel as well as I look and I do this by dressing for the occasion and also given the mood I'm in at the time.

I always read what I consider to be my most recent work written close to the time of a scheduled reading. Of course, what I do read is never the same because I am never the same person in my work and my poems change from week to week, month to month, year to year. I'm discovering myself with every poem I write and what I discover is never the same. With the exception of a few poems that I return to from time to time for purposes of warming up, I'm always trying out my most recent work.

I've never found it difficult to expose much of myself to strangers, because all my poems come out of experiences I'm willing to share. I suppose there are some poets who say, *All right, I want to write a confessional poem, let's see, what's in vogue at the moment?* But I've never worked that way. There are probably many poets who would try very hard to get away from anything that directly concerned them, but I don't feel the need to do that at all. Anything I write is very personal, and yet I don't feel as if I have that much to hide. I am always in my poems.

I've been growing as a reader by believing in myself as a poet and recognizing myself in what I am given to write. Creeley and Bly are poets whom I've secretly learned from in how I read my poems in discovering my own voice in them. Certain poems lend themselves to a particular way of reading and others to still another way. My poems contain many different voices, and all these voices are actually one voice. I feel that I am every poet without ever ceasing to be myself. I've reached the point in my writing where I feel in complete control of what I read.

\* \* \*

My first few readings went considerably well, taking into consideration that I was eighteen at the time. I think my first public reading was when I became the recipient of the Williams Poetry Prize sponsored by the Cincinnati Literary and Musical Society, back in the spring of '61. I was a freshman at the University of Cincinnati. I obliged the Society by reading the winning poem and some others. My first important reading, however, took place in December of 1962 at Wagner College, where I was an un-



dergraduate transfer student on a fellowship. Willard Maas, my mentor, and at the time my English teacher, organized this reading as part of the college's annual Fine Arts Festival. Robert Harson, a poet on the G.I. Bill, and I read with Robert Lowell and Frank O'Hara, and Willard acted as moderator. The following summer I had the occasion to participate in a group reading which was part of a series of evening events sponsored by the New York City Writers Conference. I found myself reading with LeRoi Jones, Helen Neville, Kenneth Koch, Bill Berkson, Kay Boyle, Kenward Elmslie, Ruth Landshoff York, and two of the Conference's workshop students, Frank Lima and David Shapiro. Both these readings went off very well for me.

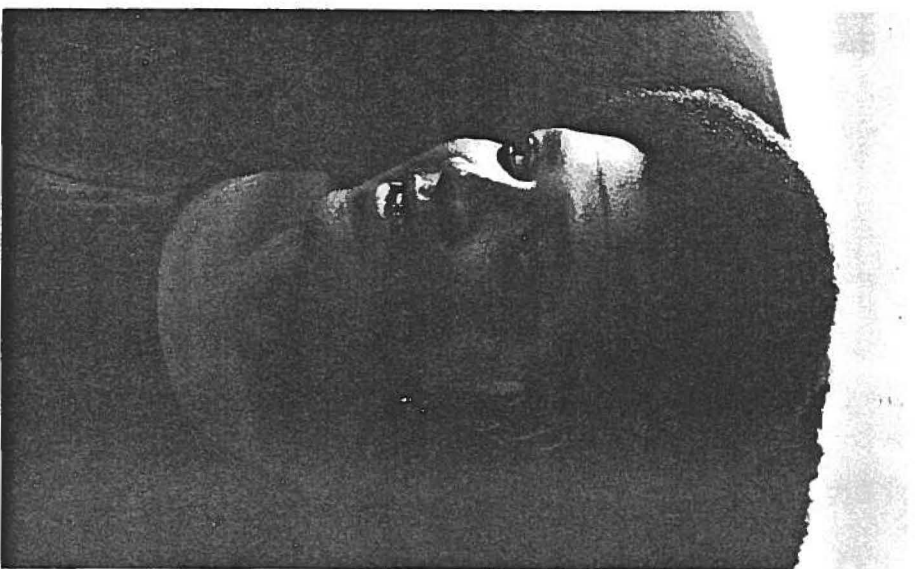
I remember when at 19 and a sophomore at Wagner College there was this notice about a poetry-reading contest held annually at Mount Holyoke College. I submitted a sheaf of poems and was accepted. I later found out that I was the only student-poet from the New York area; the other undergraduates came from Yale, Smith, Amherst, Mount Holyoke, and Connecticut College. I remember having to sit through all this boring sophomore language that was being passed off as poetry, and I knew there was nothing wrong with my hearing because there was no genuine response coming from the audience. Everything was quite mechanical. Then it was my turn, and one of the poems I read, entitled "Yellow," was unlike anything else read that night. I had written this poem as part of an assignment given to me by Kenneth Koch, whose poetry writing workshop at the New School I was taking at the time. The assignment was to write a poem using a comparison in every line—"Yellow is like . . ." or "Yellow is when . . ." I sensed an alertness from the audience which hadn't been evident when the other students were reading. At the end of the reading I received the strongest audience applause. I was naive to believe that I would be awarded first prize because of the overwhelming audience response in my favor. No such luck.

It was almost as if I were *persona non grata* and was suspected of presenting ideas that were considered alien to what poetry was supposed to be at the time.

I had come to Mount Holyoke with two speed-freak friends from the Lower East Side, and we returned to my room—the only guest room in the girls dorm—and we amused ourselves by turning the furniture around and taking the tacky pictures off the walls and throwing the mattress on the floor. The dorm-mother must have heard us and reported the disturbance, because within minutes the campus police arrived to investigate the complaint and escorted

my two friends to the campus power plant, where they had to spend the night on cots without blankets. You know, not one of those student-poets was ever heard from again.

## Audre Lorde



Readings. I find them both leech-like & rewarding, alternately and together, so approach them always with great excitement & terror. Draining & Sustaining. Contact & Chaos. They cost a tremendous amount of me, particularly recently since I've decided to quit being wise & careful & now read what needs reading & hearing, & sometimes it's heard and sometimes not, & when not, it hurts, in the place I preserve always open. "Touring" is one of the poems recently born out of this.

### TOURING

Coming in and out of cities  
where I spend one or two days  
selling myself  
where I spend one or two nights  
in beds that do not have time to fit me  
coming in and out of cities  
too quickly  
to be touched by their magic  
I burn  
from the beds that do not fit me  
I leave sated  
but without feeling  
any texture of the house I have invaded  
by invitation  
I leave  
with a disturbing sense  
of the hard core of flesh  
missed  
which is truly revealing.

I leave poems behind me  
dropping them like dark seeds that  
I will never harvest  
that I will never mourn  
if they are destroyed  
they pay for a gift  
I have not accepted.

