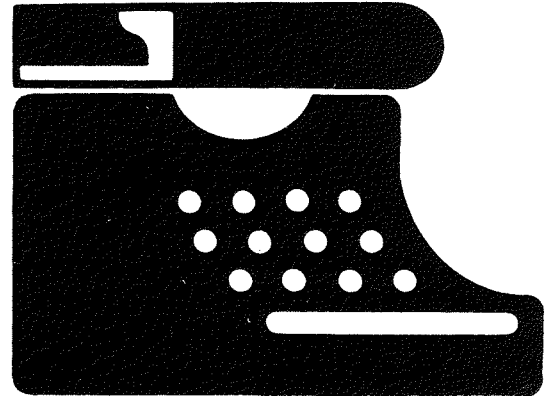


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CREATIVE READING

Other Voices

by Ron Padgett

BY THE AGE OF FIVE OR SIX, MOST OF US know that some reading is done aloud and some silently. We have been read to and we have seen adults and other children silently reading. In school, oral and silent reading are confirmed as the two basic modes.

I remember my elementary school classmates reading aloud, stumbling over hard words and skipping small ones, their voices toneless or constricted, as the rest of us followed the text with our eyes. I remember their reading the words differently than I would have, and how uncomfortable their ineptitude made me feel. This procedure of one student reading aloud as the others follow silently is now considered pedagogically defective: it induces a herky-jerky, regressive pattern in the eye movements, the opposite of what the reading teacher is trying to inculcate. Likewise, choral reading is not so popular as it was; it causes students to read in a lumbering singsong mass whose drone causes the text to lose its meaning. Individual students still read aloud to their classmates, who simply listen and do not follow the text silently with their eyes.

RON PADGETT is the editor of this magazine and the publications director at T&W. His most recent collection of poems is *The Big Something* (The Figures, 1990).

Oral reading has several benefits: it relates the students' speaking vocabulary to their reading vocabulary; it develops their ability to differentiate between the varying tones of text and to project those modulations; and it lends color and body—a physical presence—to the text. Oral reading also makes it possible for students to begin to listen to themselves. These are a few of the many good reasons for reading aloud.

Silent reading is trickier: it isn't always silent. In the first place, some people "move their lips," even going so far as to whisper the words. When I was a child, lip moving was associated with the way old people read; perhaps they read that way because they had never been told not to. My grandfather used to sit in his easy chair, reading the newspaper, unaware that a steady

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stream of subtle hissing was issuing from his lips (in whispering, the *s*'s always carry best). Just as we are forbidden to count on our fingers, we are forbidden to move our lips in reading, because the physical motion limits our speed. We can't *say* words as quickly as we *see* them, and there's the added possibility that we might stumble over words simply because we don't know how to pronounce them. Pure sight readers are often able to read and understand many words they've never said or heard, including words that can't be "sounded out" phonetically.

But silent reading has a more subtle and interesting aspect: when readers keep their lips still, but "hear" in their heads the words on the page. This silent hearing is called "subvocalization."

Reading specialists now urge teachers to discourage both lip moving and subvocalization. (My teachers never mentioned subvocalization.) Like lip moving, subvocalization is frowned upon because it reduces reading speed: you can't hear words as quickly as you can see them.

But, you may ask, what's the hurry? I *like* subvocalization. I enjoy books that have a definite "voice," a voice provided by the author. What this means is that the style is so distinct that we're able to communicate with what seems to be a specific person.

The author does this by writing either in the first person (I) or the third person (he, she, it, they). Some types of books lend themselves readily to either first- or third-person treatment. Autobiographies and travel books call for the first person.¹ These are two of the simplest, most direct uses of the first person. But the first person is not always so cut and dried. In fiction, for instance, the "I" may not be the author; it might also be a character created by the author to tell a story: the *narrator*. Although we usually assume a bond of trust between the author and us, we cannot assume a similar bond between the narrator and us. Sometimes the narrator tells the story in a self-serving way, or simply lies. And what if the narrator turns out to be a lunatic? We cannot blame the author for the mental or moral condition of the narrator, any more than we can blame any other character for such conditions.

Third-person writing is somewhat less thorny. Here the voice may be assumed to be that of the author, with no tricky intermediary.

However, the voice can have great range, from the statistical report to the novel whose author is so engaged in the story that he or she cannot resist interrupting it to comment, praise, or blame.

Although most books are cast in essentially either the first or third person, some have internal variations. Nonfiction in the third person is often interspersed

with quotations in the first person. Some first-person novels might be more aptly called first-*people* novels: different chapters are narrated by different characters. Such novels often use those characters' names as the chapter titles ("Chapter 1: Bill. Chapter 2: Frederika"). In both these variations, though, the reader knows at all times who is speaking.

This does not hold true for certain modern works. In Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* we are hard pressed to say who is speaking. Is it the author? A character? Or characters? The same goes for Eliot's "The Wasteland" and Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets*. In a fit of immodesty, I'll add my own work to this group, a novel called *Antlers in the Treetops*, written in collaboration with Tom Veitch. The voice in *Antlers* shifts every few paragraphs, from author(s), to one character, then another, then to an entirely different author or set of authors, requiring the reader to invent a new voice every few paragraphs.

For, if we become involved with a text, we tend to invent a voice to hear it in. We invent what we assume is an appropriate tone of voice, such as the laconic, manly voice of Hemingway in the Nick Adams stories, the sophisticated, subtly modulated voice of Henry James in *The Golden Bowl*, the robust voice of Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, the angular, deceptively quiet voice of Emily Dickinson in her poems. Sometimes when I read such authors, I "hear" these voices quite clearly. This subvocalization has a bonding effect on me and the words. That it causes me to read slower is anything but a drawback, it is exactly what I want! I love the feeling that the author is speaking to me, as if he or she were in the room with me. This is particularly exciting if the author lived far away and long ago.

Inventing these voices can be rather tricky, of course. If you misinterpret the material, you intensify the error by inventing a voice based on the misinterpretation. Inventing the voices of writers from other cultures can be particularly risky. For some, the temptation, when reading Chinese poetry, might be to "hear" it as if its authors were essentially one big lyrical Charlie Chan; that is, our cultural stereotypes can force widely different works into one mold. In so doing, we take the work one more step away from the original, just as the translation into English did, and the further away we get from the original, the less of its character remains.

