

POEMS: READING AT AND READING WITH

The Australian philosopher David Stove wrote: ‘An announcement that a poetry-reading is about to take place will empty a room quicker than a water-cannon.’ Although I have written and published poetry on and off for most of my life, I agree. Until recently I could boast that I had only ever attended one poetry reading. In 1965 in Cambridge Massachusetts a friend took me to a reading by Marianne Moore, a little lady in a black beret who read her poems to a room full of Harvard fans. I found her likeable but my mind wandered as she read. That year I went to the Lamont Poetry Library at Harvard and listened to some of their tape recordings. One was a British Council recording of Martin Seymour-Smith reading from his collection *Tea with Miss Stockport*. I was much taken by his sardonic London voice warning in the title poem:

Poets, beware of laughter at all ladies.
And mankind, you with the future, watch it.

Clearly I didn’t mind the *sound* of a poet reading a poem, but I didn’t like the *performance*. And since Marianne Moore I can honestly say I have never attended a poetry reading.

That is, unless I count, since 2009, poetry readings by me. That year I read from my collection *Almost Two* at its launch in London, and at two readings in Ireland. I’m never nervous if I give lectures or presentations on neuropsychology (my bread-earning profession), but I did find I was nervous reading my own poems. Projecting poems out into a room full of people felt like reading *at* the people. I only had one happy moment, at a reading in Belfast where I read my long poem *Desire in Belfast* to an audience that included family and old friends from roughly my own generation and I suddenly had a sense, glancing out at them, that they were entirely *with* me. And afterwards many of them came and told me how they remembered ‘It was really *like* that.’

That poem is about my relation with my first serious girlfriend. When we were not rolling around in the heather as the poem describes, we sometimes read poems together, out loud. She was German speaking, and read to me Rilke’s poem *Handinneres* about how one person’s hand comes to know another’s hand, and one of Goethe’s Roman Elegies where he says (I translate): ‘Let yourself not regret, beloved, that you gave yourself to me so soon.’ My girlfriend and I were reading poems about what was happening to *us*.

Yet I had hated poetry at school. The teachers reading poems to a bored class in a ‘poetry voice’. In fact having poems read *at* me put me off poems for years – until I found

myself writing them. But I remember one poem from Kindergarten, William Allingham's 'The Fairies', perhaps because we chanted it in unison.

Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a hunting
For fear of little men.
Wee folk, good folk,
Trooping all together...

This year I have read aloud a few poems by Valentin Iremonger and Martin Seymour-Smith at book launches of collections by them in Dublin and London. Each time I found myself moved – more, apart from *Desire in Belfast* on that occasion in Belfast, than ever in reading out my own poems. Why? In Dublin the listeners were old friends and the three daughters of 'Val', and in London they were old friends and the two daughters of Martin. Although mine was the voice reading, I was not reading *at*, I was reading *with*.

At worst, poetry readings are simply commercial. People are invited to, or even pay to attend, a reading by a poet whose books are on sale at a modest discount and which they sign with some pseudo-personal message. The poet reads *at* the audience – which is an audience! Meaning a group of listeners. They are not there to read or answer back. They go away with a sense of having been in contact with a celebrity – having *heard* him or her read.

I must admit that I have never attended a literary festival – no more than I would a poetry reading. But then I attended as few lectures as possible at university. I preferred to do the reading on my own. I am bored when someone lectures or talks *at* me. But I listen intently in a conversation.

So what is so special about reading *with*? Is it simply the sharing? But there are other ways of sharing. I have often given poems to the person to whom they are addressed, and my few poet friends and I sometimes send poems to each other. But this is a sequential sharing. First I send the email, and secondly it is read. A poet friend of mine used to write poems to his wife, and leave them about for her to discover. He was too apprehensive about her reaction even to hand the poem to her. At least I hand my wife poems, but I'm not sure I'd have the nerve to say "Listen to this" and read one. Poems can be complex on many levels at once. Most people who read them do so in solitude. And perhaps shed a quiet tear. When I read Isaac Rosenberg's *Dead Man's Dump* I am moved to tears. I know I could not read it in a poetry reading: I would be too upset. Perhaps the painfulness of the poem is why it does not receive as much attention as other poems of the Great War. It is particularly unbearable as

Rosenberg was killed in just such an ignominious way as his poem describes: his body was never found.

When Robert Graves read some of his own poems in his lectures as Professor of Poetry in Oxford in the early 1960s people commented on how ‘badly’ he read them – meaning that he stood to attention like the old soldier he was and barked them out as if giving orders before a battle. But I think that if he had allowed himself to read his poems with feeling he might have broken down. The poems were, to use one of his favourite phrases, ‘close to the bone.’ Tellingly, when he read poems by others he allowed more feeling into his voice.