Coming in and out of cities  
untouched by their magic  
I think without feeling  
this is what men do  
who try for some connection  
and fail  
and leave  
five dollars on the table.

# Virginia R. Terris

## A Smashing Success

Rosy with applause the poet walks out on the platform carrying two big bundles of books tied with a cord, one in his left hand and one in his right hand. He's had so many books published he hasn't been able to decide which ones to bring. So he brings them all. They're so heavy he drops one bundle on one side of the lectern and one on the other side. He bows to the audience who's come from faraway places to hear him read because he's so famous. He can't untie the knot of one bundle and swears to himself but finally gets out the top book and puts in on the lectern, smiling toward the audience as he rifles through the pages for a good poem to start off with.

After thumbing through the pages, he decides the best one to start with isn't in the first book, so he picks up a second book and the audience is so still it can hear each page fluttering as he turns through them. But he decides—maybe not that book either.

The audience waits expectantly. He just can't decide. Just any poem won't do because he's an artist. Not in the third book either.

Fifteen moments has passed and their bottoms are beginning to rebel. But his listeners are sure he's going to find the exact poem any minute. Everyone, including the poet, is very patient. By now he's gone through six books and not even coughed. The audience is waiting for the first sound. But it's time for intermission for the master of ceremonies smiles at the poet who steps aside for the announcement to the audience that wine, coffee and cookies can be bought for eighty cents in the lobby.

The poet and the M.C. walk off the stage chatting and smiling. The poet refreshes himself back stage with a hurried cup of coffee that an admirer has brought him and then signs copies of his books that admirers crowding backstage have brought in.

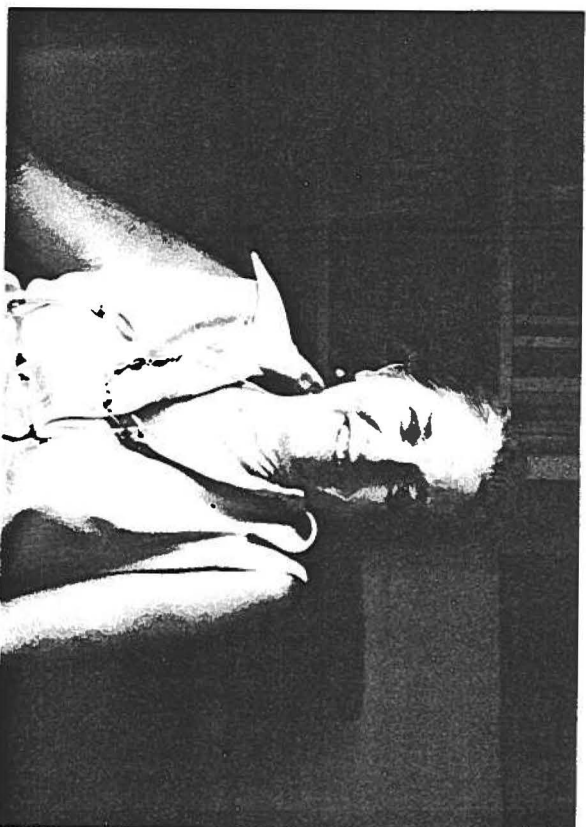
After fifteen minutes the audience is back in its seats and the poet emerges smiling from behind the blue curtains. He is now faced with another problem—to find the best poem to open the second half of the program with. He unties the second bundle and takes off the top book. But it doesn't yield a poem with quite the right tone. For a few minutes he wishes he hadn't been quite so prolific.

At last he thinks he's found the right poem and the first word is half out of his mouth but he holds off and peeks at the next page. Then he begins turning toward the back of the book. He comes to the back cover. He's so famous the audience enjoys just hearing him turn pages.

Finally he lounges against the lectern with the air of a poet who's just been notified he's won the Nobel Prize. He's found the poem. He wets his lips. The word is just behind his teeth. But suddenly he decides not to cheat his audience. He has only two more books to look through.

As he thumbs through the last volume, the M.C. comes up from the first row. It's nearing plane time. He mounts the stairs and the audience realizes that the performance is over. The applause is deafening. The poet flushes and bows modestly from the waist. He grasps the hands of his admirers who surge forward. As he bends over to tie up his books an eager young man rushes up eagerly to help him.

At last the crowd disperses enough for him to come down to the floor of the auditorium where he signs a few more books before he goes off to the bar for a quick drink with a few friends before catching the midnight plane. The evening's been a smashing success.



## Hugh Seidman

I received your letter about readings. At the time, I didn't have much to say. I probably still don't. For the first part, if you wanted to, you might note from BLOOD LORD the poem "Newton" which is a great reading poem and the poem "Persephone" which is a terrible reading poem—tho both are favorites. I always preface the latter by saying, "Now this is a really dense one that you won't get, but..." A hard road is fighting the knowledge that no one is getting more than half of what you're saying if that. The other alternative being to bring in long prose introductions about what it all "means." I once heard James Dickey read at the University of Minnesota in the 60's where he prefaced every poem with a long prose story. The stories were terrific and the poems were a colossal bore. You could really feel the great difference between his natural speech cadences and his literary movement. Pertinent to Pound's observation that it might be of interest to write poems in which you felt a man was speaking to you. But surely there is a big difference between "page-poems" and "speak-poems"; and if you're writing for the page you don't have to fill the work up with refrains and more words than necessary so that folks will get it (as Clayton Eshleman once wrote of Diane W.'s method).

When I was at Brooklyn Poly I recall a frustrated engineering student standing up in Louis Zukofsky's required English #520 (or as they used to say: six months ago I couldn't even spell *unengineer* and now I am one) and blurting out that he had been sitting in this such and such class now for a good number of months and he still hadn't understood one thing that had been said. Louis' readings are of course this way too—but with him, as with any one, it is important to be aware of the terms of reference and vocabulary. I myself had the same problem when I first encountered Louis simply because of this fact. I really couldn't understand what the man was talking about, tho I intuitively knew it made sense. When I, after a while, understood the coordinate system, it was easy as pie. We all repeat ourselves so much anyway. *The Cantos* are a lot like this. Aside from the phrases in neo-seib-sanskrit and the arcane references, it seems to me that Pound is forever going back and forth over the same ground. Once you have the map it's not so bad.

