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The Reading (a theory of fiction)

SHEILA DELANY

IN THIS LARGE room with board floors and folding metal chairs – you know the kind of room, you've been in it often; it's upstairs, usually, up a narrow flight of wooden stairs in an old building in a seedy neighbourhood. Its big and probably dirty windows look down over grey speckled sidewalks and oily black streets onto the shabby little stores below: the used -clothing boutique, the craft collective, the gay bar, the smoked-meat deli. Small benefit concerts are held here for worthy causes, or a bookstore occupies the premises with its socialist and ecological pamphlets, or theatrical events may be performed of an avant-garde nature; sometimes it is a conference on sexuality – you know the kind of room I am talking about, you've entered it often, sometimes to listen, sometimes to speak.

Today, or is it tonight, you are there to speak. In fact, you are already speaking. You are speaking and reading and writing at once, since what you speak is read off from typed sheets that you have written – first written and then typed onto this onionskin corrasable bond paper, precisely the

kind of paper that denies the reader with its unpleasant feel and its light, slippery shield warding off the intrusion of any pen.

This, nonetheless, is the paper on which, uncharacteristically, your story is typed. It is a knobbly, translucent paper of unreassuring texture: insufficiently solid, and its greyish translucency doesn't provide the best contrast for black letters, so that there is a visual insubstantiality to it as well as the unsmooth, uncertain feel of the slim bundle of papers in your hand: your story.

Why this archaic paper that only the most inexperienced students use? Perhaps it is an old story, barely revised, taken straight out of the notebook where it has languished for years, the type growing dimmer than ever. Perhaps the revisions themselves are so old they've faded too, scrawled as they were in blue liquid ink in an awkward and modest hand.

Yet you occupy a position of some authority here. Here you are, in the old wooden-floored room, standing while others sit on folding metal chairs. You occupy the point which is defined as "front" purely by virtue of your presence there. You have been asked beforehand where you would like to stand, and so the attention is turned toward you of these women's bodies and faces.

Men are not excluded from the meeting, far from it, but it seems that most of the audience are female anyhow: there are twenty or thirty of them in their twenties and thirties. Earnest of face, earnestly listening, seriously listening. They laugh where you thought people would laugh – and, surprisingly, at a few unexpected places. Those unexpected places where people laugh aren't comical, but they are perhaps ironical, a little ironical: so deeply ingrained is your irony, so deep in your perceptions that you say it, see it, inherent in most of the things you write about as in most of what you feel around you. So that it may be the disposal of a sentence that evokes a chuckle here or there, some artifice or balance where they had not before noticed artifice or balance, some small practise of rhetoric; and perhaps it is the practise of rhetoric itself which seems faintly ironical or even amusing these days, so that you are free to hope that it is a snicker of recognition and pleasure.

Your story is about an author performing a reading. This startles you at first, but then it strikes you as a pleasing coincidence. The reading within the reading does not occur in circumstances like these – no, but rather in a gallery of modern art with black and white walls, cool and elegant sculptural shapes placed on pedestals. There, in the gallery, the audience (a few well-suited men and women listening composedly) are scattered in pairs or alone. The story being read in the gallery in your story is about a young couple on a bus, on a trip. There is an undercurrent of danger in their enterprise. They are leaving the city to travel to the interior. To Hope? Beyond Hope. Where then? To Whonnock. The bus is the Whonnock express and partway there, along the highway, the driver stops the bus. There is blue sky and golden fields, the driver's blue-grey uniform and cap

– he is a nice young man eager to get there and back to the city – the parked silver bus along the road, the young couple standing by the road next to the bus, other passengers in the bus or stepping tentatively (the old ones) down the stairs, when you who are reciting this story within the story realize that you have to stop, or want to stop, and explain Whonnock.

What is it that you want to explain about Whonnock is not clear, not only because you have never been to that town yourself, but also because you usually believe that what is on the page suffices. Nonetheless there is something about Whonnock that seems to require explanation, a spoken but unwritten gloss to the written and spoken story, the doubly written and doubly spoken story.

So you stop reading and begin to speak. You break into the story, or break out of it. But the audience are not sure what is the status of this new communication – nor, now, of the old one. Some of them want you to take up where you left off and continue to read the story. Others are interested in the explanation and find it a perfectly adequate substitute for the story, or at least a perfectly acceptable and comprehensible invasion of the story. They begin to debate these questions, timidly at first, but now more and more vigorously: ought the explanation to continue, or ought the story to resume? For some of them it is as if there were a quantum of words which is rapidly exhausting itself in the explanation and which will prevent their hearing the rest of the story: they will never know the ending. For others it is as if this quantum of words were their whole desire, whatever the content. Perhaps a vote would be appropriate. But you decide (actually, one of your best friends, who is present at the reading, urges you to do it this way) to cut through the discussion with the decision you have made. This debate is undignified and tedious, you are standing there, or pacing the floor with the sheaf of papers in your hand; you want to be either doing something or going home, and your friend is certainly correct in advising you to make the decision, whatever it may be, to end the discussion. And so you do. You take up the obnoxious sheets of corrasable bond again to finish the story, for there are only two pages left.

But in your pacing and listening you have misplaced the next page, the next-to-last page of the story. You have only the last page of all, which has on it only the last two lines of the story. You are missing a page, and it is the crucial page, the one that presents the climax, the resolution. It is the page on which all these apparently innocent doings are focused in a rapid twist, in an ending which is no denouement but the opposite, a knotting up of the threads, an intense consummation that shows what was at stake all along. That page is missing. Is it on a chair somewhere? mixed up with somebody's notes, or on the projector table? But in fact all you have, beside what you have already read, is the last page with its last two lines.

There is a similar episode in a novel you recently read, but there a fortunate coincidence, some rumoured disaster, intervenes to save the speaker

by clearing the room in a hurry. Not here. That's really it: two lines, the ending to something at the top of a page.