

Robert Schnall

an excerpt from

*The Poet's Eye: Essays on Poetry**

How, in our relativist and antifoundationalist age, do we set standards for the evaluation of poetry? One way is through critical dialogue and consensus, each voice engaging with others and in the process coming to some common conclusions about the function and utility of poetry and the aesthetic value of individual poems. A second way is to use the lyric poem and the poetry essay as vehicles for making political and ethical distinctions, discriminations that bring poetry back into a larger world of common experience. A third way is to draw conclusions on a poem-by-poem basis—to decide, in the words of James Longenbach, what each poem's language requires at every given juncture. This last approach keeps us focused on the text at hand and perhaps closer in touch with the author's intentions in a way that many recent poststructuralist readings do not.

Although the authors of the books under consideration acknowledge that in our current climate we are suspicious of all generalizations, they still pose some fundamental questions about lyric poetry and the poetry essay. Do poetry and criticism speak only to a coterie of literary insiders, or can they appeal to a more general audience? Should the poet and critic embrace relativism, subjectivity, and linguistic indeterminacy, or should they try to salvage some modicum of objective order and meaning? Should we write about authors already in the canon or dedicate our attention to poets traditionally neglected because of gender or ethnic origin? Should contemporary poetry remain personal and inward, or should it assume a public voice and a social conscience?

The responses to these questions are as various as the voices represented in the books at hand; nonetheless, some broad observations are in order. All three books are written by contemporary poets. Two of them deal directly with postmodern issues, and all three are informed by poststructuralist theory—particularly deconstruction,

*An essay-review of

REAL SOFISTIKASHUN: ESSAYS ON POETRY AND CRAFT. By Tony Hoagland. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2006. 216 pp. \$15.00, paper.

THE ART OF ATTENTION: A POET'S EYE. By Donald Revell. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2007. 120 pp. \$12.00, paper.

THE ART OF THE POETIC LINE. By James Longenbach. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2008. 125 pp. \$12.00, paper.

the new historicism, and reader response theory. The collections integrate close reading, detailed poetic genealogies, and elements of memoir, and they consider poets both historical and contemporary. The authors suggest that recent American poets have focused on inward vision and eschewed the public voice, but they also contend that poetry still can and must have a rhetorical function and a social impact. All three writers believe that great poetry transcends what Donald Revell calls “wiles and strategies,” and all share an impulse toward experimentation, the ongoing desire to “make it new.”