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Review Of "Being Numerous: Poetry And The Ground Of Social Life" By O. Izenberg

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REVIEWS

Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. 234pp. \$29.95

In *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*, Oren Izenberg relentlessly raises questions about the tasks, strategies, values, and accomplishments of the most difficult modern poetry in relation to deep issues regarding the nature of persons as such. The phrase “ground of social life” focuses on personhood as something given, primitive, immediate, and distributed by nature equally among all human beings, in contrast to personhood understood as something that involves specific identity, public mastery of language, and responsibility for routines of socially intelligible action—personhood as an achievement rather than a given. Traditionally, Izenberg notes, we take the lyric subject or “the artifice of voice in the poem to offer something like a model or a theory of the person.... The poem gives shape to the concept of the person who can think, say, and make *these things*.” This traditional understanding focuses, one might say, on persons in the second sense at the expense of the first—on the mastery of voice rather than its givenness as not-yet-formed potential. Izenberg then undertakes to redress this imbalance and to describe and praise a poetry primarily of personhood as potential. This approach leads him to taxonomize varieties of modern and contemporary poetry—ontological-impersonal versus expressive-personal—in a somewhat different way than the often used oppositions of postromantic/postmodern, symbolist/constructivist, and traditionalist/avant-garde. But Izenberg’s most radical claims go beyond merely redrawing old maps. Izenberg is specifically worried that the traditional understanding of lyric as enactment of exemplary articulated subjectivity is by its very nature complicit in “a set of civilizational crises,” including “decolonization and nation formation, the leveling of consumer culture...genocide and the specter of total annihilation.” The thought here is that any effort to tell *this* story of a sequence of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and verbal articulations of them as exemplary, formed for the sake of sympathy and resonance, inevitably suppresses the independence and distinctiveness of the stories of some others.

Izenberg poses against this traditional picture of lyric a less personally expressive poetry of pure “attentiveness” and of “the greatest possible opening of the self”—to other people and to contingencies that are simply experienced sequentially and registered paratactically. This poetry turns away from emplot-

ment, articulation, and formal construction. It is hostile to art and artfulness, “deliberately hostile...to *any* reading.” This poetry of the non-poem seeks to make something happen, to awaken its readers to the quite different contingencies of their own lives in “being numerous”—that is, in being simply cast into the world along with others, where no common course of thought, feeling, or action can be plotted without attendant repression and horrors. Its slogan is Celan’s idea that “making and falsifying...take place in the same breath.” Away, then, from making (and expressing and forming and singing), and on to paratactic registering, noting, stuttering—and quizzicality.

George Oppen is arguably the central figure of Izenberg’s study. The phrase “being numerous”—being simply with others, in the absence of any common plot—is taken from the title of Oppen’s 1968 long poem, where it also appears at the end of a section that Izenberg dubs “Crusoe’s Silence.” The statement of simple being in the poem’s silence is deeply significant for Izenberg: poems, in Oppen’s words, are “still too fluent.” “I would like the poem to be nothing, to be transparent, to be inaudible, not to be,” he cites from another work of Oppen’s. Izenberg turns away from the poems, then, to Oppen’s daybooks, where he finds an inaudible-disclosive “undersong” that enacts “the determination to listen” in place of expression and assertion.

Izenberg focuses his readings of other poets—Yeats, O’Hara, the Language poets—on the same anti-expressive, paratactic gestures he finds in Oppen’s work. Yeats seeks primarily to form symbols that will draw constructed social life toward a deeper meaningful order, but his work, Izenberg argues, also registers moments of anxiety and hesitation about that traditional lyric project. Yeats’s project arrives at a “final judgment that potentiality [what the lyric symbol would disclose] can remain humanizing only by being withheld from actuality.” In Frank O’Hara, Izenberg sees a producer of the poem as “a mere emanation of a mechanism, making the poet a sort of object himself rather than a subject.” His poems display momentary, unscripted, unprincipled acts of valuing or mere preferences that are then “revealed as refractions of the field that determines him.” Similarly, in the Language Poets, focusing primarily on the Leningrad collective (Michael Davidson, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, and Barrett Watten), Izenberg finds a persistent contradiction between the pursuit of radical freedom and an acceptance of cultural determinism. The resulting work “demands...indifference and inattention” in its characteristic “paratactic structure, low affect, quizzical tone, and theoretical orientation.”