It is very hard to escape the dichotomy between wishing to communicate and be loved by an audience (the poet's classic role, as it were) and the need to push language to its limits of





comprehension, motion, understanding, etc. Mike McClure had a piece in *Rolling Stone* on Bob Dylan where he mentions that Robert Duncan has said that he will not write any more commercial books (that is, have his work printed commercially) for the next 15 years because he does not want to have to feel that he might be writing something to please someone other than himself (my paraphrase.) The poet Gil Sorentino simply refuses to read his poems in public any longer—I assume he is disgusted with the lack of response and all that going before an audience to read implies for the serious craftsmen. Or, when the Puerto Rican poet in a workshop I once taught said that he would not read his poems to the class (essentially white, etc.) because they were not his audience. Or to jump back to McClure's piece, who would not love to have 50,000 folks yelling for more; altho I can't in any honesty share his feeling that Dylan is a "poet." I myself more and more hate to read because of these things. Love me, folks, love me, even tho it don't make any sense to you. It is no wonder poets have such egos.

On the other hand, sometimes it does work and it's amazing. When the poet is really at one with the material he can often make you "hear" the work so that ever afterward it is not possible to hear differently. I had not appreciated Sorentino, for example (the earlier poems in *Perfect Fiction*) as much as I do now, until I heard him read. I was amazed, delighted, surprised, bowed over. Terrific, it was—because for the first time, I *heard* him. Creeley, too, once had the same effect on me (before he lapsed into incoherence). It was remarkable, again, to "hear" how each word for him was practically an entity in itself, and how the articulation of that gave the poems great power. Or Adrienne Rich reading "Diving Into the Wreck." Or poems like the "Waste Land" that you hear when you're 16, not knowing what any of it means, but kind of shaken by the sheer force of the language.

Well, I see that I have said more than I thought I would.

## Paul Hannigan

I am delighted to say a few words in your poetry reading symposium because I think readings are terribly important. I have two kinds of poems: poems I love to read at poetry readings and poems that don't seem to go well at readings. This poem

### TWENTY FIVE TECHNICAL CAREERS YOU CAN LEARN IN TWO YEARS OR LESS

My last two years of training taught me  
I'm headed for a violent middle age

so these new careers interest me personally  
I imagine one being managing a remote fish hatchery

all the fish in sight would be there and you would  
think of all-knowingness what fun it was how

smart sometimes it made you feel confident and wonderful  
but other times it made you feel lonesome no one to share it with

except the pululating symbols of Christ dumb and slimey  
in their warm baths

but I am not interested in careers like that or computer  
programming or dental assistant how could you get any one

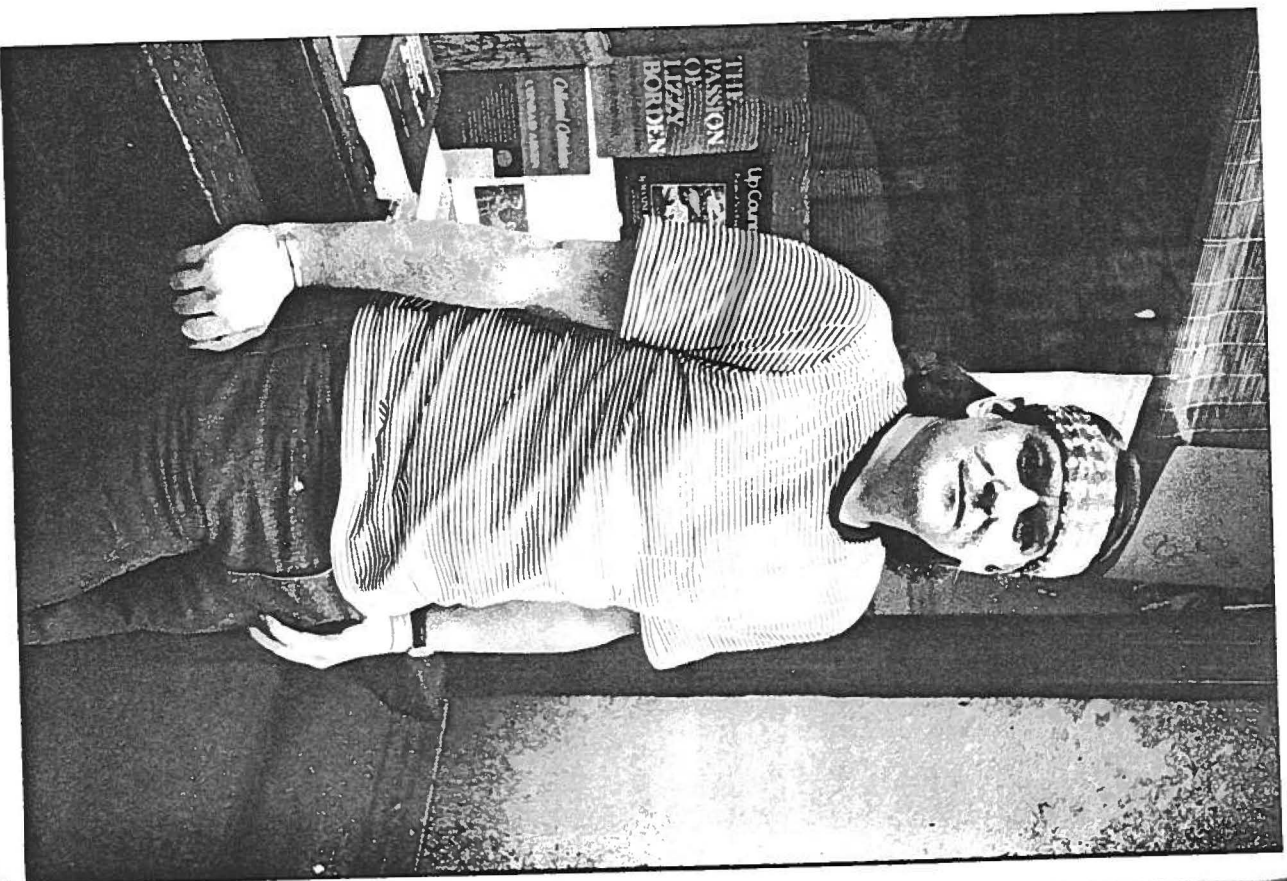
to go to a fat florid fortyish drunken dope-smoking blabbermouth  
who always jokes about pain who would go to such a man

to have his teeth cleaned? I am interested in jobs that  
dwarf the self I am interested in religious work

the loonier the better I would like to become a village  
pest or a very handsome teenage millionaire driving a sportscar

as one "who's been stabbed in the heart" I am a natural aristocrat  
don't listen to the rich they are imposters listen to me

