Everybody's Antipoetry

Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life
by Oren Izenberg
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Jasper Bernes

As anyone who has spent any time among them can attest, contemporary poets and critics of poetry often display a real enthusiasm for the act of dividing the world of poetry in half and taking up residence on one side or the other. One aligns, almost as a matter of course, with either "mainstream" or "experimental" poetry, "tradition" or the "avant-garde," "official verse culture" or the grimy froth of the margins. But curiously, such sidetaking seems to have increased in stridency even as the formations themselves have become more and more confused, either because the margins have been subsumed by the center, or because the barbarian hordes have, at last, stormed Rome and installed themselves as its new rulers. By the late 1990s, the partisans of experiment and the avant-garde had taken up key positions within the academy and other traditionally powerful institutions, at the same time as a new discourse of "hybridity" or the "middle path" proposed to facilitate the marriage of center and extremity. (See, for instance, the debates around the creation of *Fence* magazine—a magazine and book publisher which took as its domain not one camp or the other, but the "fence" between them.) It is therefore a bit disingenuous—or perhaps just erroneous—for Oren Izenberg to frame his provocative and insightful new book, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*, as a response to "a neatly unanimous literary-historical consensus" about these divisions (1). In my own memory, every time such a distinction was broached a chorus of voices would arise to controvert, complicate, or harry it, and nothing aroused more antagonism than, for instance, Ron Silliman's perpetual sorting of poets into such categories on his popular blog. I mention this to suggest that, in a sense, the distinction in question here has, as a secret object, the contemporary moment. These categories, that is, not only constitute a set of truth-claims about modernism or postwar poetry. Just as importantly, they enable contemporary practitioners to sharpen their sense of self by making an example of the past, and projecting their own values backwards.

Rather than attempting to overcome this division, Izenberg proposes a new distinction—based on "ontological commitments" and "intentionality" (10) and less marred, in his opinion, by a superficial "impressionism" (31)—through which we might survey the twentieth century. In one corner, we have the poetry of "aesthetic splendor," poetry in which, as critics like Susan Stewart have made quite clear, the relation between *person* and *poem* is mediated by sensuous particulars embodied in "that class of objects we call poems" (17). In the other corner, we have a styleless and departicularized "non-poetry" that aims not to create objects of aesthetic experience but to confer value—sometimes through the medium of poetry—on "persons" in the abstract.

Being Numerous seeks to develop a theoretical account of the latter poetry. Izenberg describes this type as a "non-poetry" (11), since its need to distinguish an abstract yet substantial personhood subtending all persons requires it to forgo the particularizing pleasure of aesthesis, to resist "formal mastery" (16) or even, in its most extreme formulations, to imagine a "poetry without poems." For this reason, he argues, poets such as Yeats, Oppen, O'Hara and the many writers associated with Language poetry find themselves, despite their prodigious gifts, "subverting or destroying the very medium that bears them" (4).

This is an original and provocative explanation of the "difficulty" of much twentieth-century poetry, its destructive attitude and its refusal of conventional forms of rationality or meaning, representation or aesthetic pleasure. But Izenberg wants his categories to function not just as speculative reorientations but as literary-historical markers, and in this he is less than convincing. He gives us no hints as to what a new literary history motivated by his categories might look like, how it might cut through or clarify existing groupings, schools, alliances, friendships, and antagonisms, or their relationship to intellectual, social, political, and economic developments. Though he claims at several points that the categories might unsettle established views about who belongs where, almost all of the poets whose work he treats as "non-poetry" hail firmly from the experimentalist camp. (Yeats is an exception, but given that he stands at the headwaters of modernism, most critics would find no compulsion to place him on one side or the other.) Taking the case of Oppen or O'Hara—two of the poets featured in *Being Numerous*—would "personhood" refine our understanding of either "Objectivism" or the "New York School"? Izenberg does not say, although he does evince skepticism about these categories.

to reinforce the skeptical position, Wittgenstein (and Kripke following him) suggests that our error lies in conceiving of language as a vehicle that transmits understanding from one mind to another rather than a mesh of practices in which our behaviors agree or disagree, regardless of the images or understanding in our minds. "To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life" (7) as Wittgenstein writes famously. Or, as Oppen puts it, "My language which proves I am not alone" (87). The very fact that Crusoe writes at all proves that he is not alone. It also proves that he *is* alone, as all of us are. Oppen: "*we are others, we are members of others, and therefore alone*" (Oppen 64).

