

Introduction: *University Press Poetry and the Publishing Crisis*

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The next two issues of *ABR* will focus on poetry and fiction titles published by university presses. The relatively recent decision by university presses to establish literature series has been a welcome development. As a result, university presses, along with nonprofit literary presses, play an increasingly vital role in helping maintain a vigorous literary culture in America.

“Independent presses” refers to noncommercial literary presses, especially nonprofit literary presses. “Nonprofit” designates a legal category, usually meaning that the presses have been granted IRS 501©(3) tax status, which denotes a charitable or educational purpose and qualifies the presses to apply for public and private grants in the same way as other arts organizations (e.g., regional theaters, dance companies, symphony orchestras, art museums) do. While not all independent presses are nonprofits, technically for-profit literary presses such as City Lights Books, the New Press, and McPherson & Co. share with nonprofit presses a commitment to literary quality rather than profit.

Over the past decade, independent literary presses, including university presses, have published more books of poetry than all the major commercial presses combined. When it comes to poetry publishing, independent publishers share a demonstrable edge in quality as well as quantity. During the 1990s, nonprofit presses published six of the ten National Book Critics Circle Award-winning poetry books. Three of the winning titles—Mark Rudman’s *Rider* (Wesleyan UP, 1994), Mark Doty’s *My Alexandria* (U of Illinois P, 1993), and Albert Goldbarth’s *Heaven and Earth: A Cosmology* (U of Georgia P, 1991)—were university press books. (A seventh award-winner, William Matthews’s *Time and Money* [1995], was published by Houghton Mifflin, with Norton one of the last two major independents.)

While such facts highlight the contributions of independent presses, they also hint at the fragility of literary culture in America today.

Until only a few years ago, we could count on commercial publishers to put out superb, challenging literary books on a regular basis. There are disturbing signs, however, that this situation has changed. Most of the famous New York publishing houses, which remained independent throughout much of their histories, have in recent years been purchased and consolidated by international entertainment conglomerates. Ted Turner’s Time Warner gobbled up Little, Brown; News Corporation, Rupert Murdoch’s vast media empire, owns HarperCollins; Sumner Redstone’s Viacom procured Simon & Schuster, Scribner, and Pocket Books; Hearst absorbed William Morrow and Avon. Indeed, many legendary American publishing houses are no longer American-owned. The British giant Pearson acquired Viking, Putnam, and Dutton. Faulkner’s publisher, Random House, along with Henry Holt, Doubleday, Dell, and Farrar, Straus & Giroux, belong to the German behemoths Bertelsmann and Holtzbrinck.

While it would be premature to predict that commercial houses will cease to publish books by serious authors, it is fair to say that the number of serious works of literature supported by the conglomerates has declined in recent years and is likely to continue to decline. Not only do these corporate giants compete for the same titles and seek to serve all the same markets, but they’ve also begun to downsize, in the process concentrating on the publication of those books most likely to sell. To cut anticipated losses, commercial houses seldom promote the few unconventional literary books they do publish (David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* was a rare exception). As a result, hardcover copies of these books disappear very quickly from the shelves of most

bookstores—as anyone who attempted to purchase, say, Gass’s *The Tunnel* more than a month after its 1995 publication date discovered. Some of the smaller chain bookstores never bother stocking them at all.

The “shelf-life” of a hardback book, the time it normally remains in a chain bookstore before it’s replaced by a newer book, is usually less than two months. Before the IRS Thor Power-Tool decision in the late 70s, books returned to publishers continued to remain in print because the books could be stored in warehouses and depreciated for tax credit. The Thor decision rescinded that tax credit, forcing publishers to allow slower-selling titles to go out of print very quickly. The resulting corporate decision to reduce emphasis on the publication of financially marginal books led to a general abandonment by most large commercial houses of poetry, literary translations, first novels, and unconventional (i.e. non-realistic) fiction, the kinds of titles that, unlike well-promoted blockbusters, require time to be discovered and that, therefore, need to remain in print, sometimes for years, before publication costs begin to be defrayed.

For reasons such as these, the responsibility for publishing serious literature has shifted from trade publishers to independent literary presses. Nonprofit and other noncommercial independent presses now publish a disproportionate amount of the contemporary poetry, plays, literary translations, and experimental fiction in America today.