In some traditions, poems can be made emotionally safer by being chanted – as if the chanting controls the involuntary tremor of the voice when moved and reading aloud. An example is Sorley MacLean reading his intensely charged love poems in the Gaelic tradition of almost singing them. In 1961 when I was eighteen and staying at a Youth Hostel in Connemara with friends, we hired a motorboat and its skipper to take us across to the port of Kilmurvey on Aran Mór. The Arans were not fashionable then and saw few tourists. We walked on a hot day several miles to the prehistoric fort at Dun Aengus, stopping on the way in a pub. There was a group of men wearing tweed caps and Aran sweaters, some of them with boots but some with moccasin-like ‘nampooties’ and the traditional woollen ‘crios’ belts. They were standing in the middle of the dirt-packed floor in the semi-dark with the sun pouring a shaft in on them from the door, and one of them was half singing, half reciting a long poetic narrative in Irish. The others were slapping him on the back and pouring drink down him when he paused, and shouting out key phrases or cues. Since they all knew the story, this was truly reciting *with* not at.

Singing seems to give permission to emotion while at the same time keeping it under control. Also in the Gaelic tradition is the Irish *sean nós* or ‘old custom’ of singing unaccompanied. (For an example, see and listen online to Padraigín ní h-Uallacháin singing an eighteenth century poem by Art mac Chumaidh: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJaVQyucw-I>).

When a poem is read aloud, a choice presents itself: you either read it naturally and allow yourself to become visibly moved, or you read it in an artificial ‘poetry voice’ or deadpan. Singing puts the poem on another level – as when Schubert set poems by Goethe, or Gerald Finzi set poems by Hardy.

Real poems, as distinct from artsy exercises in verse, are *feeling thought*. They face and convey a truth that can be emotionally dangerous. And most of us who read poems face them in private, on our own, and read them in our inner voice.

Yet poetry is also a public thing. It is often ‘published’. How can we bring its inner voice out into life? How can the poem best be heard?

In the Reader colloquium in London recently, when videos were shown of reader groups in Liverpool reading prose and poems – one by Herrick, one by Frost – the poems were literally heard. Then heard again. And again. Each time read in a different voice, by a different person, and with a period of gentle sharing and reflection between each poem. There was no reading *at*. This was reading *with*. And it worked! None of the poems was neutralised by being read deadpan. Each reader in a sense struggled with the poem – what it was saying, and how it was saying it. Each reader – and each listener – was involved with the poem. The group was a safe place for the poem to be brought out, thought and felt about, and shared.

When I saw the videos, I was moved. Because poetry must have its readers: as Martin Seymour-Smith used to remind me, ‘You don’t write poems *for* readers, but poems are nothing *without* readers.’ I know so many people who write poetry (of sorts) I sometimes wonder if any one reads it.

Reading a poem *with* others is also literally an act of *sympathy*. The word comes from the Greek and means ‘feeling with.’

In September my wife G and I went to Paris to spend a few days with our friend Z from Brazil who was there for a holiday with his new love, D. He had come up with an idea. We would all take the train to Giverny for lunch and spend the afternoon at Monet’s gardens – the ones with those lily ponds. At one point he would go for a quiet walk with D and propose marriage to her. He had even bought the rings. He wanted us to be witnesses to this proposal. And would I please read a poem? ‘But what if she refuses?’ we wrote to Z anxiously before they left Brazil. We arranged with him that if he and D came back from their walk and made no announcement, we would not bat an eyelid. Nevertheless I wrote out for them, on good parchment, a poem of mine called *Dán* which had been read some years ago at the wedding of an Irish niece (which sadly I could not attend) and I was prepared to read it aloud if D accepted. I had some reservations. I don’t like reading *at* people. But G knew the poem: it had had originally been written to her. Then to complicate things, Z and D and G and I spoke together a mixture of Portuguese, English and French – and the poem is about an Irish word: *Dán* which means ‘What is given: a gift, Fate, a poem.’ It begins:

A poem is a gift
From me to you,
From you to me:
This circle makes it true.

The 'circle' in the poem is a wedding ring.

At Giverny on a sunny September day, with the gardens full of tourists, Z managed to take D to a quiet side of the lily pond where they remained for a long time. Eventually they found us again. Phew! They were both wearing the rings Z had bought. G and I had been loitering near a concealed side path and we all walked along it and stopped. I took the poem out of my pocket and read it aloud. We were standing together in a little circle surrounded by flowering bushes. When I had read the poem G added some words and we all hugged each other. That's what I call reading *with*.