

How to Give a Rousing Reading

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Tom BRADLEY

“Seven wealthy towns contend for Homer dead,
Through which the living Homer begged his bread.”

--Thomas Steward

It's official, no doubt about it. We have returned to Homeric times, when writers had to recite, and recite well, or risk being buried in flung tableware and beef bones. Swelling legions of authors exhaust their vitality behind the public podium. And if you've been exposed to the regular plague of such literary burlesques lately, you will understand the need for a bit of judicious advice on how to go about it properly.

R.V. Cassill, editor of the *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, reviewed one of my novels not too long ago. He said that he read the thing in a “state of fascination, admiration, awe, anxiety, and outrage.” The question is how you can elicit and sustain such reactions from mobs of rowdy listeners, and whether you should.

Truman Capote gave the best performance I ever attended. Believe it or not, he was superb. It took place in the Far West, where the men are big and the podia proportional. You could only see the upper half of this little old man's head as he read strictly from his very early stuff, the nice lyrical things about being reared by crazy aunties and grannies in the Deep South.

At the end of every selection, he would stride out from behind the podium, raise his book over his head, and give it one good shake. It was a gesture which even his detractors would have to call mighty, or manly (to use an impermissible word). He waved his work high in the air, as if to say, “Think what you will about me and my life. This is the only thing that matters.”

Everyone in the room was moved, especially the scribblers--the majority of whom had only shown up to be obnoxious during the questions-and-answers part, and to jeer at this “little lap dog of the rich and famous.” We gave Truman Capote a standing ovation that night.

If you love somebody's work, you'll find uncanny enhancements in the most affected delivery, the reediest voice, the plainest face. Capote demonstrated that to the satisfaction of thousands. On the other hand, one wonders how Gerard Manley Hopkins rendered his own

“sprung rhythm,” and whether it would have been possible to sit through a couple hours watching him do it.

In a strictly technical sense, Jorge Luis Borges was the worst I’ve ever seen (besides James Baldwin--but that’s a different story). The great Argentinean was deep in his dotage, and arrived on the arm of this academic type, a self-proclaimed Custodian of the Author’s Immortality Before the Fact. Whenever somebody asked Borges a question about his artistic development, or his childhood, or anything more complicated than “How do you like the weather in these parts?” he said, “I’ll let my esteemed colleague answer that one,” and slipped off into dreamland. And this colleague would simper, “Well, you know, it’s only a theory of mine. I haven’t published it yet, but--” and proceed to psychoanalyze the human being seated on stage next to him as if he was already dead. It was more surreal than anything in a Borges story.

The one we came to see didn’t actually read anything. But at one point his blind old eyes lit up, and he interrupted his colleague, and started talking about the stroll across the tree-lined park that had brought him to us that night. He said it was already reconstituting itself in his memory as more fictional than real. Everybody in the place was a Borges fan, and we all knew exactly what he meant, or thought we did, and that one short utterance gave us everything we had come for.

We supplied the magic from our recollections of his books, which are all that matter now that he’s dead, anyway. Which brings us to the question of recordings.

Dylan Thomas set the eternal unattainable standard for everybody. Basil Rathbone doing Poe is second on the honor roll. Third is Nabokov growling out his own Russian rendering of the jailbait chronicle. My personal list also includes Lenny Bruce before he became a forensic homilist. But, in the current competitive atmosphere, where it is nearly impossible to be heard over the din, the recordings that can teach us the most are Ezra Pound’s. Listen to him go insane and beat his big bass drum like an evil seductress.

I don’t know if every single one of my physical performances ascends to Poundian mania. But I do like to come on as broadly as I can. I’m six foot nine, and weigh more than three hundred pounds. (Can’t help it: basketball family, you know. My father holds a plausible claim to having invented the hook shot when he was a pro in a cage in Chicago, way back in the olden days; my second-cousin Bill Bradley played for the Toledo Twats or whoever, and then went on to become one of the next presidents of our nation; and my Mormon nephew Shawn Bradley is currently the NBA’s premier shot blocker or something. I have no idea what team he plays for, but he’s seven-foot-six, so he gets to be in Bugs Bunny movies. It’s not fair.)

It doesn’t come naturally for big guys like us to assert ourselves overmuch in public. It’s not necessary to do more than simply exist inside such a frame, in order to get more attention than you could ever want on the street. But being on the stage is different. You’ve placed your person at the

service of the characters and situations in your novels, and you must do whatever's required, even if it means scaring hell out of people in the front row.