Unlike mainstream commercial presses, for whom the bottom line is, well, the bottom line, noncommercial literary presses base their publication decisions on a book’s enduring literary merit rather than its short-term commercial appeal. Because of their tax status, nonprofit publishers are exempt from the Thor provision. As a result, they are not only able to keep their own authors’ books in print, but in some cases have been willing to reprint—and to thereafter keep in print—many out-of-print books originally published by large commercial houses. In this regard, such nonprofit presses as Dalkey Archive Press and Sun and Moon, which fea-

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ture reprints, function as archives for essential works of contemporary literature that would otherwise be unavailable.

Clearly, independent presses play a vital role in maintaining the health and, possibly, the survival of serious contemporary literature. Yet, at a point in history when the importance of such presses has never been greater, support for these presses is declining. The much-publicized savaging of the National Endowment for the Arts by the Republican Congress in the mid-90s remains a major blow to independent publishers, since NEA funds were virtually the only reliable source of external support for most literary presses and journals. Unlike theater, music, and the visual arts, literature has not yet developed a diversified funding base to supplement public funds. Less than two percent of private philanthropic dollars is spent on literature in this country and only two percent of state arts agency money goes to the field.

In addition to the diminished funding scene, other cultural changes that potentially threaten the health of independent publishers and, by extension, contemporary American literature include:

The growth of chain superstores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble, which have driven many independent booksellers out of business. For years, small independent bookstores such as San Francisco’s City Lights, New York City’s now-defunct Shakespeare and Company, Chicago’s Barbara’s Bookstore, and St. Paul’s Ruminator (formerly the Hungry Mind) have been the chief purveyors of noncommercial press books. The superchains don’t sell books so much as shelf space. All of the book displays you see in a Barnes & Noble, including the Discovery Series, are bought and paid for by publishers, at prices that far exceed the budgets of most independent presses. Independent booksellers not

only stock independent and university press fare, but they allow these titles to linger for months on the shelves where browsers can find them, often “handselling,” or recommending, books to their customers (when’s the last time a clerk at B&N brought your attention to an unpublicized but excellent title?). Some of the superstore chains, Borders in particular, have done an adequate job imitating the great independents. But more books are being published today than ever before; unlike independent press books, most of them are market-driven. One must wonder if Borders and Barnes & Noble will continue to reserve valuable shelf space for slow-moving independent press fare when the competition from independent bookstores has been completely driven out.

The cutbacks in institutional funding for university presses. In the past, institutional support freed university presses from the need to recover publishing costs from sales, allowing them to publish books primarily selected for academic or literary merit. In recent years, however, universities have begun to reduce that support—by as much as ten to twelve percent over the past four years alone. In some cases, universities even treat their presses as cash centers, requiring a percentage of all revenue as a kind of “kick-back.” As a result, university presses must now compete against the rest of the literary field for shrinking grant funds; at the same time, many have replaced more traditional publications—not just academic monographs but also literary series—with commercially “viable” books. Even Oxford University Press, one of the more financially secure university presses, recently determined to cut back on poetry in order to increase annual profits at the expense of publications with a more limited “constituency.”

The paucity of attention given to independent press books by mainstream review media such as New York Review of Books and the review sections of major metropolitan newspapers and magazines. The cost of a full-page ad in the *New York Times Book Review* exceeds the annual budget of most independent literary presses. Not surprisingly, most of the books reviewed in *NYTBR* are published by corpora-

tions who regularly purchase advertising space. It is also not surprising that these are the books featured most prominently in book stores, who want to parlay the reviews and the promotion into sales, and the books most likely to be hawked by distribution house sales reps, who work on commission. The potential audience for serious contemporary literature often remains untapped for the simple reason that potential readers never find out about many books they might otherwise read.

For over twenty years, *American Book Review* has featured books published by independent presses. But our circulation is restricted by the same cultural conditions limiting the dissemination of independent literary press books. Because the presses whose books we review have modest (at best!) marketing budgets, *ABR* cannot, like mainstream reviews, cover its publishing costs by charging large advertising rates. Like most of the presses whose books we feature, *ABR* is nonprofit and therefore competes for the same small pool of funding dollars the rest of the field depends upon. Like a support group—or, perhaps, a house of cards—*ABR*, independent bookstores, and the independent presses and the writers those presses publish are mutually dependent.

Clearly, developments over the next few years involving public funding, independent bookstores, and the degree to which noncommercial publishers are able to attract more readers will determine the fate not only of independent literary presses but, quite possibly, contemporary literary culture itself.

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