O muse as I enumerate those twenty-five careers corpse-carrier  
mouth-cleaner flnk machine-nurse spot-licker pus-drummer



interchangeable nitwit streetcorner scout (scouting is not to be confused with cruising) stare into the filthy waters and groan spy on your friends and gasp shriek over the missing five thousand railroads help grow the new syphilis strain count the remaining possible buffalo geek help print the announcements you could become the President's eyelash even if you flunked out of junior college you can lick a boot kiss a hand tug a forelock spot possible targets filter out undesirables jack off smoke a lizard suck wind there are not twenty-five careers in the world grow food, make useful things, or con people: these are the only three jobs in the world so they certainly must be the only three careers in the world O my muse my sweetest little muse in the world my darling cutie pie babykins dollface honeypot jam-lockermotherlode and making useful things and conning people are thankless farming is left the dismal art choking life from the earth only so we may kill it and eat it and die ourselves farming is the adolescence of human life when mankind apparently learns bitterness and loneliness the lies of the great mathematicians seem to be in vogue still you can teach a moron to read in a thousand years but then it will take you twenty thousand to enjoy it and what kind of a life is that for you? none at all! and why kind of a life is that for you? none at all! I am tired of boxing and wrestling and hockey and football those careers have begun to oppress our lives no matter who we are

the modest professor of Ulaic languages running for his bus  
or the idiot speedfreak cabdriver

what's the score you say which score he says the game! you say  
ah the game! he says they're tied at the end of one he says

still? you are incredulous! still tied at the end of one  
you say leaping from the cab late for class again

running like a man "who's been stabbed in the heart"  
the possibility of your becoming a nun is closed

once and for all for you this is the existential moment  
you must decide whether or not you are a bourgeois

or whether you are going to put off that decision another week  
until your natural aristocracy is discovered

he sure is a terrible farmer! they groan in unison  
he couldn't grow slime on scum they mutter

wordsworth was right O my adorable wasn't he when he said:  
slush is just cold wet language that is true honeybaby right?

when I say he ran like a man "who's been stabbed in the heart"  
we all have the same picture in our minds don't we?

think about yourself honey Gail Sayers wants you to write away  
for a booklet called TWENTY-FIVE TECHNICAL CAREERS YOU

CAN LEARN IN TWO YEARS and think what are you doing  
look around your life and admit that you are doing all you can

to take care of yourself muchless feeding toornadoes  
life is harder than television makes it out to be

even during the news the agony of the men in the news  
is nothing to your agonies and they asked for it

if they want to beat you they will have to beat you at the tape  
you're a wonderful guy or gal you have got this far

there must be something in store for you  
the wall of a rabbit caught in one of your own traps

or a month of uninterrupted drinking and television  
in "a friend's place" watch all the game shows with beer  
in the morning and think about being a contestant  
but you have no wife the couch is on fire shit

Barry's not going to like this what the hell  
make it up to him someday somehow kill his dad

prison food prison food prison food I could eat  
prison food prison food could not be all that terrible

and if it is you could organize and beat the piss  
out of somebody and feel pretty good about it

for a change now that the hostages are taking hostages  
maybe it is not so hard not to be bourgeois right

my Buns my musatron my slave-baby my gold star mother  
my rake-handed snake-haired Medusa of the long march

there are actually so few who have never worked in their lives  
and fewer still who have been successful at that career

but you cannot learn it in two years; it takes 3 years  
talking is not enough you also have to be able to run

walking won't do you must be able to talk and run  
how you run is a matter of personal preference

like having a boil lanced or a tooth pulled or running  
your car into the child or the tree

every moment of your life  
seems melodramatic until

you imagine yourself  
in a new career

as a discriptionist of  
far away places

a cyclist disappearing  
around a bend shaded by

poplars the dogs  
snap at his heels  
their teeth wet  
lips foaming

O my vowel  
my a

great at readings but this poem

goes

## TWO SONNETS

Classics ever begin with a meditation on their own nature.

The least important word of a classic may be the first.

No classic would greatly miss its first word.

The 1st and 2nd words may mean something but the 2nd and 3rd words will always mean more and the 2nd 3rd and 4th words together may mean everything.

Each word builds on all the preceding words.

Ultimately the effect is momentarily overpowering.

But life goes on in the great classics despite momentary setbacks which in lesser works or real lives would seem great tragedies or hopeless confusions.

And some deeper force presently reveals itself to be at work and to control the lives of all our loved ones in unexpected ways.

Every imaginable alternative in the lives of our loved ones fills us with dread.

But it is time for supper now beans and greens or cunt and baloney.

Small wonder then we turn again to the classics. Some respite from this limp in cognito walkabout.

I enjoy the way these people plunge from depth to depth without every struggling through the shallows.

Everything they do seems to say: How wonderful to live in this world with its apparently jagged surprises which all turn out to be infinitely symmetrical scrolls to the discriminating.

While everything they say seems so real that it makes time pass too quickly. But only a madman would go back and read those words again so soon.

Let us rise to the highest slumber, Brothers and Sisters—  
O my Brothers and Sisters we must rise to the higher slum.

doesn't. I like the 2nd poem better myself because it is more fun to write than the first. But you can't read the 2nd poem at a reading because it's not much fun to hear until you have read it once or twice and begun to see what's going on in it. But readings are important because we need people who can read poetry well; we need them in the worst way. So when innocent people get sucked into going to a reading and find to their surprise that poetry is believable they may go on to read it. Even if they don't the poets get some bread. That's probably oversimplified but it's pretty much what I think about poetry readings in a nutshell. I guess I've taken up enough of your time and should sit down now.



