

Joseph Hutchison
P.O. Box 266
Indian Hills, Colorado 80454
(303) 697-3344
joe@jhwriter.com

“On Readings and Reading Alone”
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On Readings and Reading Alone

The big lecture room on the University of Colorado’s Boulder campus, though airy, was gloomily lit and packed with people: fresh-faced students, grizzled faculty, a delegation from the Naropa Institute, the usual unaffiliated folks from Denver and environs. All of us were awaiting the arrival of Mark Strand, a fine and extremely influential poet, who was jetting up from Utah to read his work. Strand was late, but that didn’t matter. Outside the open windows, leaves shuddered loose in the windy night and fell with a dry noise like chickens waltzing on sandpaper. The atmosphere was perfect for listening to poems from books with titles like *Darker* and *The Late Hour*.

But once Strand arrived and began to read, it became clear (at least to me) that atmosphere wouldn’t be enough to salvage the evening. His voice was flat and uniformly loud, as if a high school drama teacher’s directive were constantly roaring in his ears: “Project!” In the end, every intriguing emotional wrinkle in Strand’s poems vanished under the sliding iron of his delivery.

Why should I be surprised? I thought while driving home. Such disappointments are common at poetry readings. And the better the poet, the greater the disappointment when the performance is poor. But these truisms, for some reason, made me uncomfortable. So I started thinking about them.

How is it that a writer can fail his own work? After all, isn't the voice in the work the voice of its author? And why does the right answer to the latter questions — namely, “No” — seem like some kind of heresy?

I remember reading my poems before a fairly large, extremely responsive crowd at Poor Richard's Feed & Read in Colorado Springs. Beyond the luxury of being paid (thanks to the efforts of Nan Farady and the Women's Poetry Link), I was getting a chance to perform. Most poets, I think, have within them a frustrated actor who hates the solitude in which poems get written, a languishing ham for whom public readings are the only cure. That part of me was delirious, hearing the scattered ahs as an image struck home, laughter in the right places, occasional applause. . . .

“Well?” I afterwards said to my then wife, who soon after stopped attending such events.

“Well,” she said, “I just don't like it. It isn't you up there.”

As I was jotting down notes for this essay, the latest issue of Coda: Poets & Writers Newsletter serendipitously arrived in my mailbox, bearing a cover story on poetry readings. In it, I read the following statement by a New York poet named Mark Nepo: “Poetry is essentially oral and I like to think that reading aloud is the natural process by which poetry first came about.”

Hell-low, breathed the Basil Rathbone in my left brain. Here was our fallacy! The conception, at least 500 years out of date, of poetry as an oral art is a tacit belief among most American poets today. And the legitimizing appeal to ancient oral traditions is also widespread. There are even “performance poets” who will not allow their work to appear in print and who must enjoy the esteem of those professionally hip college instructors who see no important difference between Shakespeare’s songs and lyrics by Pink Floyd.

Am I a heretic, then? Probably so. But I’d better spell out my heresy, just to make sure.

First of all, I believe that the voice in the work is not the voice of its author. It includes the author’s personal voice, but is composed as well of many others: parents’, friends’, voices overheard on buses, TV news voices . . . and most of all, voices out of the literary tradition. (I insist on the primacy of the latter group of voices, at the risk of being branded a reactionary, because it provides the context in which all poems are finally judged. After the amusing anecdotes delivered at readings are forgotten — after, in short, the coffin is lowered — what matters is how successfully one struggled against the influence of, let’s say, Whitman; how well one alchemized Yeats and Dickinson, Heaney and Walcott, Merwin and Rich; how creatively one misread Pope or Browning or Donne.) Surely this is one reason behind my ex-wife’s post-performance comment: it wasn’t me up there!

Secondly, I believe that each of us adds our own voice to the composite voice in the work, so that the poem each of us hears while reading is the “true” poem. No matter how often I might hear Galway Kinnell recite his great poem “The Bear,” it can never be as true for me as “The Bear” I hear in my head when I read it . . . because the poem Kinnell reads lacks my voice.

The corollary of my second point is that any performance of poetry must fail the work. As the author, I may use my personal voice — which is only one in the chorus that makes up a given poem — or I may invent yet another voice, a “persona” voice, which may amplify or mute certain voices in the poem but can never replace the missing voices of readers. Inevitably, the author’s personal voice will disappoint an audience, but the “persona” voice may commit and even greater sin: it can sometimes convince the audience that they’ve heard the true poem, when in fact they will hear that poem only in solitude, when each reader adds his own voice to the work.

“On any given night,” says Kinnell in the current issue of *Coda*, it’s likely there are more people listening to poetry in the United States than in the rest of the world combined.” This is the kind of statement that sets a statistician’s teeth on edge, but the gist of it is probably accurate. If we replace “listening to poetry” with “reading poetry,” however, the statement rings utterly false. And I find that disturbing.

Apparently, the tacit belief that poetry is “essentially oral” has sanctioned a situation in which more people go to hear poetry performed than read books of poems. In Denver, for example, one can use up every weekend and a weeknight or two attending readings; one cannot, however, find the works of Denver poets in most bookstores. What’s worse, Denver has no real small press community. Individuals here and there produce books, usually their own, but we have nothing equivalent of Copper Canyon Press in Port Townsend, Washington, or San Francisco’s City Lights Books, or The Juniper Press in La Crosse, Wisconsin. With two or three exceptions, the same is true of Colorado at large.

Now I'm not suggesting that we do away with poetry readings. They are valuable tools for getting readers excited enough about books of poems to actually buy them. At their best, readings are an art form in themselves. But I do suggest that we must realize that readings are secondary to the poems on the page, as performing is secondary to writing for the poet. If the literary community in Colorado devoted as much time, money and energy to publishing and buying poetry as it does to mounting and attending readings, writers and readers would be much better served.

“In spite of all I have said against it,” writes poet Louis Simpson in his autobiography, *North of Jamaica*, “reading poems aloud may be useful. When you read to an audience you must come to terms with what you really feel.” If this is so, and I think it is, then the same must be true when we read a poem in solitude. Perhaps making us come to terms with what we really feels is the final purpose of all poems — a purpose not well served when poems are flying by us at public readings.

Take, for example, an example of Mark Strand's work at its best. (If all goes well, it may be you at your best as well.) But first, here are a few helpful hints on reading alone.

Find a place where language can reach you, a place where your inner voice can embrace the poem nakedly (it is a kind of love you're about to make). An openness is required which you may find threatening, and you must be ready to pour your best energies into it. This will be poetry performed as only you can perform it — in private, for no one but yourself. If it helps, take a deep cleansing breath. Then begin:

Black Maps

Not the attendance of stones,
nor the applauding wind,
shall let you know
you have arrived,

nor the sea that celebrates
only departures,
nor the mountains,
nor the dying cities.

Nothing will tell you
where you are.
Each moment is a place
you've never been.

You can walk
believing you cast
a light around you.
But how will you know?

The present is always dark.
It's maps are black,
rising from nothing,
describing,

in their slow ascent
into themselves,
their own voyage,
its emptiness,

the bleak, temperate
necessity of its completion.
As they rise into being
they are like breath.

And if they are studied at all
it is only to find,
too late, what you thought
were concerns of yours

do not exist.
Your house is not marked
on any of them,
nor are your friends,

waiting for you to appear,
nor are your enemies,
listing your faults.
Only you are there,

saying hello
to what you will be,
and the black grass
is holding up the black stars.