Work that has no character in the first place is immune to such misinterpretation. Dry, official, toneless writing is dry, official, and toneless in translation, and it has the same "voice" as that which issues from the mouths of so many public and private officials. Their vocabulary is hazed over with latinisms and riddled with jargon; their verbs are passive; their

diction is wooden; their clothing is uniform; their manner is what passes for adult. These people—men, mostly—speak unnaturally because their speech attempts to imitate formal, written language, and rather poorly, at that. When our education does not succeed in teaching us to think in complex structures, we cannot speak in complex structures either. We cannot utter long, grammatically complex (and correct) sentences; we cannot arrange our thoughts into logical groups; and we cannot order such groups into a cohesive whole. To compensate, these public figures use technical jargon, fashionable “buzz” words, and important-sounding abstractions. Alas, such language precipitates into the culture, like acid rain. Inventing accurate voices for the texts written by such people can hardly be called invention; it is, rather, an exercise in memory. In public the speaker talks like bad writing, begins to think like bad writing, and in private often creates more bad writing. The whole chain of thinking, writing, and reading not only has no originality, but also has no connection with the natural voice. If only some of these people who make speeches and give news conferences would talk to us the way they talk (we assume) at home! If we cannot have a clear public speech of intellectual character, let us at least have a little down-home authenticity.

But we have little of that. So what’s to do with such hopelessly dull material? Well, we can simply not read it.

Or we can try *voice substitution*. It’s an old technique used by comedians, but never, so far as I know applied to reading. All you have to do is substitute a voice different from that of the text. For example, when reading the text of a presidential press secretary, imagine it being delivered by Donald Duck. If the text of a “tobacco industry spokesman” bores you, imagine it in the voice of a professional wrestler. If you are about to be glazed over by the platitudes of a school commencement address, imagine it being delivered in the voice of Marlene Dietrich or Hattie McDaniel.

This is similar to a method used by comic musician Spike Jones. The typical Spike Jones song begins with soothing, romantic material, as in “Cocktails for Two”:

Oh what delight to
Be given the right to
Be carefree and gay once again,
No longer slinking
Respectably drinking
Like civilized ladies and men.
No longer need we miss
A charming scene like this:
In some secluded rendezvous....

Suddenly, a maniacal voice shrieks “Whoopee!,” a police whistle sounds, a gun fires, and the music goes completely wild. The vocalist maintains his suavity, but is constantly undercut with burlesque sound effects (his crooning of “And we’ll enjoy a cigarette” is followed by an emphysemic cough). This undercutting radically transforms the original material. It’s a shame more young people don’t know about Spike Jones; he is a delightful way to learn about broad parody and burlesque.

Jones was the master of his style, but his range was narrow. You might want to try more subtle transformations. In any case, combine whatever voice with whatever material you wish, keeping in mind that the greater the difference in voice and text, the more bizarre (and sometimes comic) the effect.

A similar set of techniques can be applied also to reading good writing. Let’s say you are hooked on the crime novels of Elmore Leonard. Let’s also say you have a favorite uncle who used to run numbers. Why not imagine his voice reading Elmore Leonard to you? That’s what the companies that produce spoken arts records do: they try to match up the voice with the material. They pair off Irish actress Siobhan McKenna and James Joyce’s writing; they hire Jay Silverheels (who played Tonto in the “Lone Ranger” radio programs and movies) to read American Indian poems and tales; they get spooky Vincent Price to read the horror tales of Edgar Allan Poe. You can use anyone’s voice—a famous person’s or a friend’s—as the “voice” of the book.

When, after many attempts, I finally broke the Proust barrier and got so far into *Remembrance of Things Past* that I never wanted to get out, I found that the book provided its own voice for me to hear, the voice of Marcel, the narrator. It was a cultured, sensitive voice. One afternoon a friend came by for a nice, long chat. That night, when I resumed my reading, I heard *his* voice instead of Marcel’s, but, given my friend’s nature, the substitution worked fine. My friend became Marcel for that night. The next day I went back to using the original Marcel voice, refreshed by the respite from it.

The experience of hearing a friend’s voice in my head was more frequent when I was in my early twenties. In those days I would often spend ten or twelve hours with Ted Berrigan, the poet, who was a Rabelaisian conversationalist with a highly distinct way of talking. Each time we parted, his voice continued to reverberate in my head. Everything I read I heard in his voice. Everything I said sounded as if he were saying it. Of course, the remembered voice “decayed” over the next few days and I returned to a more various way of hearing. (Every time I see the word

“various,” though, I hear a little of Frank O’Hara, who used the word “variously” so beautifully in one of his poems, and of Lionel Trilling, who used it frequently in his lectures.) People who are young enough to be impressionable but old enough to do good imitations are prime candidates for learning how to assimilate voices, store them, and use them in their reading. It also helps, of course, to live in a culturally diverse society, although I suppose that anyone with a television set has access to a wide variety of voices.

We should not overlook the possibility of applying *incongruous* voices to good writing. When the poetry of Wallace Stevens starts to sound a bit too solemn, I sometimes “hear” it in the voice of a Southern redneck. T.S. Eliot’s poetry is particularly delightful when heard in an old-time hillbilly accent (“Aprul e-is thuh croolist munth”). I like to imagine how William Carlos Williams’s poems—so American—would sound in an Italian accent. I would like to be able to “hear” an Eskimo cast perform *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a Jamaican read *Paradise Lost*. Such unusual pairings result in what amounts to burlesque, but frequently in the burlesque you see clearly an aspect of the writer’s work that was previously too familiar to be noticed. The forest and the trees are separated.

Our own voices are the most familiar of all. That is to say, when we speak we are so accustomed to hearing ourselves that we don’t notice how we sound, unless the circumstances are unusual (a “frog in the throat,” a tape recording, etc.). Most people, hearing themselves on tape for the first time, ask, “Is *that* me? Do I really sound like that?” The reason the voice on the tape sounds different is that we are receiving the sound waves solely from outside our heads, whereas when we speak, we hear the sound from both inside and outside our heads. The new experience of hearing ourselves only from the outside gives us quite a different view of how we “really” sound. Most of us immediately conclude that we sound horrible, partly because we are distressed to find that we aren’t what we had always thought we were, partly because we become self-conscious when attention is directed—like a camera—on us.