The question always arises whether you should be scary under all circumstances. Should you perfect a method and adhere to it religiously, or whore yourself out a little bit, and adjust your behavior to suit the circumstances?

Of course, certain audiences and venues don't deserve tailoring to. We all know the type: the fruit of Thatcher and Reagan's dumbing down of the English-speaking world, the kind who find literary novels "difficult" and are quick to admit it, who aren't even aware that they should be ashamed, or at least sheepish and silent, about their own subliteracy, and are even proud of it--once it's called to their attention, that is. To adjust for them would be to recite rock lyrics, which a jazz snob like me will refuse to do. (Admittedly, jazz lyrics are even worse: "We won't say goodbye until the last minute/ I'll hold out my hand, and my heart will be in it.")

Back in my days as an itinerant harpist in America, I'm afraid that I became altogether too adept at tailoring my act to suit the circumstances--whoring myself out, to put it another way. It was always easy to get hired at pretentious restaurants and patrician ski lounges, because I learned to give the managers exactly what they wanted at that all-important first audition.

Suppose, as was often the case with those specializing in European foods, the prospective employer appeared to harbor ambitions toward being "cultured." Say he had an unclipped mustache and a toupeeless bald spot, and every other clause was "as they say" or even "as it were," and the television in his office was always tuned to something Edwardian on the Public Broadcasting System. Well then, it was best to give him the Injured Young Artiste in Dire Need of a Highly Refined Patron. I centered my beetled brow right where the guy would notice it most, and grunted occasionally while scraping out something raucous by Hindemith or Luciano Berio.

On the other hand, say a certain resort manager was a hopeless hormone case, but tried to cover it under grubby cable-knit sweaters and bumptious, ultra-Western speech patterns. The canny harpist will perceive that such a man likes to be on top in life. So it is necessary to play him a teensy-weensy Mozart transcription, and be all breathless from fluttery-buttery nerves. As a musician, I was somehow able to make myself appear small. A precise, almost painterly touch of morbidezza-blush and a falsetto titter hidden behind a flustered wrist can shrink an elephant.

However, once I got a gig through this second, more degrading approach, I usually couldn't help but try to regain a portion of my manly pride by cutting as preposterous a figure as I could while performing, and generally ended with my precious ass canned, anyway. In other words, I was becoming a writer.

Jean Cocteau exhorts us as follows: "Whatever the public blames you for, cultivate it: it is yourself." I once read this in the back of the *New Yorker* or the *Atlantic Monthly* or someplace

east-coasty like that, and ever since have cultivated “myself” to a perverse degree.

Though I gave up the degrading practice of musicking a while ago, my whole upper body still responds involuntarily to the symbols in sheet music. These marks evolved over generations to be ideal facilitators in *prima vista*, the spontaneity of which you should try to approximate every time you read out loud, in your authorial mode.

So, these days, as a novelist, even though I no longer have a machine of birch and brass and catgut nestled between my thighs when I perform in public, I still use my old skills. I read from a manuscript, triple-spaced, with plenty of room between the lines to insert musical expression marks: fermatas, sforzandi, crescendi and diminuendi, and those outsized commas found in wind instrument method books that indicate a breath to be taken.

It’s only good marketing policy to wave the actual product in everyone’s face while you read, so I trim my musical score down, to fit inside my books with no overlap. When I’m done with the recital, just before I dismount the dais and go among my admirers, I palm the loose sheets and stuff them in my pockets, so nobody will think I’m weird.

Many writers are perplexed by the question of whether they should read novel excerpts or short stories, in the “live format.” On at least one occasion, John Irving solved that perplexity by dragging us through what must have been an entire book. He went on for the better part of a night, and lost several fans in the process. I, on the other hand, have never faced this excerpt/short story dilemma, and I’ll tell you why--but it’s a secret, just between you and me: I’ve never written a short story in my life.

All the things I’ve published in magazines are adaptations knocked together from separate parts of larger works, carefully shuffled and adjusted to follow Poe’s formula for the short story (the “singleness of expression,” the “economy of means” making it consumable in a single sitting--just the right length so people’s buttocks don’t get tired, and so on). I recite only these “shorties.” To avoid long expository introductions, which are deadly at any reading, I fob them off as integrated excerpts lifted whole from the novels.