We can see immediately that Marx and Wittgenstein agree, in this instance, that language is primarily a social fact, one that precedes the individual. But Izenberg constructs an opposition between them in order to argue, via Wittgenstein, that "Oppen's understanding of the truth of poetry is precisely at odds with any account of virtue that depends on the social determinations of a 'form of life'" (106). In line with this reading of Wittgenstein, Izenberg has Oppen proposing a solution to something unresolved in the Wittgensteinian line of argument—something that Wittgenstein and Kripke had, in fact, demonstrated to be both impossible and unnecessary. Izenberg writes that Kripke "*does not explain why we should think of [Crusoe] as following a rule.* How we might come to recognize rule-following as such . . . is not at all clear" (94). For Wittgenstein and Kripke, however, the point is that what we think—the image in our minds—has very little to do with it. As Wittgenstein writes, "'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule" (690). But Izenberg needs the rule to be ontologically real (rather than pragmatically real) because he wants to move away from a constructivist reading of language use—which would suggest that language communities develop in historical and social terms—to what we might term an "immanentist" view, one that accords with his ethical universalism: the shared understanding between one person and another, between us and Crusoe, depends only on a prelinguistic and prereflective "silent extension of credit" (95) not on any particular, contingent set of meanings. Our shared life is already *there*. It does not need to be made or constructed.

In other words (Oppen's words, in fact): "they are there," prior to recognition (99). Being human does not depend upon any quality or relation, but on an ontological given. This turn toward ontological foundations is the very core of the book, and its innovative reading of Language poetry—a reading to which the entirety of the book builds—revolves

around this move. But before we get to that crucial chapter, I want to note that the immanentist position seems to owe a great deal to an unacknowledged figure, Martin Heidegger, whose aesthetics and philosophy are quite close to the positions developed in *Being Numerous*. One quickly recognizes that the notion of "personhood" proposed here—a personhood distinguished from any particular set of predicates or identity—is very much Heidegger's *Being*, which we will remember must be distinguished from particular beings (something that previous metaphysics with its analytic, differentiating form of thought, could not do). This is very much analogous to the argument that Izenberg uses against not only the poetry of "aesthetic splendor" (7), but the criticism which attempts to distinguish it. Unlike aesthetic thought, the (Heideggerian) poetics of personhood finds that "the insistence upon difference (between poets, between verse genres, indeed between one person and another) is the very problem in need of a solution" (34). If one then remembers that, in Heidegger, aesthetics and aesthesis is also the problem rather than solution—reducing art to an "enframed" object—the closeness of the two arguments appears unmistakable. Like Heidegger's Hölderlin, Izenberg's Oppen provides a form of authentic language which discloses the originary source of the common being beneath the merely numerous and fractious world of appearances.

Izenberg's pursuit of this common being leads him to locate, in Language poetry, not just the poets' obvious interest in collaborative practice—as in the book *Leningrad*, which forms the primary focus of his chapter—but a kind of collective style, involving thousands upon thousands of largely homogeneous poems marked by "paratactic structure, low affect, quizzical tone, and theoretical orientation" (141). This is the first misstep in the chapter, since such a characterization is inapt for writers who are unarguably part of Language poetry (Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman, Leslie Scalapino, Bob Perelman), not to mention outliers and fellow travelers who form important points of reference within the experimentalist galaxy (figures like Stephen Rodefer, Clark Coolidge, Bernadette Mayer, and Hannah Weiner). It does not even hold up against his own quoted examples, in particular a highly hypotactic passage from one of Lyn Hejinian's contributions to *Leningrad*. Izenberg hangs a great deal on this conception of a common style, which he suggests obliterates the differences between individual poets and poems both, and therefore, in its refusal of particularity, reveals the innate grammatical structures

If Izenberg is skeptical about the limits of current literary historicism, particularly its "elaboration of ever-more-finely differentiated micro-histories of literary genres and functions" (31-32), neither does he practice the other kind of historicization—the kind we might associate with someone like Fredric Jameson—in which the individual literary artifact is placed in the broad stream of global history in order to adjudge the dynamics of the latter by the small disturbances the former creates. He does give a few indications of how this latter type of history might take shape, saying at various points that the poetics of personhood and non-poetry responds to "crises of human value" (3) with "a civilizational wish to reground the concept and the *value* of the person" (1). The "pre-political and ontological commitments" (4) that Izenberg locates, even though they might veer off in directions both progressive and fascist, disclose the possibility of "a new humanism." Izenberg's poets bear witness to a century of dehumanization against which they "attempt to make the person appear anew as a value-bearing fact" (35). This aspect of Izenberg's argument is less than satisfying: not once does he reckon with the many critics of universalist humanism, from Marx through Lukács and Adorno and Horkheimer to Derrida and Spivak. Although in a few places he suggests that his universalism should be distinguished from other post-Enlightenment universalisms, he never says how.