In learning to read better and more creatively, however, attention to self is exactly what is called for. You need to ask yourself:

- Do I subvocalize?
- Do I subvocalize sometimes or always? Does the subvocalized voice flicker in and out?
- Do I subvocalize when it isn’t necessary (as in reading the contents listing on a food can)?
- Do I subvocalize in different voices? If so, how do I arrive at those voices?

• Do I subvocalize in only one voice? What or whose voice is it?

Many people use a combination of the above. They don’t subvocalize single words (like STOP on a street sign) or brief phrases; nor do they subvocalize certain types of material, such as scientific and mathematical data, lists of facts, flat nonfiction, and the like. They do subvocalize some poetry (where the sound can be crucial to the whole experience of the work) and fiction (for instance, they might “hear” English novels in an English accent). But, by and large, the single most common voice used in subvocalization seems to be a ghost version of one’s own speaking voice. This voice is the old reliable of voices, the one that arises naturally when needed, when no other voices suggest themselves. (It is also the one we hear when we think in words.) So in a sense, when we use our own voice for subvocalization, we are not simply reading to ourselves, we are appropriating the text, modeling it to our own tone, reshaping its emotional contours. Without changing the words, we are “rewriting” the text.

This discussion of voice in reading would be incomplete without mention of a relatively recent phenomenon: the availability of the author’s actual voice. In the past thirty years, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of live performances and recordings by authors reading their own work.

In the past, relatively few American authors read their work to large groups in public. Coffeehouse poetry readings were not uncommon in Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side of New York in the 1920s and 1930s, but their audiences were small and localized. Most of the poetry readings in the 1940s and early 1950s were by “distinguished” older poets—mostly men, although Gertrude Stein was an exception—who were invited to read their poetry or perhaps deliver a talk at a university. The big breakthrough occurred when Dylan Thomas toured America. Thomas’s musical and dramatic intonations swept listeners off their feet; you can get some idea of the distinctive power of his voice by listening to any of the recordings still readily available. I remember hearing his recording of “Fern Hill” when I was in high school. I had read the poem before, but I wasn’t prepared for the great lyrical blast of his voice. It sent me back to the printed page, and when I got there and silently read the poem again, I could hear his voice “singing” it to me. To this day I subvocalize Dylan Thomas’s voice when reading his work.

His voice is congruent with his work, as is Wallace Stevens’s, Edna St. Vincent Millay’s, Allen

Ginsberg's, and many others. Other voices come as surprises. I read John Ashbery's early work for several years before hearing him read, and I subvocalized a voice for it, a voice something like John Wayne's. Ashbery's real voice brought me up short. It seemed—partly as a result of my expectations—rather nasal. Later I adjusted to his voice, which blended perfectly with his new work, “perfectly” because in fact I was unable to read it without hearing his actual voice.

Did I understand his work any better, then? Some might argue that my original fantasy (the John Wayne voice) was in fact a more accurate representation of what has been called Ashbery's status as an “executive poet.” Is there always an advantage—or ever an advantage—in being acquainted with the author's speaking voice?

After listening to hundreds of writers read their work, I've come to the conclusion that in some cases it helps, and in some cases it doesn't. Some good writers read their own work poorly, making you wish you had stayed home with your own fantasy of the voice. Some writers who seem good read their work in such a way that you realize, hearing them, that their work isn't that good after all; its faults are revealed by the glare of public presentation. Other writers, whose work sometimes may seem elusive on the page, come through with perfect clarity when they read it aloud. Here I'm thinking particularly of poets Kenneth Koch and Edwin Denby. Koch's gentle irony is perfectly clear and appropriate, as are Denby's shifting tones of everyday speech. When one goes back to their work on the page, it remains forever clarified. When hearing an author read, though, it's important to keep in mind that reading styles change, just as literary styles do. We shouldn't be disconcerted, for example, by the “old-fashioned” voice of “modernist” Ezra Pound.

The great opportunity we as readers have—with so many public readings, tapes, and records now available—is to be able to invite not only an author's work into our minds, but his or her voice as well. We have the opportunity of measuring the author's voice against whatever voice we had created for that author, and from there of pondering the relative qualities of both. From this we move toward a greater understanding of what the work is (or isn't).

To push it a step further, we can combine authors in any number of ways; we can, for instance, imagine T.S. Eliot in the unforgettable voice of Truman Capote, or vice versa.

Here are some other ways to experiment with reading aloud:

1. *Duets*: one person reads silently while another person reads a different text aloud. What effect does this have on the silent reader? How does the selection of material change the effect? Alternative: have both read different texts aloud.

2. *Choral readings*: a large group of people—a classroom-full, for instance—simultaneously read different texts, creating a sort of sound environment. This can be orchestrated, to make it resemble the general hum of conversation in a restaurant, theater, or sports arena; to make it harmonious (as in a round such as “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”); to make it euphonious (perhaps creating an abstraction using a text with similar vowel and/or consonant sounds); to make it chaotic, with everyone reading completely different texts, either whispered or shouted.

Another variation is to have a group read in unison a text that is identical except for, say, its nouns. (Such a text can easily be prepared by having each person do a fill-in-the-blanks.) What effect does such a reading have on the feel of the text? This exercise is not unlike the singing of “Happy Birthday to You,” when everyone is in unison except when it comes to the name of the birthday person, who, it turns out, often is called by several different names. When the group momentarily divides at that point, the song always gets a little shaky.

