

Robert von Hallberg and the University

“Those who read only the inset verse quotations here may adequately estimate whether this book has anything to say to them.” So writes Robert von Hallberg in the introduction to *Lyric Powers* (2008). “The case I make is no stronger than the poems my claims support,” he continues. “Other critics make compelling arguments for quite different views of the art of poetry. If the poems that support their arguments are superior to the ones that support mine, I concede defeat. Even a clever argument supported by routine art should hold no authority among literary critics. However, if I have the better poems, I probably have the better arguments too.” The poems he cites are by, among others, Ronald Johnson, August Kleinzahler, Langston Hughes, Robert Pinsky, Rae Armantrout, Johnny Mercer, and Paul Celan.

In the context of contemporary academic criticism, these claims are extraordinary, even irresponsible. Von Hallberg blurs the line between taste and argument. He attempts to transcend and renovate academic standards. His tone is moral, yet he ignores the central concern of most humanities departments: social justice. He speaks to scholars and intellectuals, yet undermines their role as arbiters of value. In an age of academic specialization, he reads across languages, periods, genres, camps. His canon is unrecognizable as such. Good poems are good arguments, yet much more. They are forms of affirmation—expressions of orphic desire or civic belonging. They are utopian—charged with a belief in the power of words over the inertia of history. They are sources of pleasure.

Lyric Powers heightens a tension between poetry and the university that, in different guises, informs von Hallberg’s work from his early *Charles Olson: The Scholar’s Art* (1978) and *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980* (1985) to the present. Academic disciplines thrive on doubt, not affirmation. They promote abstraction and generalization, not luminous detail. They value critique, not accommodation. (Paradoxically, the one institution to employ poets is also one with a struc-

tural insensitivity to their art.) The tension dates to Plato's banishment of poets from his ideal city. Today, the academy resolves the tension in more sophisticated ways. Adorno provides an important model: poetry is an index of social relations under capitalism—its forms of affirmation attest to a general attenuation of social life. As poets attempt to escape or assume power, they illuminate its effects. This approach is secular and skeptical, able to match the resources of particular poems to the values of the academy. But it has a price: intricacies of voice and place tend to get lost in the amplification of general truths.

Von Hallberg does not try to resolve this tension between poetry and the university, but engages it. (As the humanities have changed over the last forty years, so too has the nature of this engagement.) His criticism is pragmatic, attentive to poetry as a living art and to its vexed relationship with the institutions that support it. His heroes are Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold, and his examples are Yvor Winters and Donald Davie, both of whom taught at Stanford where he did his PhD. Despite their many differences, these critics all value poetry as the most vital human artifact. (Unlike these critics, von Hallberg is not also a poet.) In *American Poetry and Culture* and *Lytic Powers*, he plays Johnson in an age of camps and partisans. He practices a rigorous catholicism of taste, identifying and defending what he sees as the most important writing of the period. In contrast to two other great academic critics of contemporary poetry, Helen Vendler and Marjorie Perloff, he does not promote a specific tradition. He is less interested in genealogies of poets than how and why particular poems (and even lines of poems) matter. There is something tonic and precarious about his work: a pragmatic criticism that does not always value pragmatic poetry, a criticism that reads poems as the expression of a dynamic, plural culture.

The ten essays in this issue mark von Hallberg's retirement from the University of Chicago. They are all by former staff members of *Chicago Review*, who also completed dissertations under his supervision. The essays all address some aspect of poetry's relation to power. Devin Johnston writes about Robert Duncan and Thom Gunn and their refashioning of the *Odyssey*. Elizabeth Arnold treats the relation between poetry and prose in Basil Bunting's "Chomei at Toyama." Alan Golding examines Louis Zukofsky's "avant-garde textbook," *A Test*

of *Poetry*. Mark Morrisson discusses Ezra Pound's regionalism and Matthias Regan celebrates Edward Dorn's populism (and his antics at the MLA convention in 1981). Robert Huddleston considers Ted Hughes's sense of vocation and its incompatibility with his Cambridge education. Lynn Keller and Andrea Scott show how two very different contemporary poets—Juliana Spahr and Gerhard Falkner—write lyric poetry that expresses individual desire, while remaining critical of public institutions. Peter O'Leary and Keith Tuma illuminate two responses to the hegemony of creative writing programs.

There is a clear tradition in the essays, despite von Hallberg's catholicism: Pound, Zukofsky, Bunting, Duncan, Dorn. This is earnest poetry. The New York School, for example, is absent, and so are the laureates—Pinsky, Robert Hass, Mark Strand (about whom von Hallberg has written extensively). This is a tradition of iconoclasts, who believe in the power of poetry and its relevance to social life. Pound is foundational—all the essays read poets who try to realize or recuperate one aspect of his legacy: to shape powerful institutions, to shape the spirit of the age. This canon and its concerns are one of von Hallberg's legacies as a teacher. Such a canon sustains the faith of poets, and many of these essayists are poets in their own right.

For a critic preoccupied with the incompatibility of poetry and the university, von Hallberg has, for the past thirty-five years, built and sustained a strong community at the University of Chicago. He has chaired the poetry and poetics workshop (formerly the modern poetry workshop), and in the past decade he was instrumental in bringing a range of poets to campus to give readings and seminars: Robert Creeley, Allen Grossman, Susan Stewart, C.D. Wright, Christopher Middleton, Tom Pickard, Michael Palmer, Susan Howe, J.H. Prynne, Lyn Hejinian, Frank Bidart, Nathaniel Mackey, Fanny Howe, and many others. He also ensured the independence that has allowed *Chicago Review* to flourish. This too is part of his pragmatism.

Von Hallberg provides a model for how to balance the demands of poetry and the academy: catholicism in taste, dialogue with practicing poets, support for young critics. This approach helps mitigate the mutual ignorance or distrust with which poets and intellectuals habitually confront one another. We are grateful for this example.