The warrant Izenberg offers for reading canonical poems and poets in an often surprising and idiosyncratic way is based on a broader understanding of intention and its relation to the art object. In a kind of coda as apologia titled “We Are Reading,” Izenberg characterizes his own reading practice as one that “oscillates uncertainly between interpretation and speculation” by

making “the occasional leap from the artifact of the poem . . . to a universalizing intention that the specificity of the poem both indicates and frustrates,” as though—what?—personhood as such or “practices, discourses, institutions” (anything but the particularized subject) as such were both speaking and reading—thus “disclosing the real of personhood.” The implicitly Lacanian term of art in this last formulation—“the real of personhood”—indicates that Izenberg has a radically ontological understanding of personhood as something that in principle eludes discursive characterization and particularized expression. “The real of personhood” names “the mind, given rather than made, approached through the made thing” specifically via attention to what is unintended within the poem (indirection, shift, parataxis—silence).

A project this radical, which eschews the poem as articulated expression, is also likely to display significant weaknesses. It is, finally, more interested in raising questions about the nature and function of twentieth-century lyric poetry than it is successful line-by-line in either its readings or argument. Some claims about particular poems seem forced and opportunistic, or at any rate not fully argued. For example, the project’s central phrase from Oppen—“We have chosen the meaning / Of being numerous”—reads, among other things, as an account of an unfortunate fall from singularity into modern mass life. Yet Izenberg seems simultaneously to accept this reading and also to regard being numerous, or acceptance of it, as somehow redemptive. There is simply not enough detailed scholarship on the full text of the poem to carry this complex reading; Izenberg instead invokes comparisons with Marx and Wittgenstein in an ad hoc way. Similarly, Izenberg reads O’Hara’s marked casualness of diction and flittings of attention as evasions of both personal subjectivity and form, but he fails to distinguish significantly among different texts of O’Hara’s, some of which O’Hara may have specifically chosen to publish (rather than leaving them in notebooks) precisely because the casual diction and flow of attention to a subject matter in this particular text are, after all, distinctively and exemplarily his. In general, and however much they are both enacting an ungraspable Lacanian “real” personhood and unreflectively channeling cultural memes and phrases in circulation, it seems hard to credit that poets are not also distinctively attending to their formulations, crafting and revising them to serve aesthetic and expressive ends. Did Yeats in the end abandon this project? Did the Language Poets? (Izenberg acknowledges fully in a long, generous footnote that Ron Silliman rejects his characterizations of the compositional activities and aims of the Leningrad collective).

More broadly, we should reject the central dichotomy that structures Izenberg’s argument—a bare, ontological, anti-aesthetic, anti-expressive poetry versus the lyrical, aesthetic, expressive, individual poem. Major poets from at least Donne to the present have continuously pursued dramatic closure and

eschewed doctrinal closure. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith argued in her 1968 study *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*, twentieth-century poets increasingly experiment in “open closure,” allowing into their poetry a kind of parataxis that resists summary couplets and gestures toward the mysteries of a world that goes beyond their understanding, but also achieves and expresses a sense that “I have lived, felt, thought, and so on *thus*, anyway.”

No doubt the construction of a poem is entangled with the construction of a culture and of possible selves, and no doubt these enterprises are all fraught with dangers and haunted by failures. It is a frightening thought—frightening for poetry, for philosophy, and for human subjects seeking to come into active possession and enactment of their human powers—that these constructive efforts are all but inevitably complicit in violence, and it is a thought that is supported by massive inductive evidence from human history. But is that any reason, finally, to abandon attempts at fruitful and more just construction of exemplary social individuality? The ground of personhood (ontic voice, power, inspiration) and its singular expressions (particular poems, phrases, images, and cadences) are always already complexly entangled with each other and never fully able to be isolated, in ways that major poets have always known.

Richard Eldridge

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Lisa Robertson, *Nilling*. Toronto: Bookthug, 2012. 96pp. \$18

We often use the problem of the “prose poem” as a way to critically define its parts: what is particularly poetic, if the piece is in prose? In *Nilling*, Lisa Robertson challenges us with a series of “prose essays.” Aren’t essays always in prose? Are these essays *on* prose? Is this tautology or paradox? The six prose essays in this volume center on what happens when we consent to leave ourselves behind, and resist such binaries.

For Robertson, reading is the major site for such resistance. It requires active participation and concentration—willing—, but also receptivity and passivity, for the will to resist its own autonomy—nilling. The space opened by nilling allows for “indeterminacy” of thought and liberation from the self: skipping around, allowing thought balloons between bursts of attention to the text, letting ideas snowball—these all afford liberty and creativity in thought, unconstrained by identity or societal markers, but structured at least by the shape of the text:

With minimal gestures, the time of my sensing is repeatedly annexed,
confounded by the codex, which now lends its folds to thought. What reader

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