Another option is to create word scenes. Have the group simultaneously read aloud words that suggest:

- the ocean (*water, waves, whitecaps, splash, glug, crash, shhh, whoosh, etc.*)
- the desert (*sand, palm tree, hot, dry, lizard, thirsty, sun, gasp, etc.*)
- night (*cool, dark, quiet, crickets, moon, stars, sleep, etc.*)
- the woods (*trees, green, wind, leaves, crunch, quiet, buzz, calm, alone, etc.*)

A variation of these word scenes is to combine words and sounds, as in:

- an orchestra, in which the *sounds* of the instruments are supported by a basso continuo of sentences or words *about* music

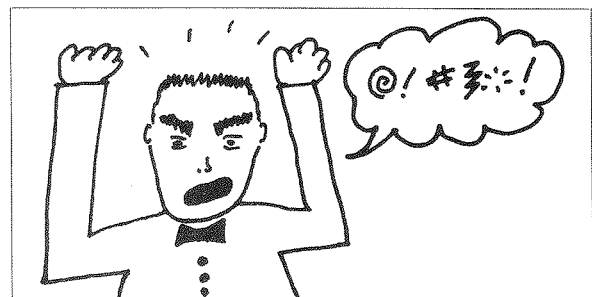


Figure 1

• a barnyard or zoo, in which animal sounds are mixed with words about animals

• a factory, with whistles, chugs, booms, and clicks mixed with words about manufacturing.

These exercises are fun in themselves, but they also set us to thinking about how to read aloud material that might be considered unreadable. How, for instance, would you read aloud what the man is saying in figure 1?

The picture of the cussing man is a clue that makes the typographical symbols (in the speech balloon) into international symbols. Readers in Martinique or the Philippines or Israel would be able to "read" what he is saying.

SEMICOLON; for Philip Whalen

Semicolon ; like the head & forearm of a man swimming, the arm in foreshortened perspective, his head looking away ; his mouth's open in exaggerated O inhaling on the other side, his wrist's bent just about to re-enter the surf ; water dripping from the fingertips ; semicolon

Or a whole row of them

;;;;;;
swimming off to Catalina

Figure 2

How would you read the semicolons in the poem in figure 2? Obviously, the poet has created this poem more for the eye than for the ear, which is partly why it's challenging to try to figure out a good way to read it aloud.

Take a look at the poem in figure 3, by Paul de Vree. At first it looks like a bunch of random letters and parentheses thrown up into the air, but if you look at it for a moment you'll notice that the letters are those of

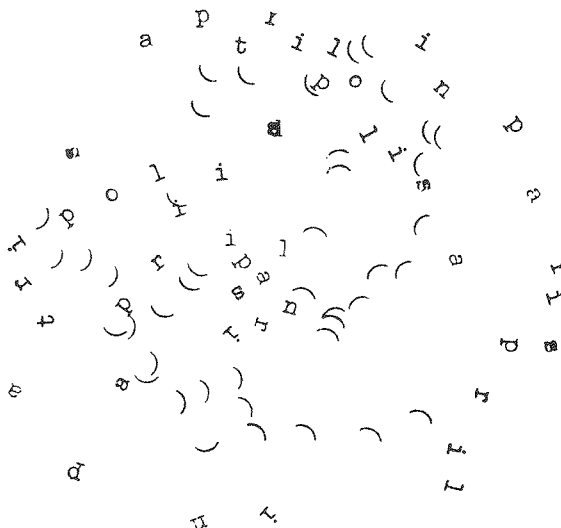


Figure 3

the title of a famous song (with something else thrown in). Now, how would you read it aloud? (I think I'd get a small group of friends to read it with me. I'd have everyone read or sing the words, out of synch, and perhaps with fluttery voices, since the parentheses remind me of birds fluttering around in the airy springtime Paris sky.)

Another exercise is called Megaphone. As you read any text aloud, get louder and louder, then softer and softer, then louder again, then softer again, and so on. The change in volume should have nothing to do with the text's content.

There are several variations on Megaphone, based on pitch. As you read aloud, start with your voice pitched low and have it gradually go up as high as you can; then back down, and so on. Or have a pitch "twist" on each word, so that the voice rises on each word:

I want to go home

or falls on each:

I want to go home

or alternates, one word with a rising twist, the next with a falling:

I want to go home

or with no change at all—a monotone:

I want to go home.

It's easier to read in a monotone if you imagine you're a robot or if you simulate a computer-generated voice. Intentionally reading in a monotone is particularly helpful for children whose oral reading tends to be toneless; the exaggerated monotone makes them realize that there is such a thing as tone and that reading aloud sounds so much better when it has tone, the way ordinary speech does.

Another voice skill valuable for reading is totally silent: listening. Listening is a form of reading, insofar as we "listen" to the words of what we read.

Try the following listening exercise. Close your eyes and open your ears; that is, focus your attention on what you hear. Keep listening until you think you've heard everything there is to hear at the moment, sounds in the far distance and sounds up close (such as that of your own breathing). If there are voices

around you, so much the better. Notice how you immediately became more aware of all these sounds.

Here's another listening exercise. Ask a friend to talk with you while your eyes are closed. Pay close attention to each word your friend says, not just to the gist of it. Notice the tone, volume, and pace, and check to see if the words are in complete sentences or in little fragments. Then have your friend close his or her eyes too and continue the conversation. After a while, do you notice that you feel closer to your friend? We feel closer whenever we really listen to the other person, undistracted by other sounds, including those of our own thoughts. We interlock with our friend's words, and, in that sense, we show respect. We show that we feel that our friend's words are worthy of close attention.

Reading teachers, especially those who follow what is now called the "whole language" approach, are becoming more aware of the importance of listening. Discussing the reading abilities of the deaf and the blind, Jeanne Chall says:

Common sense tells us that the deaf would be the better readers because they can see the print. Yet the blind are the better readers. This happens because reading is closer to hearing than to seeing.³

Good teachers consider listening an active skill that must be practiced and developed, especially in light of the passive hearing most children grow up with, sitting in front of the television, which, after all, is primarily a visual medium, one whose words (and music) are often not worth listening to anyway. But even those who grow up without television need to maintain their listening power, to overcome their natural tendency toward aural numbness. And if you want to read more creatively, the ability to listen carefully and continuously is even more crucial.

Finally, here are two exercises, for one person.

1. Pick any book and alternate reading silently and orally from it, alternating words, phrases, or sentences (the larger the syntactical unit, the easier the exercise).