Some of my listeners have been surprised to buy my books and find these tales scattered in pieces over a few hundred pages, stitched together with paragraphs and phrases that don’t even appear in the book. But I don’t think it’s intolerably dishonest of me. Nobody’s ever asked for his money back. Didn’t Picasso or somebody say that art is lies? It’s true even if he did say it.

The point is that we’re engaging in a performance. And without the primeval shape of the completed tale, the rising action, climax and denouement, you miss the opportunity to draw the full dramatic potential from your hour upon the stage. The most you get is puzzled silence and a few anticlimactic throat-clearings from the peanut gallery. “Literary events” are theater, not literature--which has taken place mostly in silence and solitude since literacy became widespread enough to

present a market.

So, once you've arrived at a style of gyrating and vocalizing, and you've got something on paper to present, there remains the small problem of your entrance.

If you can do it without pissing your hosts off too much, it's always best to politely forgo any offers of an introduction. And intros from your own lips are even worse. We've all squirmed through too many interminable preambles--necessary because the works themselves are couched in private language, dealing with private matters which the authors are too coy or lazy or theoretically constricted to elucidate in the body of the work. These intros are never composed or rehearsed, but are supposed to be emphatically spontaneous, and every other syllable is "um." In deliberate reaction to that abuse, the canny author won't say anything at all, but will climb up there and just start reading recital pieces which have been shaped into self-explanatory and -contained wholes. That's with a "W."

Should you show up early and mix, or create a mystique by showing up late? This all depends upon the size and mood of the gathering. If it's small and relaxed enough so there's a plausible chance of schmoozing and glad-handing everyone, you should be there before the doors are unlocked. With a big crowd it's always better to be tardy--not so much for "mystique" as to avoid getting chummy with just one clump of the audience, and being tempted to elicit most of your cheers and guffaws from that quadrant of the room. That always looks like you carted in your own clique, or paid a bunch of ringers to come in from the taverns. (Not a bad idea, come to think of it.)

Speaking of drunken spelunkers, I love hecklers and interlopers of any kind, and never get enough of them. I encourage people to jump up and chatter or giggle or scream right in the middle of everything. It almost never happens, of course. I even love the passive-aggressive types with the marathon "questions" designed to exhibit themselves and their erudition. Many writers pride themselves on their ability to stall out these motor mouths with humiliation techniques. But I'm never mean to them. I give them the Mother Teresa treatment.

Now, my cruel streak is just as broad and deep as the next selfish, conceited author's, and I've occasionally let that streak show. Indiscriminate kindness is by no means my strong suit. But, as it's an abstract quality, virtually alien to me, and something that I have observed mostly from the outside, I'm actually very good at faking indiscriminate kindness. Normal people are much more impressed if you treat these long winded interlocutors gently. Like a good junior-high-level writing teacher, you should hear them out with infinite patience, then rephrase their verbosity succinctly and elegantly, and make it sound as though it might actually make sense. Then answer it to the best of your earnest, sincere ability. And if you can encompass all this with a soft, almost epicene voice (try to sound like that movie star/martial arts expert who appointed himself the Dalai Lama's

bodyguard)--well, among numerous other benefits, it will just about melt any potential sex partners in the audience, if that happens to be a consideration.

At an open reading in a Dublin pub, years ago, someone started reciting along with me, and was doing a better job, so I gave him his head and sat back. Nobody complained, and he got a stand-up ovation. Only after the reading was over did this guy's catamite inform me that he'd been trying to read sarcastically, to "take the piss out" of me.

Earlier that night, just down the lane, there'd been a student production of Yeats' *On Baile's Strand*, a beautiful thing, and I was a bit reluctant to follow it. But everybody including me was drunk, so I had a vague feeling that the night was going to be okay from here on out. I had passed out a few copies of the crypto novel adaptation I wanted to present, and this guy had gotten his hands on one.

I thought he was an echo at first. Like Yeats' blind man, I quavered, "Someone's shakin' the bench!" and got less of a laugh than I would have if this wonderful voice hadn't been competing with me from across the bar. I assume he was a pillar of the local theatrical community. If he wasn't, he should have been.

It was more than twenty years ago, but I still remember that magnificent fruity voice deliberately botching my white-slum Salt Lake City accent. That's when I learned the value of broad affectation and camp melodrama at "literary events" like these.

Vocal quality, it has to be said once and for all, is about eighty two percent of everything--at least for those auditors who haven't quite yet come around to worshipping every syllable that bears your name, regardless of delivery. Drama students are taken through a daily regimen of wrenching weird noises from their throats and noses: squeaks and grunts and hoots and screams--the equivalent of a rousing game of hockey for the vocal cords. You don't need to formalize it all that much, though. It helps to be raising children, who require those sorts of noises several times per hour from at least one parent.