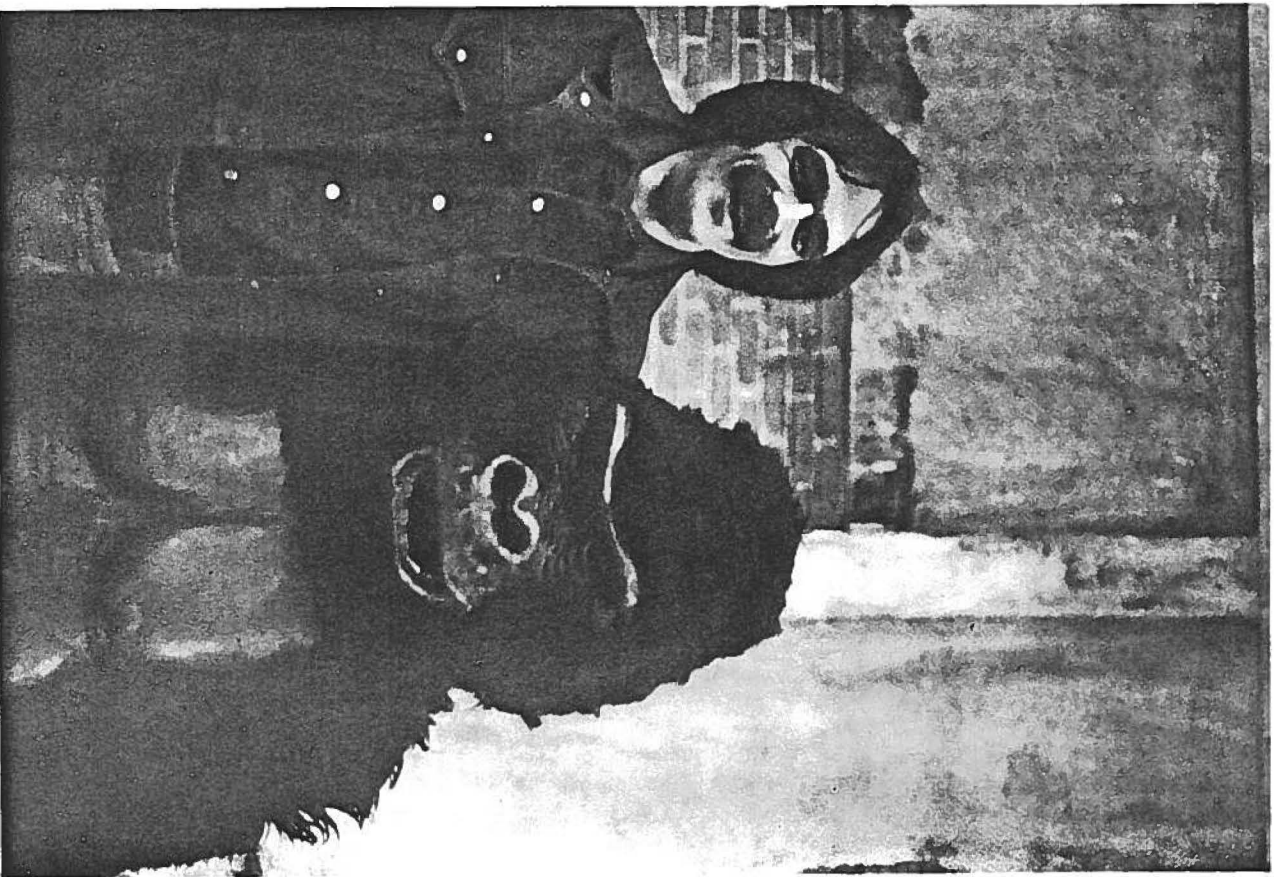
## Terry Stokes

### Speaking Of Poetry Readings

I like to approach my poetry readings blind-folded. I am usually guided to the podium by a wino-cat with six eyes. I wear only ski outfits, & ear muffs. Sometimes the noise on the stage becomes confusing. The bacon-cheeseburger platter with everything on it is dangerous. This is serious business, I am being paid. My four-eyed cat reminds me as the groupies begin sucking on my bootlaces, which I have marinated in musk oil several days in advance in expectation of what's coming, this is serious. It is time for a drink. I would like a Bermuda Triangle, please?

This blank space is left for zipping my fly up or down depending on the crowd, & what sort of mushrooms I have just eaten on my favorite dish. A veal dish, that is. Now that I have your attention, I will read a serious poem I wrote for Valentine's Day in Southeast Asia: I came across a fortune cookie which led into this poem: A Breadstick With Cancer Has Nothing To Do With Napalm Of The Heart. About this time, it's piss-call

for most of the folks in the crowd. & I order a Sombrero, & get it. I pull a brace of paper dolls from the left-hand pocket of my parka, & hum a song about a klieg light in Arizona. I notice most people are by now beside themselves, except for one solemn attache who pleads with the bartender to turn on the pinball machine. That's it! I read "Needle Point Nightmare." I shout it like a Met fan. I adopt my pouty Ralph Branca pose; Bobby Thompson drops his quarter into the machine & I catch his wink over the light blue audience.



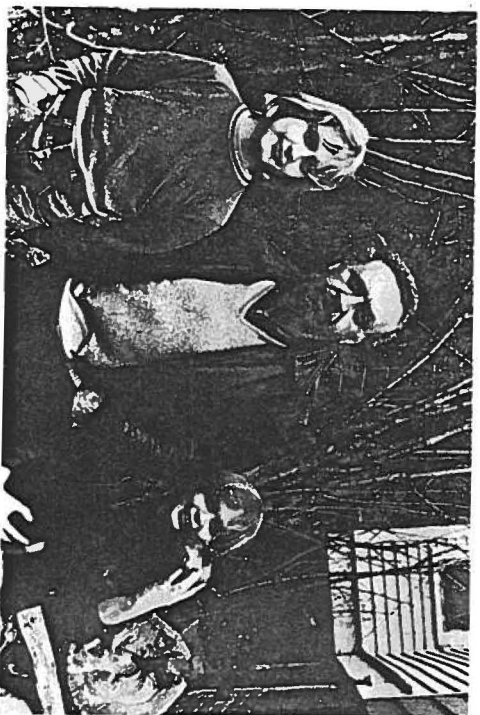
# Armand Schwerner

## old dog sermon

for Jackson Mac Low

the poet reads. in the bar there's an order  
of satisfaction? home  
in the larynx. in the voiced room the people pay  
attention. everyone shares  
this, that the sounds matter. how? what mother  
ground communion  
flower, mulch, bloodmeal?  
after the descent Moses bore the goods.  
he transmitted the goods. were the Jews  
waiting for the goods?  
his hot white going up.  
his exhausted come-down. he was  
the inscriptions, the refusals, the ambience  
of the anger and the receiving.

so, the poet's waylaid by his hunt  
he's bloodmeal watchfulness for the narwahl invisible  
he's harpoon waiting 11 hours at the ice-hole  
his only power the attentiveness, at best  
at best the  
harpoon-poems the ice-hole poems. the tiny tundra sounds  
from point to point  
in the air, vibrations



of the white mother ground, these  
can be shared can they, can  
be life-watch celebration  
as general ground? channel 7 is also general ground, rises  
like a white loaf of fat between us,  
solidifying Great Wall of Love Me Love Me.

is it possible to be here  
and not ask for love, to be sucked off? the lost practice  
of mindfulness, the practice. home  
in the body, body of the world,  
not getting hooked  
on the kicks, which turn soon enough.