2. How slowly can you read aloud and still retain the meaning of a sentence: Try reading any text aloud, slower and slower, until you're saying it word by word. After you say a word, keep your eyes on it; don't peek ahead to the next one. When you've really slowed down to, say, one word per ten seconds, notice what your mind does in the silent intervals.

After doing any of the exercises above, you'll find that your normal reading has become smoother, easier and clearer.

New Reading

The twentieth century has changed the way we read, and the change has been relatively abrupt. The proliferation of advertising, the media "explosion," and the influence of modernism in literature have caused us to perceive words in ways foreign to our ancestors. Our fundamental sense of what reading is and of how to do it has changed.

Imagine that you are driving down a highway and you see, over on the right, the word "GAS," *six hundred miles* tall. The letters rest lightly on the ground, from where they sweep up through the clouds, their tops disappearing beyond the stratosphere. You would be astonished, like a hillbilly in the 1930s seeing a billboard for the first time. Until then the only words he might have ever seen—perhaps in the Bible—were tiny.

But you are sophisticated. You have seen faces fifty feet tall, moving and talking, as real as life. You are not like 92-year-old Harold Clough who, at his first movie as a boy in rural Vermont around 1912, saw a train heading toward him and got up and ran for his life. You have seen words written in vapor across the sky, you have seen them dance around and around the tops of buildings, like a revolving halo, you have seen them fly toward you in different colors and explode (on television and in computer games). You've seen them flash on and off, buck like a horse, and spell themselves out in neon script. You've seen them in a hundred different typefaces, big, fat, skinny, curly, leaning, antique, shadowed. Most of us have experienced these new presentations of words so often that we take them for granted.

Less common are the new ways of reading necessitated by modern literature. In 1897, when Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *A Throw of the Dice* was published, the literary page was given a new look: the lines, set in various sizes, were scattered around the page, so that the white space around the words suddenly took on an importance of its own. Christian Morgenstern's poem "Night Song" used symbols instead of alphabetical letters: it didn't need to be translated from the original "German." The shaped poetry of the past—in which a poem has the physical shape of its subject matter—experienced a rejuvenation in the hands of Guillaume Apollinaire (see his poem "It's Raining" in figure 4) and helped spawn what became known as "concrete poetry." The Italian Futurist poets espoused a kind of writing they called *parole in libertà*, or "words set loose" (see figure 5), and words, sometimes truncated or dislocated, appeared in Cubist collages and paintings.

How Did You Learn to Read?

And What Does It Mean?

by Ron Padgett

IF READING IS ONE OF THE MOST VALUABLE things we do, then we should help it develop, deepen, grow more expansive, fluid, comprehensive, and various. To do so, it helps enormously to understand what kinds of readers we are, how our reading patterns and attitudes have been formed, what the history of our reading has been. In short, we need to know how we got to where we are, so we can see where we might go from here.

What follows are some basic ideas, techniques, and questions that will help you get a better idea of your history as a reader. The questions are arranged under the headings of “Before School,” “At School,” and “After School” because for most of us school is the pivotal point in our reading experience.

Before School

Try to remember what experiences you had with written words before you ever went to school.

1. Did your parents or someone else read to you or tell you bedtime stories? Did you like it? What kinds of books did they read to you? Picture books? Did you have favorites? What were they?
2. Were there favorite anecdotes that were often told at family get-togethers?
3. Were there books and magazines in your house? Who read them? Did you see your parents reading?
4. Did you play with alphabet blocks?
5. Did you go to a nursery school, a Head Start center, or a local library where stories were read aloud to you? Who read them? Did you like the stories? The reader?
6. Did you watch the reading segments on educational television shows, such as *Sesame Street*? Did you enjoy them? Did you pay attention and follow the instructions?

7. What other kinds of shows did you watch? Did you watch the commercials? Which do you still remember? Do you remember any of the jingles?

8. Did you listen to stories on the radio? Were they mysteries, cowboy shows, situation comedies, or dramas?

9. Did anyone make an active, conscious effort to teach you to read? Did anyone help you read when you asked for help? If so, who? If you asked what a sign meant, did you get a positive reaction?

10. Were you taken to the library and shown how to check out books?

11. Were you given books as presents or rewards?

12. Were you encouraged to talk? Did your parents listen to you? Did they look at you when you talked to them? In your family, did one speaker often interrupt another?

13. Were you able to read? What kinds of things, and how well?

These questions are hard to answer right off the bat. For most of us, memories of our early years are locked away in distant brain cells. It takes a while to get at them. Here are some specific techniques that might help.

1. Look at photographs taken during your early years. The family album is a palace of windows onto the past—it shows not only how things looked, but how they *felt*. Noticing the set of your uncle’s jaw could remind you of how forbidding he seemed when you were little. Seeing a photograph of your dog can remind you what it felt like to roll around on the grass with him and have him lick your face. If you look at old photographs and sort of let yourself go, sometimes you can “fall” into them for a moment; that is, the feeling in them comes back to you.

2. Make a list, including addresses, of all the places you lived when you were little. Draw a map of the street, the area directly around the house or apartment, and a floor plan of each place. On the floor plan, mark where the doors, windows, and closets were. Include furniture and appliances, especially the television, radio, and telephone. Mark the area where your family usually put the Christmas tree or other holiday decorations. Also mark spots where books and magazines were kept: shelves, cases, tables, and racks. It helps to close your eyes and take a slow mental walk through and around the various rooms. Turn on the lights as you go.

3. Do the same for other houses you visited often, such as Granny's or a neighbor's.

4. Talk to your relatives about your early years. Ask your parents or grandparents if they read to you, bought you books or magazines, or helped you learn to read. Ask them whether or not you were curious about signs in the street and along the road. Ask them what they used to read, and what their favorite radio and television shows were.

At School

For some of us, the jump from home to school is so momentous that we are unable to recall exactly how it happened. First and second grades, when we're learning to read by school methods, are particularly hard to remember. Learning to read is so subtle and gradual that it's as if there were no starting point, as if, for instance, we've always known that "though" and "rough," despite their similar spellings, do not rhyme. The questions below will help you recall a surprising amount about how you were taught to read in school.

1. Who were the teachers who taught you to read? What were their names, and what did they look like? Can you remember any of their voices? What else?