I've been told that my voice is good. Whether that's true or not, it definitely carries far and wide without much effort on my end of things. My theater friends assure me that being gigantic is an advantage. That extra span of lung and trachea acts as a resonator. Also, slipping into a little superfluous *avoirdufois* doesn't hurt: that surplus unction oozes straight to the larynx, enriching and lubing things up. So equipped, I can fill up a big hall with myself with no strain. Like Thomas Waller said, "All you gotta do is give me air and I fill it, one way or another, yes, yes."

But even if you haven't been so blessed, and you're short and scrawny, you should always stand (Capote did). And shove that lectern aside. If it's bolted down, stand in front of it. Or on top of it. And even if you don't have time for daily throat hockey, you must avoid microphones altogether. Certainly never allow yourself to be handed a mike without a stand.

Obviously, none of this advice applies if you're writing domesticated realism in the intimate and soft-pedaled mode, bathed in muted tones, imbued with "transparency of style," with simple declarative syntax, no intimidating polysyllables, all democratic and "pure," manageable by all and sundry, "real-time fictions" offering reassurance and comfort to moral valetudinarians, featuring ordinary characters whom just about anybody can gently condescend to, doing ordinary things, just as you'd do in your daily life if you, too, were a member of the nebbishim--in other words, what *Private Eye* calls "wimminy fiction." In that case you'll need to ask someone to lug a comfy chair onto the stage for you, and equip yourself with a brown ceramic cup of chamomile tea and fuzzy bunny slippers, and a mike with one of those spongy muffling things over its glans.

For everyone else, those reciters born with at least a normal budget of animal vigor, it's advisable to be drunk. But not too, lest you lose sight, literally, of the page. Personally, I've always been able to tune a wine drunk more finely than a spirituous one. Beer's out of the question. Upper-gastrointestinal eructations are the bane of any vocal performer, and frequent visits to the urinal tend to interrupt the flow of your plot line. Wine's the thing, as long as there's some okay cheap American stuff around. If necessary (and if it fits in with the milieu, not too disruptive of the ambience and so forth, and doesn't seriously violate local licensing laws), don't hesitate to tote your own in. A nice screw-top jug of Carlo Rossi red is just about right.

As far as making your literary selections goes, you'll find every detail of every audience's response etched forever in your memory, not just laughter and jeers, but even squeaking chairs and coughs. Whenever you reread the passage, the recollected sounds will accompany every word as it passes under your eye. Keep that in mind, if you decide to publicly present the same stuff more than once: don't be surprised if the Des Moines teenager doesn't materialize in the Pittsburgh front row and yawn on that certain subordinate clause.

The key is to be drawn into the story with all the absolute concentration and intensity and devotion that, in your fondest and most megalomaniacal fantasies, you wish every reader would bring to your work. And to do that, a big part of you has to shut out the rest of the room completely. Hence the judicious application of alcohol. Your own ideal reader would be someone who reads exactly as you do when you come to a new book by an author who you admire virtually without reservation, on a first reading, when you are willing, this time at least, to suspend critical judgment and be swept away into this guy's heaven or hell or purgatory or limbo.

One of the most difficult things that public readers have to do, and to continually remind themselves to do, especially prose writers, is to speak slowly. Selfishly consume what the socialized, diurnal self would consider an inordinate amount of the audience's collective life span. But if you become your own ideal reader, that ceases to pose any difficulty. You naturally relish each sacred phoneme--narcissistic as that sounds. If you're lost in playing the role of your own

ideal reader, delectating as it were someone else's stuff, if you're alone in bed with this wonderful, strange novel, coming at it for the first time (the *prima vista* again), it won't seem narcissistic at all--unless your writing sucks and isn't worthy of that much attention in the first place. But that's a different topic for a different "How-To" article.

When the last word is declaimed and the lights come back on, and when all tomfoolery is set aside along with my mocked-up musical "shorties," I go home where there's no peanut gallery except in my imagination, and I sit down to write what I am increasingly coming to consider closet fiction--as radical as that may sound to the devoted followers of the public reading circuit. Like that little lap dog I mentioned above, I base my self-respect on the paper product, because the mass of bone and soft tissue that gets dragged to the lectern each time will be silenced and invisible soon enough.