Interview with Andy Stallings

Andy Stallings lives in New Orleans, where he teaches creative writing at Tulane University and raises, with his wife Melissa Dickey, two children, Esme and Curran. He is a co-editor of THERMOS *magazine, and a devoted fan of the Seattle Mariners.*

Tulane Review: *Do you think that teaching poetry has changed your views on poetry or what people need to be exposed to? If so, on what do you think people are missing out?*

Andy Stallings: The specific act of teaching hasn't changed anything I could name about my sense of poetry or poetics. However, in the sense that my thinking in and on the subject of the classroom is (temporally) continuous with the rest of my thinking, teaching is essentially inseparable from life, as I treat it. And life (the fact of living) is a constant source of pressure applied to my sense of poetry and poetics, which two things constitute more than half of what I'm ever thinking about. In which sense, as an unprivileged entity, teaching has certainly contributed to my constantly shifting sense of what is or is not important in poetry. More clearly: what I bring to the classroom as important to the experience of poetry is, without exception, what I consider to be important to the experience of poetry is. My sense is: a poet is a person who has permanently accepted the gambit that they are to be a poet, and who thereby opens him or herself to the continuous possibility of transformation. If that is true, and I take it to be, then the difference between myself and, on one end, John Ashbery, on the other end, someone about to write their first poem in earnest, is a matter of degree, not of kind. Therefore, what interests me about poetry should interest John Ashbery and should interest the beginning student about to write their first poem. Why would it be otherwise? My pedagogical sense, then, and I recognize this as a bit of an elitist or privileging view, is that what people need to be exposed to in poetry is their own interest in it. Another way of saying that is: if there is disinterest, there is no missing out; if there is interest, there is no missing out. I don't consider it my responsibility as a teacher to change this equation, though it is my responsibility to recognize interest where it is latent, and make every attempt to bring it to the active state.

Some specific things of concern to me right now, what might be called

views on poetry or questions about poetry: (1) poetry is the motion of the poet, the poet's transitions and transformations, rather than any protocol, more or less defined, concerning technique, form, or ideology. (2) I'm at present most attracted to open forms, what I'd call generative forms, poems that create the space they will come to occupy, or otherwise, to paraphrase Charles Olsen, function as a transfer of living energy from world, through poet, through poem, to reader, and onwards. Generative as opposed to imposed forms. (3) a poetics of indeterminacy (in which signs—words—or what might in other contexts be taken for symbols are rendered unavailable to coherent symbolic interpretation) is of much greater interest to me than, for instance, any dichotomy of free verse or closed verse, tradition or avant-garde, and particularly than a poetics of symbolism and interpretation (i.e. I take John Ashbery to be of greater importance than T.S. Eliot, to simplify things).

TR: *Do you have any plans to publish a book? If you do, how does building a first manuscript differ from sitting down to write poems? Do you find yourself writing for the manuscript instead of writing for the sake of writing? If you don't, you should, because your poetry is awesome.*

AS: At present I think of the book as a compositional unit, in the way that I used to consider the discrete poem a compositional unit. A new strand in my writing is almost invariably provoked by encounter with a specific poet or group of poets who emerge to me in a new light. The early poems in a strand, then, tend to occur in close response (though not imitation, a practice that has significant use to me in other ways) to, for instance, George Oppen or Guillaume Apollinaire. The first poems, then, have more in common with, as you say, "sitting down to write poems," than the writing that follows. As soon as I get the sense (and at this stage it's entirely interior—I don't show poems to friends or attempt to publish them until I'm fairly certain that they're opening ground for me as a group) that a few poems suggest a direction other than the trash bin, I begin to consider them in relation to one another, and start to imagine the other poems that form a set of contrasts with them —and it's in that imagining of what reverberates, whether through similarity or through contrast, that the book as a composition emerges. The particular shape of the book is part of the imagining—recently, for instance, I've written 3 poems that I take to be a sort of belated response to the Swiss/French poet Blaise Cendrars, and they suggest to me a larger parameter. In this case, my sense of their size is a chapbook as opposed to a full manuscript. If I had to put a page count on it, I'd say 19. Will it wind up that way? It's highly doubtful. But as a compositional tool, it gives me a concrete shape that I can flexibly work towards or away from. I suppose it's worth noting that

the event, the transformation, of whatever this group becomes has already occurred—it is the first few poems, and the subsequent imagining of what it means to have written them. I've found that this past tense, carried forward, doesn't preclude the best poems in the group from coming later, as one might expect. However, the remainder of the compositional process is responsive, a sort of triangulation. A long way around of saying that yes, I write for the manuscript once it presents itself to me—but it is, though dissimilar in scale, essentially no different to me than writing a discrete poem.

As for publication, I don't have much to say that you can't read in other discussions like this one. In light of what I've written in the past several months, I'm grateful to have not published my preceding work. But there's no doubt that I hold the endpoint of an object I can touch and admire pretty near to the front of my mind, whenever I consider the shape of my life. I've always considered it to be a matter of time, if one is truly devoted to poetry, and I still do. But the technical aspects of the process—spending time submitting a manuscript instead of using that half hour to write a new poem, for one thing, is a tradeoff I often find difficult to make. There are many more tradeoffs like this.

TR: *What do you think contemporary poetry gives to today's culture that isn't found in any other field?*

AS: My claims for poetry are perhaps more modest than you might expect from someone who considers it worth the majority of his time and energy. I can't say that I honestly see anything in the experience of poetry, whether contemporary or not, that gives an altogether different experience from, say, watching a baseball game. That is to say that I see poetry, engaged as a practice of reading or of writing, as one among many potential modes one might use to open oneself to transformation—or, at least, to the real. The key is recognition and not, per se, poetry. Nevertheless, poetry seems to serve that function, for me, more than any other thing. Another way of saying this is that meaning comes from everywhere distinctly, not distinctly from one place.

TR: *If there is one poem you wish you had written or one poet with whom you could speak (and who you don't currently know/speak with), what poem would it be or which poet would he or she be?*

AS: I don't know that there's truly one poem that I could answer this question honestly by—but today, anyhow, I sure wouldn't mind having written Apollinaire's "Zone," at least in the Ron Padgett translation. To the other half

of the question, I'll say David Antin. The great thing about poetry, though, is that there's no one who seems inaccessible to me. It was startling to recognize when I first did, but "celebrity" in poetry is a vastly different thing than it is in other fields, so that a person like David Antin, while certainly in particular quite different from me, is as I take it also a person who thinks about poetry, and therefore accessible to me. I talked about this above, in a different sense. And this is true in the posthumous sense as well—I can think of a number of instances reported by poets in which they dreamed encounters with poets they'd had intense reading encounters with. And this, to me, would suffice. Shall I e-mail David Antin, or dream about him? I guess I have my choice.