I occupy myself, occupations  
breed more vacancies to  
be filled to be filled, farm  
of occupations. is there an unasking silence  
at the heart of this reading? for pain centuries  
our poems body the 'task',  
Rilke calls it, chances between

the harpoon and the hole—verbal gestures, paleoelectricity  
Blake

Whitman, Fernando Pessoa, George Oppen—but among  
rare poem-epiphanies, gift  
dharma flutings, the uninhabitable  
otherness, werewolf Sahara  
of London Lisbon San Francisco the

coffee house the campus auditorium. . . .  
o give me the clear, the wake-up of the poems. and then damn fool  
the more burning their acid shadows on the deserts  
attacking my marrow heating up the space  
between the births. how to

live. what  
to do? sitting's  
stumbling onto a sudden  
freshest. I sit and watch. I walk and watch. the screen's  
in or it's outside.

the discovery, gratuitous. it makes earth  
the ample beloved. the empty center  
is poetry in action, us in this voicing, no feathers  
if now, 'right now', I'm hippo. whatever. 'energy is eternal delight,'  
said the teacher Wm. Blake. leaping water. freshness.  
which is the drinker. and then who is there to thank?

## Rochelle Ratner



In the poetry reading, as in the writing of the poem, we must apply Olson's statement that "form is an extension of content." We're dealing with a different form here, but if the poet wants to share something with his audience, he must find the proper ways of doing it. The voice can change in intensity, in velocity, etc., all to accent certain words or lines. The only way to find the proper form is to experiment—at home, alone, reading out loud. I read *anything*, to see how my voice can change the expression of it.

I've always thought of myself as an "internal" poet. While I never refused to read the work, I'd always intended it more for the printed page. But since most of my work has been "series", the readings gave me the opportunity to test the unity which flowed from poem to poem. In a sense, I found (and find) I need the opportunity of reading it in order for the work to grow. It's a special moment when this sort of thing can happen, and it demands that I leave myself open and vulnerable; the audience is sharing in the process of creation.

I did a lot of work in the Poetry-in-the-Schools program one year, and it's had a big influence on my reading style. In teaching, I found it necessary to reach out to the students, to hold their interest, while still keeping my integrity and refusing to fall into the role of stand-up comedian. The intensity and the loneliness of one five-week stint in South Carolina gave my poems a new sense of urgency. I survived the period because I was continually writing, and I found the poems opened up in a way I hadn't expected. When I read these poems, or some that I've written since then, there's more of an audience response. Like my earlier work, they were written as internal poems, but as my life began to relate more and more to groups of people, the poems were finding their own way to relate. I wasn't conscious of it until afterwards. The following poem is one which came out of the S.C. experience:

### REPLY TO THE LOUDSPEAKER

No sir,  
it's not my car out there.  
Who am I  
to block the principal?  
I know how important  
his meeting is.

## Denise Levertov

Yes sir, my car is beige.  
Just to hear them describe it  
I shiver.

He might suspend me  
for not swearing on a bible  
it's not mine,  
except they no longer have bibles  
in the schools.

I know I don't really belong here.  
Someone might have pushed  
my car in front of his  
just to cause trouble.  
One week here's enough.

They make the announcement again.  
I look around the classroom

They make the announcement again.  
I look around the classroom.

Two boys glance up  
from their papers.  
They're *certain* it's my car.  
If they don't believe me  
why should the principal?

Maybe I can say  
I'm not old enough to drive yet.  
Poets can't afford cars.  
It's not my car, it's rented.  
I have to take it back to Greenville.  
See you.

### EDITORS' NOTE

Denise Levertov's response came in the form of an interview through the mail.

**SOME:** How do you approach public readings? Do you see yourself in part as a performer entertaining people?

**LEVERTOV:** I don't want to bore people but nor do I see myself as an entertainer. I'm  $\frac{1}{2}$  sad, and  $\frac{1}{2}$  irritated when an audience claps only at funny poems, or obvious drama, and seems to miss the finer points. But then, I think to myself that after all it is hard to listen in an auditorium and maybe anyway I didn't read the subtler things well enough.

**SOME:** Do you read poems that are difficult for an audience to grasp on one hearing? If you do, how does it feel standing up there not certain how much is getting through?

**LEVERTOV:** I try to feel out what kind of audience it is. If it seems crude, naive, restless, or if acoustics are bad or the room is too hot, I stick to simpler poems. Since my sight is poor (i.e. I take my glasses off to read but then I can't see the audience beyond the first row if that) I can only get nonvisual reactions anyway. If I think the poem is good I feel it is their loss if they don't get it (theoretically—of course in fact I am exhilarated by a good response and feel flat when there's a flat one; and a good response for one poem makes one read the next one better, & so on.)

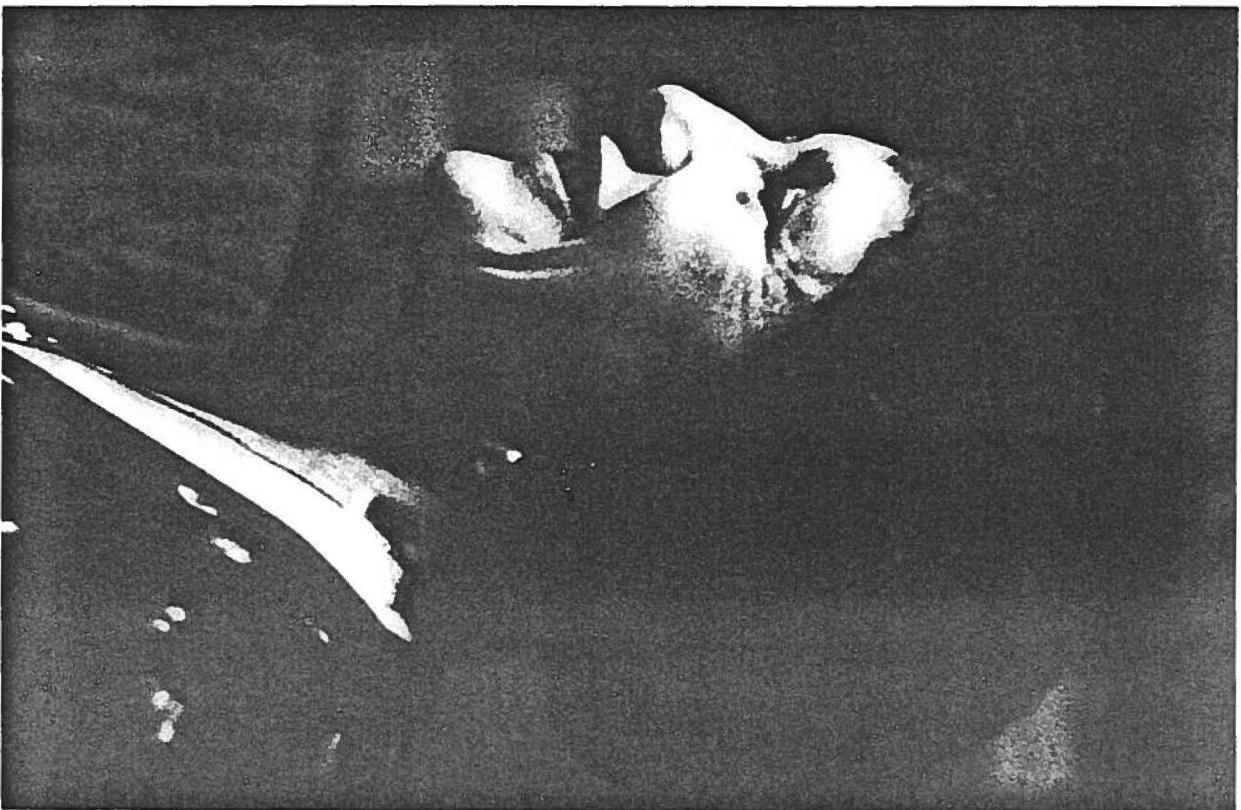
**SOME:** Do you ever use "dramatic" or theater-type devices?

