

Jeff Gundy

an excerpt from

*Where Do We Discover What We Believe?**

Sighs and moans about American poetry being co-opted by the academy abound these days—one of the more lively being Kay Ryan’s account in *Poetry* magazine of her trip to the 2005 Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference in Vancouver. A veteran of that conference and of the academy myself, I have no desire to claim that poetry flourishes best in the classroom or to celebrate the workshop habit of pounding poems with the tenderizing mallet of minute critique. Still, the five books under review here demonstrate that even though many current poets make a living within the academy, the result has not been some simple, monolithic orthodoxy, either in terms of poetics or of how one might *write* poetics. Although hardly exhausting the possibilities, these books cover a spectrum from relentlessly (but not quite formlessly) casual, “poetic” meditations and explorations to earnest, even tedious, academic texts. Considered in terms of their authors’ aesthetic positions, they rearrange themselves on a different continuum, with Peter Middleton and Ann Lauterbach the most “experimental,” Richard Tillinghast the most “traditional,” and Robert Baker and C. D. Wright somewhere in between.

Only the most careless reader could consider these books homogeneous, but at least four of them have one striking commonality: an interest in what function poetry actually has in the world, and especially in the ways that poetry might substitute for or at least intersect with religion. This question goes back at least to the Romantics—much later, T. E. Hulme famously and somewhat accurately dismissed romanticism as “spilt religion”—but it is fascinating to see its reemergence in our postmodern moment. Poets whose aesthetics are otherwise wildly diverse share the belief, or at least

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COOLING TIME: AN AMERICAN POETRY VIGIL. By C. D. Wright. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2005. 110 pp. \$15.00, paper.

THE NIGHT SKY: WRITINGS ON THE POETICS OF EXPERIENCE. By Ann Lauterbach. New York: Viking Press, 2005. 262 pp. \$29.95.

POETRY AND WHAT IS REAL. By Richard Tillinghast. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. 188 pp. \$49.50. \$17.95, paper.

DISTANT READING: PERFORMANCE, READERSHIP, AND CONSUMPTION IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY. By Peter Middleton. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. 242 pp. \$60.00. \$27.50, paper.

THE EXTRAVAGANT: CROSSINGS OF MODERN POETRY AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY. By Robert Baker. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. 406 pp. \$30.00, paper.

the hope, that poetry might indeed serve as a way of coping with the most troubling human realities and meeting the deepest human needs.