2. Try to remember how they taught you. Did they use the "look-say" (word recognition) method? Did they use the phonics method? Both?

3. Did your teachers read to you? Did you like them? At a certain grade level, did they stop reading to you? Did they ever talk about what *they* read?

4. Was there a classroom library? What was in it? Were there any books by students? Did your teacher show you how to make your own books?

5. Did you enjoy reading in school, or did you read just because it was required?

6. Do you recall having to read aloud in front of the class? How did you feel? Did you do well? Did it make you nervous? Proud?

7. What did the school library—or, as they're sometimes called now, the "media center"—look like? What did it smell like? Was it attractive? Why did you go there? Did you feel comfortable? Welcome? Did you check out books and read them because you wanted to?

8. Think ahead now to junior and senior high. Did your reading habits change? Did you have a summer vacation or a school year in which you suddenly began reading a lot more? What books were they? Why the sudden change? Or did you read less and less?

9. How did your school reading compare with your home reading? Did your friends read? Was there peer pressure on you to read, or *not* to read? Did your social life take a lot of time away from reading?

10. Did you have reading guidance from your parents, a teacher, or a librarian, someone who made a difference?

11. Did you read books that were considered "over your head"? Or did you read books that were intended for a younger reader? Or both?

12. Did you at any point begin to find it harder to read in long stretches? Or easier?

13. Did you read books so that they would take you away from reality and into another world? Or did you read books that would help you with the everyday world?

14. Did you have favorite writers, whose books you devoured? Did you have favorite books that you read over and over?

Here are some ways that might help you answer the questions above.

1. Make a list of the schools you attended. Draw their floor plans, as best you can. Start with the lunch room or auditorium, or any room you used year after year and therefore remember best.

2. Try to locate your school photos, the ones taken every year. If possible, arrange them in chronological order.

3. Try to locate your report cards. These are particularly valuable because they have your grades in reading and the language arts, your attendance figures,

your teacher's names, your parent's signatures, and sometimes what the teachers wanted your parents to know about how you were doing in school. Just holding a report card in your hand and looking at it will give you a feel for those days: the size and shape of the card, the typeface, the teacher's handwriting, all are powerful stimuli, as powerful now as they were then. If you can't find your report cards, ask the Board of Education how you can get your school transcripts.

4. Try to find your school notebooks, papers, art work, and textbooks, the older the better. In these times of increased social mobility and houses without attics, such things tend to get thrown out. You may be surprised by what you find, though, if you scrounge around. Ask your parents and other relatives. (Mothers tend to cherish keepsakes more than fathers.) Maybe your cousins used the same textbooks as you did. Look in the old cardboard boxes sitting up there on the garage joists. To find old textbooks, comb through the used book stores, the thrift shops, and the lawn sales around where you went to school. Also, keep in mind that the same textbooks are sometimes used—and therefore can be found—in disparate parts of the country. (At a library sale in Vermont, I found the first-grade speller we used in Oklahoma 38 years before.) The classified ads in the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* (available at your library) usually include booksellers who will search for old books for you.

5. Visit your old school. Sit in on a class in one of your rooms. Find out if any of your teachers are still there, and if so, talk with them about how they taught reading.

6. Talk to your old classmates about your early schooling. These conversations sometimes start slowly, but they can build momentum and lead to memories that would otherwise remain inaccessible. If you're not in contact with any classmates, find out if your high school reunion committee has a current list of names and addresses; if you grew up in the same town, it's possible that some of your high school classmates also attended elementary school with you.

7. Use hypnosis as a way of "regressing" to your early days. Tell the hypnotist what you want to remember.

After School

By "after school" I mean after you completed your formal education.

1. Did you feel that your education was complete, and so there was no need to read as much? Or was the habit of reading so rewarding and ingrained that you kept on reading at the same rate or at an increased rate?

2. Do you have friends who read, and with whom you talk about books?

3. Do you have bookshelves? Do they have books on them? What kinds of books? What kinds *don't* you have?

4. If you've had children, have you read to them? Did you buy them books?

5. Have you ever belonged to a national or local book club? A reading group?

6. Did you ever study speed reading? Did it make you a more versatile reader? Did it stick? Do you think it was useful?

7. Does reading seem less important, as important, or more important than it used to? How?

8. Do your eyes tire more easily than they used to? Do you use reading glasses?

9. Do you read more than one book at the same time? Do you have a tendency to abandon one book in favor of starting another, only to abandon it in turn, and so on?

10. Are there books you've always wanted to read, or told yourself you *ought* to read, but never have? Make a list of them. (I've never read *War and Peace* or *Don Quixote*.) Do they naturally fall into certain categories? If so, do the categories tell you anything? Why do you think you've never read these books?

11. After a hard day of work, do you find it easier to come home and watch television than to read? Or, like a jogger who needs to run every day, do you get up early so you can read for an hour each morning before you go to work?

12. Do you buy books and keep them? Do you have a particular bookshop you always look forward to? Do you underline certain passages and make marginal notes? Do you set coffee cups and drinking glasses on your books?

13. Do you use the library? Do you use it only as a last resort? Do you go there for a particular book, or to browse around and take out whatever looks appealing? Do you sometimes browse among books whose subject matter doesn't particularly interest you? Do you take care of library books as well as you take care of your own?

14. Do you read books in other languages?
15. Do you ever read aloud to yourself alone?
16. In response to a book, have you ever written to its author or publisher?
17. Have you ever written a book (published or unpublished)? Have you thought about writing one, or started one but never finished it?

These barrages of questions and procedures might seem overwhelming. Take them individually, allowing yourself plenty of time to mull them over. Some of them will come clear only with time. Others, whose answers seem obvious at first, become richer and more complex in light of the answers to other questions. The more you put into thinking about them, the more you get out of them.

The purpose of the questions is to help you establish a chronology of your feelings about reading, based on the facts of your reading history. You might want to make a time-line of your reading history, and add to it whenever you remember something new. To make a time-line, get a long sheet of paper (or tape several sheets together) and turn it sideways. Draw a horizontal line across the middle. At the left, put the date of your birth. At the right, put the present date. Using answers from the questions above (and any others you might think of), fill it in with relevant dates and events in your reading history.