**LEVERTOV:** NO.

**SOME:** Are there some poems that consistently go over especially well at readings?

**LEVERTOV:** Yes—"A Tree Recalls Orpheus", for instance, or "A Solitude". But for a good reason—they are my best poems. However, political poems such as "The Pilots" (was originally in *CALC's American Report* with my articles when I came back from Hanoi, since reprinted in *The Freeing of the Dust and Poet in the World*) often go over well with apparently non-political audiences.





**SOME:** Do you see readings as an opportunity to spread political views (in poems and/or in talk between poems)?

**LEVERTOV:** Definitely. Not at the expense of poetry and non-political poems—but as public events where I have a platform. On occasions where I am not really *supposed* to air my political views I try to do so with a certain amount of tact, at least not to be obnoxious which only defeats one's own ends; but I do feel a moral obligation not to waste opportunities, so I will for instance circulate some current petition or, since I often spend a whole day or two days or more at a college where I am reading, I get some time allotted to me to talk about whatever I'm into, show slides, or whatever—i.e., do a separate political event while I am there.

**SOME:** How did your first few readings go? How did you grow as a reader—by watching other poets, Henry Youngman, etc.?

**LEVERTOV:** At first I was too tense & read too fast. But I had learned, before that, to read clearly and expressively by a) hearing my mother read aloud (fiction) when I was growing up and b) reading aloud to my son when he was a child. (Who is Henry Youngman???)

**SOME:** Any thoughts about poets writing and reading poems with other poets in them? The poet as myth.

**LEVERTOV:** One's friends do pop up in one's poems of course, like one's tree if one has one or the visiting hummingbird. It is not objectionable in itself, it is so natural. But when Robert Duncan said I was Kali (because, though I was an old friend and he knew better, he'd seen me on TV being vehement & indignant, & because he felt my activities were threatening my poetry, maybe—and him—) I was hurt because I felt *misrepresented*. Another mythologizing is common to anyone of any fame at all—that is the kind that puts people on such a pedestal that they are deprived of ordinary human intercourse—e.g. there are young men who like to worship a woman poet from afar, but woe betide her if she mistakes their worship for love and demands anything real of them...! They want to keep her on that chilly old pedestal! And I'm not talking about 'making out', fucky-Dickey style, but about real emotion, friendship, any real human demand, any sense of the real person. I long since learned that &

# David Meltzer

## Rocks for AZ

### EDITORS' NOTE:

Poet David Meltzer has also appeared before audiences as a rock musician, singing his verse. This piece tells of his experience as a poet with guitar, amplifiers, and back-up musicians.

it amuses me now, but I remember when it hurt, & I've since seen it happen to other people. There is another kind of falsification writers lay on each other, an idealization, that's bad too, & I'm guilty of it—e.g. I certainly didn't help some of my War Resister friends when I put *them* on pedestals in my poems.

Up there. In the lights. Soundwall behind. Plugged in. Umbillicuss. Um bundt mensch. Volume knobs. Baas & treble dials. Each to each. Solitary confinement. Up there. You out there. Down there. In your cups. On your cloud. In the red. Or white. Spaces. Faces come and go. Nobody gives a shit about Michaelangelo. Din.

### Prelim.

First number.  
Blues about dark lady of the highways who keeps undulating into semi-deltoid flex. Billy gut grope. Basic drum backbeat. Thump. Pulse. Without them, no flow. No go. Drum pulse. Drum wall. Climb it. Lay on its seismograph pinpoints. Support its openings. Hands in conversation.

Rhythm guitar speeds attention.  
I drift. Want atonal. All the time. Break the time. Poly wants a complex river, a gang of rivers to ride into the sunset, a chain of gangs all preciously complex, ganglia together, the whole instantaneous body of music you make right now. Break the boogie. Tear away ear clutched by pop cliches. Bend string this way. Boogie woogie spine tap. Zipper rip. Bend string that way. Hugga mugga tantrick ticks. Bubbles up the colon. Loud. No sound for room.

We stay stoned  
because we're not, we can't get out of it enough. It's a levelling. To get up there. Into the lights. Luftmenschen cavemen. Thug hugging poets. Want all the ladies in & out of our minds to understand each nuance of what's up there, what's going on. Actually. Want the men of good will to build bigger and better machinery. Wonderful equipment we serve. Plugged into. Umbunco artists. Cord into chords. Plugged in. High voltage amniotic sac.

Pushing thru time. Up against the sound wall. Keep time. Change time. Time dies against collapse of brain ceilings. Venus molluscs.

### Two exacts.

Audience mirror. Cracked, jack.  
Music made. Creation, striving.  
As it is in jazz. Surprises.

Never was much of a formalist. Zombo monkey. Repeat repeat until it sounds like everything else is going to sound. Spin the dial. What dyou get? you get wide spectrum bland. White poise. Gimme the money. Straighten up and fly right. Buy rite.

