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A Conversaton on the Objective Reading of Poems

Michael Theune, *Illinois Wesleyan University*

Barbara Hamby

Kevin Prufer



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Barbara Hamby, Kevin Prufer,
and Michael Theune

We asked three writers—Barbara Hamby, Kevin Prufer, and Michael Theune—to discuss how personal connection (collegial alliance, acquaintance, friendship) with a poet can affect one’s reading of the poet’s work.

Kevin Prufer: I believe there are a few great contemporary poems, many good ones, and numberless bad ones. I believe there is just as much room for objective judgment in poetry as there is in any art. Good composers exist, and so do bad ones; the stage has seen trained dancers and hopeless wigglers, brilliant opera singers and cloying noodlers. On the other hand, I also believe, against all odds, that most of my poetry-writing friends are writing poetry of lasting value. I would like to say that this is because I’ve made an effort to get to know writers whose work first impressed me. In some cases this is true, but in most it is not. I like my friends because they are friendly. Am I blinded to their faults by my affection for them? Do I merely “get” their work, being able to fit it more neatly into my sense of their poetic oeuvre or their personal history? Do I back away from bad poets, fearing an awkward manuscript is in the offing? Or has my sense of what a contemporary poet is come from my interactions with my friends, and thus, self-fulfillingly, they fit the mold they initially helped to create?

Barbara Hamby: I have a lot of poet friends. I’m thinking that engineers have a lot of engineer friends and electricians have a coterie of friends who could light up a city. It’s a trait of human beings that we love to talk about what we love. I’m married to a poet, David Kirby. We talk about poetry all the time. We show each other our new work. Are all his poems created equal? Some give me chills, some need a few more beats here and there, and some don’t come together for me. It’s the same for him when he’s looking at my work.

David and I just finished editing a special issue of *TriQuarterly*. We called it the Ultra-Talk issue. We sent out about a hundred letters to poets we know well, poets we know to say “hi” to, poets we came across in anthologies and magazines, and poets whose books we love. We were excited about the project, but we were wary, too. What if someone we really admired, or someone we knew, sent us a stinker? It happened. Some of the poets sent brilliant poems, some sent passable poems, and others sent dreck.

If your friend shows you a poem you don’t like, you say, “Wow, that has a lot of energy.” You don’t say, “This divorce is making you one bitter fucking crank.” Because when he forgets about his wife and has a nice new girlfriend, you still want to be friends. If you edit a magazine and a friend sends something you don’t want to publish, you can say that it doesn’t fit into the issue you’re putting together. It’s the truth, in a sense, though not quite the whole truth.

One of the best things that has happened to me lately is being asked to serve as final judge for the New Issues Prize. I picked Jason Bredle’s book. Most of the finalists wrote smart and sensitive poems, but Jason’s poems jumped off the page, stole a car, and were on their way to Mexico before I could finish reading them. I think I speak for all editors when I say that discovering an exciting new voice is one of our biggest thrills.

Michael Theune: What is it that transcends the bonds of interpersonal connection to differentiate the brilliant from the dreck? The answer must be a quality or qualities of poems, independent of the identity of the author. There is a dialectic in conversation about contemporary American poetry: on the one hand, poets (and the attendant relationships—acquaintances, friendships, cliques, schools, etc.), and on the other hand, good or great poems. This dialectic needs to be made explicit for the sake of honesty. But it will be difficult. We live in a time when the poet is privileged over the poem. Perhaps this is how it always has been (or how the kvetchers have always seen it?), but there are powerful forces at work now that reinforce this situation, from the institutional (poets, not poems, get tenure, run departments, hire more poets) to the aesthetic/theoretical (theories exist that explicitly validate poetic failure) to the habitual (saying we like a poet when what we really like are a handful of poems by that poet).

We can begin to offer an alternative to the privileging of the poet by recognizing the significance of those instances when we read something that we suddenly love by someone whom we don’t know or even someone whom we personally despise. These instances suggest there is something not merely subjective and “personal” in poetic quality. But if we want to really change the situation as a whole, we need to actively privilege the poem over the poet.

For this, we would need a definition of a good poem that transcends all current, trendy, oversimplified demarcations of affiliation, including alliances among poets. This would help us focus on particular poems, rather than on books and the careers of their authors. Something drastic must be done, or else we just slide back into the formation of recalcitrant competing “schools” and the promotion of poems that do nothing but adhere to a school’s self-serving criteria.

As much as we befriend poets, we should befriend poems, and we should find ways to be intimately and systematically supportive of that friendship, even when—or precisely when—it is at odds with our friendships with specific poets.

Kevin Prufer: When I say I like Anne Bradstreet, I don’t mean that I like her personally; I’m not preferring her to her poems. I’m merely being inarticulate, expressing a general affinity for her work. Michael, I’m uneasy with the distance you set up between poets and poems. To speak of “Jorie Graham” and thereby to suggest an aesthetic in her work is useful and doesn’t have to mean “privileging the poet over her work.” Jorie Graham the poet (and the person) is in fact part of the context of her poems. While I’m sympathetic to the old New Critical approach—when I consider a poem I think about prosody, interesting turns, ambiguities of language, ambition—I still think that understanding a poem as part of the body of a poet’s work, the “Jorie Graham” that stands behind “Mind,” for instance, is important.

If I pick up an incompetent poem and it’s by Jane Blow, I toss it aside and move on. But if it’s actually a lost poem by Emily Dickinson, it becomes interesting. At that point we’re recognizing the fact that context is an important part of the experience of reading. And, for the record, I’d publish such a poem in *Pleiades*.

But probably, Michael, you’re talking about the fact that a sort of personality cult surrounds many poets and that we (like the culture at large) are frequently blinded by celebrity: we join cliques, we buy into ill-considered aesthetic schools, we have our own Jessica Simpsons and American Idols, and because of this we often fail to discuss poetry when we claim to be doing just that. This is true and pathetic, but I’m not sure we differ from any other community I’ve ever been part of. And I believe that, over time, as all the hipness fades away, most of the bad poetry will go with it. And most of the good will remain.

But there is something we can do as critics and editors to be part of the change you envision. I believe that if every literary magazine in the country divided in half the number of poems it prints and used the newly available pages to print honest, thoughtful book reviews, we’d all be the better for it. We worry about offending friends (or potential friends, or people who can help our careers, or whatever) but this, I think, sucks. It is the job of the book critic to assess what literary quality is, what good poetry is, and to speak honestly to the work without fear of, or empathy for, the poet who stands behind it. Her responsibility is to readers and to poetry