A good sense of yourself as a reader—how you got to where you are as a reader today—will help you understand what kind of reader you can become.

My Childhood

by Maxim Gorky

STRAIGHT AWAY MOTHER MADE ME learn poetry by heart, and this was the start of a long period of mutual torment. The verses of one poem ran:

O road, so big and straight,
 Much space you've taken from God.
 No axe or spade has levelled thee,
 Soft on hoof, and full of dust.

I read 'prostova' instead of 'prostora', 'rubili' instead of 'rovnyali', 'kopyta' instead of 'kopytu'.
 "Think!" pleaded Mother. "That's the genitive case of 'prostoi'—prostava! Idiot! The word's 'prostora'—understand?"

I understood, but still said 'prostrova', amazing even myself.

She angrily called me stupid and obstinate. This distressed me very much and I concentrated all my

efforts on memorizing those wretched lines. In my mind I could recite them without any mistake, but when it came to reading them out loud, I couldn't help mixing them up. I hated these elusive verses and from sheer spite started misquoting them on purpose, producing a whole string of absurdities concocted from similar-sounding words. I was delighted when I managed to deprive those bewitched lines of all meaning.

But this form of amusement had its reward: once, after a successful lesson, when Mother asked if I'd finally learned the poem, I couldn't stop myself saying:

Road, toad, flowed, load...
 Hoofs, roofs...

and so on. Too late I realized what I was doing. Mother suddenly got up and leaned her arms on the table and asked me, "What does it all mean?" enunciating each word quite distinctly.

"I don't know," I answered, horror-struck.

"Oh yes you do!"

"That's how it goes."

"What?"

"A funny poem."

MAXIM GORKY (1868-1936) wrote many novels, plays, and essays. This selection is from his autobiographical *My Childhood* (Penguin, 1966), translated by Ronald Wilks.

“Stand in the corner.”

“Why?”

Quietly, but menacingly, she repeated: “Into the corner!”

“Which one?”

Without answering, she looked at me in such a way that I stood there at my wits’ end trying to fathom what she wanted. There was a small round table in the corner where the icons were kept, with a vase full of heavily scented grasses and flowers standing on it. In the opposite corner stood a chest, covered with a carpet, and another corner was taken up by a bed. There wasn’t a fourth, as the door jamb came straight to the wall.

“I don’t know what you want,” I said, despairing of understanding her.

She sat down in her chair, silently rubbing her forehead and cheeks, after which she asked:

“Did Grandfather make you stand in the corner?”

“When?”

“Any time!” she cried, banging her hand twice on the table.

“No, not that I can remember.”

“You know that it’s a punishment to stand in the corner?”

“No. Why a punishment?”

She sighed.

“Oooh! Come here.”

I went up to her and asked:

“Why do you shout at me?”

“And why do you mix up the poems on purpose?”

I explained as best I could that with my eyes closed I could remember them word for word but that they all came out differently when I tried reciting them.

“You’re not pretending, are you?”

I said no, but was at once struck by the thought: “Am I pretending after all?”

And suddenly, without hurrying, I recited all the poems without a single mistake. This astonished me, and at the same time destroyed me. I felt that my face had suddenly swollen up, and blood ran to my ears, making them heavy. My head was filled with horrible noises, and there I stood before Mother, burning with shame, and through my tears I could see her face sadly darken, her lips tighten, and the eyebrows draw close together.

“How’s that?” she said in a strange voice. “You must have been pretending?”

“Don’t know. I didn’t want to....”

“You’re a very difficult boy,” she said, and looked down at the floor. “Go away.”

She made me apply myself more and more to learning poetry, and my memory took in less and less of those tedious lines, and as a result the irresistible urge to twist the words round, distort them, misquote and introduce

variants of my own, grew stronger and stronger. This was not an easy task: additional words came swarming out of me and swiftly made nonsense of the texts. Often a whole line vanished from my mind, and however much honest effort I made to recapture them, I could never visually recall them again. The following wretched poem by Prince Vyazemski brought me much suffering:

At evening time and early morn
Old men, widows, orphans forlorn
Are out begging for Christian charity.

And the third line:

Beneath windows with bags they go...

I always managed to leave out in its entirety. My indignant mother would tell Grandfather about my performance, but he would reply in a threatening voice:

“He’s too spoilt! He has a memory: knows his prayers better than me. He’s always lying—he’s got a memory like a stone: anything you engrave on it is there forever! He needs a good beating!

Grandmother would also testify:

“He remembers fairy tales and songs. But if he remembers songs, why not poetry: it’s all the same, isn’t it?”

All this was true and I felt very guilty, but as soon as I embarked on a fresh poem, along would come creeping—like cockroaches—words which had no business to be there and which even formed lines of their own:

At our gates
Many old men and orphans
Come and groan and ask for bread,
Then they take it to Petrovna
Sell it to her to feed the cows,
And drink vodka down in the gully.

BOOK



The Call of Stories
by Robert Coles
(Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989)
212 pp., \$8.95 paper.

by Christopher Edgar

THE THEME OF *THE CALL OF STORIES*

—the moral influence of literature on our lives—is a particularly troublesome and daunting one. Does reading George Eliot or Chekhov or Tolstoy or Williams really lead someone to live a better life? Do we (and can we) really absorb the lessons of what we read? *The Call of Stories* is informed throughout by Coles's belief that we can be changed for the better, that literature can serve in some sense as a "moral corrective," but he wisely avoids pat answers and easy explanations. Rather, he shows how literature prompts us to take a hard look around, and how it can provide moral support in our soul-searching. By taking a hard look himself, Coles has assembled a fascinating account of how we read at various points in our lives, and how we struggle to reconcile literature—and by extension our moral views—with modern life.

To his credit, Coles's approach has much in common with the authors he most admires. The book is full of differing perspectives on the problem: those of undergraduates, medical students, stockbrokers, relatives, Dr. Williams, even the physicist Enrico Fermi. Coles generally keeps to the background and allows his characters to speak in uninterrupted monologue, almost as if from the analyst's couch. The chapters are sequenced to mirror the stages of life, from childhood to old age, and this structure enables Coles to examine the conflicts and attitudes particular to each.