Armpits talk. Swap Bunuel muff patch  
for goat horn. Out a site. The place abscond mit der funds  
\* \* \*

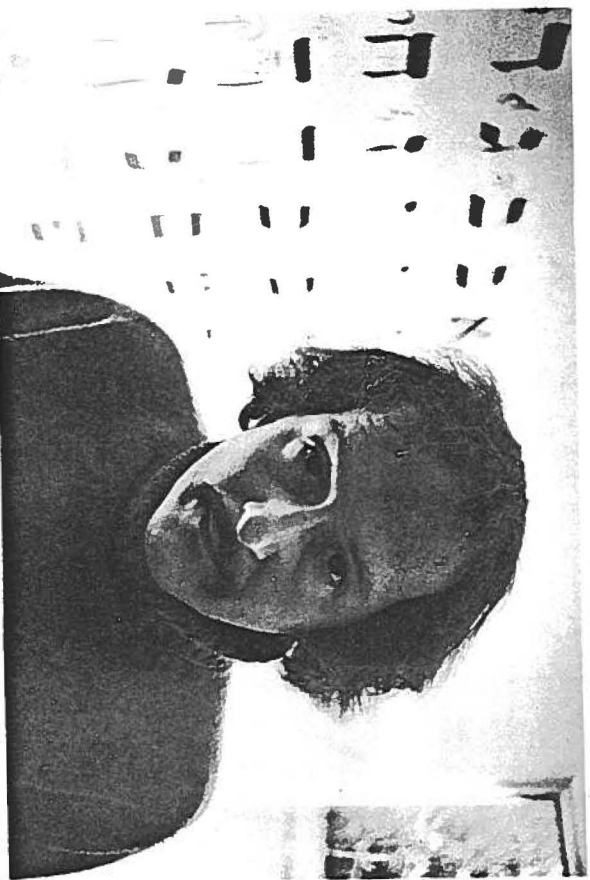
Depends. Often just made-up words. Drown them in feedback. Wah-wah. Distort. Screw face up. Holler. Veins ripple. Bout to flap out of the face. Make the voice a tone. Two tones. Tonal. Adjust intelligence. Tennis. Anyone can listen. These aren't my hands. Who is inside my throat? Lon Chaney permutants spring out a glottal caves. Huh huh mamamah got duh get de absolute negation of the duh blasphemed squirrel huh huh.

All programmed. What by? by what we hear on the radio phono transistor smog belts von Allen flypaper shocks. Webworks. Sound always the sound expected. Imitation. Sincerest form of muggery. Tribal learned from tradition of disques. Watch others who have learned to do it as well as the record. The goal is twofold: stage and platter. Flesh bridge pole from one to the other out there. All electric. Power and light company. Each micro-orgasm operative in sequins across inside-out body. Volto-Ecclesiastico. All is. Anyway.  
\* \* \*

Masculine fantasy. Frenzy. Rape. Sing for your supper. Same old shit. S.O.S. Everybody hear comes. Hears what they hear with tin gramophone ear of order.

But what is it like to be up there?  
When it got to be work the band broke up.

Sooner or later it gets to be work. Psychic toil. Body pillage. And if you havent alit to the next flit of a realm where they carry you like a queen bee from sphere to sphere, then it's time to quit. White rock and roll superstart commercial record industry monopoly softsell hardsell Faust trucking company Inc. limited. The limitation being the product. RPM a total truth mismanaged to become merely circles. Consumer wavers. Wafers for the vast. Middle classics. Mid-clunk. Potty O'Philes. Imagination loss. Gelt galore. The galaxy brothers who brought you the Kiwanis bring you up to date on what's new. Gotta pay them dues to belong to the clubbers. Hit that head until its as topographical debittered as a pancackled grub stuck in vermilion insectuum malicious. Delicious desert. Just. The arid abundance.



## Margaret Atwood



I gave my first poetry reading back in 1960, in a small Toronto coffee-house called *The Bohemian Embassy*. This place specialized in jazz and folk-singing, but one night was poetry night and a lot of young and not-so-young Toronto poets got their start there. It was a terrifying ordeal for me at the time—I'd never done it before, and during the actual reading people kept going for cups of coffee, working the Espresso machine and talking. I'm glad now that I had this experience, since just about nothing that could happen at a reading now would upset me very much.

I hated poetry readings for years, and I think the ones I gave were rather serious and grim (so were a lot of the poems). It's only recently that I've begun to enjoy readings, and that's since I've been reading some poems lighter in content and also some prose. It was a big help too when I discovered that the reason I used to feel so green and queasy was that I'm allergic to coffee, which I used to drink in quantity before readings.

Poetry readings in Canada are quite different from those in the States. Poetry is more widely read by the population at large, and you're therefore more likely to get a cross-section—not just students and *literati*. Reading in, say, Yellowknife or North Bay is very different from reading in New York. People are a lot less interested in your craft or technique and a lot more interested in "what-you-have-to-say." The feedback is very different too: no-one will admire your semi-colons but a lot of people will want to know why you do it, how you got started and whether you can make any money at it.

I enjoy readings more than I used to, but I find myself doing fewer of them. It's a good way to try out new work—you can hear what it sounds like to you—but there's still a little of the zoo animal or freak show about the experience, especially for woman writers. I get tired of feeling on display. And I still occasionally feel that I'll throw up on stage or get laryngitis. I understand why Dylan Thomas used to get drunk beforehand, but getting drunk is not yet socially acceptable for female poets. Also, I'm allergic to alcohol.

It's when you start having those dreams about being up there and opening your notebook and finding that everything is written in Chinese that you figure it may be time to take a rest.



## SHORT RESPONSES

### EDITORS' NOTE

The following writers responded directly on the reply card we sent with our request that they contribute to this symposium. Their cards are reproduced below.

## Dick Gallup

Hi. 'coo busy here to write you a proper reply. I always give readings from the top of my art. If I wanted to be a geek, I'd join the circus. I don't think you should worry about entertainment value, pleasing per se, but I certainly don't try to turn people off. The real point is the level of your art, if you're good you don't have the sort of doubts and problems yr question about readings implies. Pl== Political poems are 95% bullshit. Yes, I will reply. I. My first few readings were terrific (1963)... Well I think yr idea of raising the consciousness of poets about readings is a good idea--tho' I don't know if it's likely to work. It would be alot more to the point to try to do something about getting readings reviewed by people with a brain. normally, are reads to 2..or..3..people in the audience who not only may understand but tell you what they felt about yr reading. Communication is the main line, head to head, heart to heart.

YRS,  
Dick Gallup  
305 Hilltop Ave  
R Keyser W. Va. 26726 ('til June)

## Anne Waldman

I write many poem-chants to be read/sung aloud. I don't think about audience as I'm writing. I write for the sake of language basically, not to get "message" across. I enjoy reading. Most popular poems seems to be "pressure" from my book: LIFE NOTES (Bobbs-Merrill 1973)

Yes, I will reply | |

Anne Waldman

Sorry, no reply | |

No time to reply at further length

name .....

## James Dickey

Dear SOME

Yes, I will reply | |

Sorry, no reply | |

Reply below.

name ...James Dickey.....

I am generally sympathetic to your project, but I do think this kind of research results in the over-analysis of motive that is probably contributing to the general downfall.

James Dickey