CHRISTOPHER EDGAR is the assistant editor of this magazine. At present he is completing a translation of Vladimir Mayakovsky's *For the Voice*.

Coles shows a great deal of respect for the opinions of his undergraduate students. Time and again, they complain bitterly that literature courses do not address moral issues, only literary questions; they would like to discuss how their reading assignments relate to *their* lives. Many students speak of how much they identify with literary characters such as Holden Caulfield, Sydney Carton, or Hardy's Jude, and how they think of these characters as real people, with problems akin to their own. They do not so much resent being taught to be readers knowledgeable in literary conventions, stylistic devices, symbols, and so forth, but they do realize that classroom discussion often tends to skirt moral issues. Coles's students cast a wary eye towards their future: like Holden Caulfield, they see *phoniness* all around them, and seem to believe that they will be making a Faustian bargain with that phoniness after college, and perhaps succumb to it. During office hours, Coles finds himself responding to such criticisms in the way that professors will: he offers no straight answers, only more questions. He is largely in agreement with his students, and at several points expresses the same wish that college professors could be moral as well as literary instructors. The best professors do this, perhaps, in a Socratic way, and more could make the effort, one imagines, but how much can we reasonably ask of them? Even the ablest professors are hard-pressed to teach the intellect and the conscience at the same time. The thrust of *The Call of Stories* is that our moral battles are fought on an individual rather than collective battlefield, and that whatever moral education students will gain in life is essentially learned the hard way, individually.

How do Coles's students, these self-described "millionaires of time," fare when they hit the workplace? Coles gives us a grim but penetrating look at "the regularly ordered plateglass" with which we surround ourselves in adulthood. Former students from Coles's literature courses at Harvard Medical and Business Schools often treat literature as a steam valve, an escape, or a counterweight to the hypocrisy they see around them. A Manhattan tax lawyer, for example, finds a companion in his own version of Sydney Carton, which he admits is an amalgam of Dickens's character and his self-questioning uncle.

Hearing the querying voice of "Carton" helps him keep going. The tax lawyer flees to the library for a few days when he can't take his job anymore. This, he says, is far better than "binging" on drugs and alcohol as his colleagues do. "Binging" comes up repeatedly when Coles's students talk about their parents. In a number of cases we learn of the overworked husband who escapes by drowning his sorrows for a week, and the lonely wife who finds brief solace in shopping sprees. Reading may make the tax lawyer happier and more circumspect, but it does not make him change his life; rather, it allows him to endure it stoically. Interestingly, there remains something of that youthful appreciation of literature still tucked away inside him, yet at the same time he uses literature like aspirin.

As an antidote, Coles holds out the example of William Carlos Williams. The crusty doctor relentlessly questions himself and others, and comes down hard on the stuffiness and hypocrisy of "professionals." Doctors should listen to their patients, he says, and strive to be humble at all times. When Coles accompanies Williams on his housecalls, however, Williams breaks his own rules when he vents his ire at an Italian mother. Afterwards, he berates himself. There is a refreshing honesty in Williams's chiding himself when he finds himself playing the "know-it-all" doctor, just as Coles does when he finds himself playing the role of the parochial academic. The two share a healthy iconoclasm.

Coles does not shy away from the subject of death. He believes that all of us—though particularly doctors—can learn much from the seriously ill and the dying. In a touching scene, Coles describes his mother on her deathbed with her copy of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* marked by a postcard of Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Close to death we are fully open to the serious questions literature offers us, questions we tend to avoid earlier. While Dr. Coles is treating Enrico Fermi, near death in hospital, Fermi is also reading Tolstoy. Fermi asks Coles if he has read *Ivan Ilyich*, to which Coles sheepishly replies that no, he has read "Master and Man," but hasn't quite gotten to *Ivan Ilyich*. Fermi responds graciously, mentions his gratitude to Tolstoy, and says that he and Tolstoy are good friends and will be seeing each other soon. Fermi seems to forgive Coles his preoccupations: young doctors have no time for *those* questions, but if they have some inkling of what the dying go through, then that is enough. The people on their deathbeds Coles describes here, it seems, have far more in common with adolescent and college readers than with middle-aged ones.

In the final chapter of *The Call of Stories*, Coles draws a metaphor from one of Chekhov's masterpieces, the story "Gooseberries." "Behind the door of every contented, happy man there ought to be someone standing with a little hammer," Chekhov writes, "continually reminding him that there are unhappy people, that however happy he may be, life will sooner or later show him its claws.... But there is no man with a hammer." Each one of us has to find his own "little hammer," Coles tells us. But self-examination is not enough; we must somehow find our balance between a healthy skepticism and cynicism. Chekhov was more cynical (and viciously funny) in his *Notebooks* than he allowed himself to be in his stories and plays. In public, he did not let himself be overly cynical; he used irony, not pessimism, as his little hammer, and there is both a great and a small difference between the two. Williams and Coles share Chekhov's ethic, I think.

Does literature really help us find this little hammer, and hence live better lives? Are literature's benefits tangible? Coles's answer, based entirely on his faith in humanism, is yes. Many of us will agree. In the other ear, however, we still hear Doc Williams admonishing: "Sure, if you could get medical students to read certain novels or short stories it might make a difference. But, I'll tell you, don't bet too much of your money on it.... It isn't the 'humanities' or something called 'fiction' (or 'poetry') that will save you medical students or us docs. Books shouldn't be given *that* job." The questions Coles raises, and his earnest and sage discussion of them, do not make *The Call of Stories* an easy read. The book itself is a little hammer, and we should be grateful to Coles for it.

PLUG



The California Poets-in-the-Schools program is sponsoring "Chapters and Verse," the first national conference of poets and writers in the schools, August 16-19, at Dominican College in San Rafael, California. For teachers really interested in teaching imaginative writing, this should prove to be an extraordinary opportunity to take part in panels and workshops and to meet writers who have been working in schools all across the country. The \$250 fee includes the conference, room, and board. (There is a \$175 day-rate.) For a free descriptive brochure or to register by phone, call toll-free (800) 345-2888, Ext. 83.