But even if he is wrong about the implications of his categories, the categories themselves are largely persuasive, as long as one is permitted to make some important qualifications and provide some missing criticality about their philosophical bases. George Oppen, the subject of the second chapter, *does* seem motivated by a profound ambivalence toward (or dissatisfaction with) the fact of poetry, one that is bound up at every turn with a temptation toward philosophical skepticism and even solipsism. Izenberg, therefore, interprets Oppen's twenty-five-year silence as an essential part of his poetic project: "a poetic solution to the problem of threatened sociability" (81). But unlike other critics who see the silence as a quest for a solution in *poetry*, Izenberg suggests that the silence was itself the solution *to poetry*, an attempt to deny the power of language—to treat "words" as "enemies," as Oppen writes, and to move beyond them toward common humanity. Oppen's return to poetry is not a return from silence but a return *with* silence—hence the gravity and hesitance of the late poems, where each word is eaten away by resonant silences. For Izenberg, Oppen's silence (which never ended) was a recognition "that such

knowledge as poems need . . . must reside in a distinction not realized in things that can take on formal differences; not realized in other words, in words" (84).

The exact form of such a distinction—really more like an acknowledgment, since it is predicated on non-distinction—gets elaborated in a very complex argument about the figure of Robinson Crusoe in Oppen's "Of Being Numerous," in Marx, and in Saul Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein's "private language" argument. Since this argument gets to the very heart of the philosophical positions in Izenberg's book, it is worth tracking. Both the poem and the figure of Crusoe concern the precise relation of the individual to the collective—the "shipwreck / Of the singular" and the "meaning / Of being numerous." Izenberg's chapter worries the question of how we can say that Crusoe was "rescued." (The word is in quotes in the poem.) How do we understand the restoration of Crusoe to the social totality? Does it even make sense to think of him as having left it in the first place? For Marx, the novel *Robinson Crusoe* and its many later recapitulations (Robinsonades) are a kind of origin myth for the bourgeoisie, a way in which contemporary class society projects its own contingent social relations onto the past, eternizing them. The "individual and isolated hunter and fisherman," whose industriousness forms an explanation for the emergence of current society in Ricardo and Smith is, in fact, determined by present society, just as the free individual of bourgeois society upon which this mythic fisherman is based could not exist outside of a particular social matrix (Marx 83-84). For Marx, then, Crusoe underscores the fact that social relations precede the individual.

While Izenberg acknowledges that this Marxian Crusoe provides a crucial intertext for Oppen, he contrasts it with what he imagines as Oppen's response to a certain problematic in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. Throughout his later work, Wittgenstein attempts to evacuate the skeptical position—which he nevertheless imbues with poetry and pathos—by demonstrating its self-contradictory nature. In the so-called "private language" argument, he shows that attempts to verify that language implies shared meaning or common understanding are fundamentally impossible, since any observed behavior might result from obedience to an infinite number of internal "rules" (Wittgenstein 75-81). Even if, as Kripke demonstrates in his elucidation of the argument, I produce the correct response to the operation 2 + 2, there is no way to demonstrate that, internally, I followed the operation of addition rather than some other operation (Kripke 7-13). While this might seem

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common to all of us (and, presumably, hardwired into out brains). In other words, his account of Language poetry, and his claims for its paramount importance (which are, I believe, quite sincere, however backhanded they might seem) rest on the ability of the collective style to "make it possible to separate the universal grammar from the merely idiosyncratic habits of a single person" (155).

It is a fascinating argument. One almost wishes it were true. But as I have indicated earlier, Izenberg's attempt to come up with a description that identifies the mass of Language poetry and its near relatives fails from the start. One might look at the examples he gives, which include writers as far from Language poetry (however defined) as Marjorie Welish and Jennifer Moxley (158). One of his key claims is that Language poetry's experimentation operates primarily in syntactic terms, along what Roman Jakobson calls the "axis of combination." But many of the examples he offers fail to conform in precisely this way, many of them violate not grammatical but semantic rules, and many violate neither rules of syntax nor semantics but rules—as Silliman indicates in "The New Sentence"—for coherent combination of sentences into paragraphs. Izenberg's claim for the fundamental sameness of these seems to depend upon his inability or unwillingness to recognize difference.

He is, however, absolutely correct that the object and ground of much Language poetry is sociality itself. Oftentimes, this takes the form of poets attributing to grammar and syntax a modeling function, where the relationship between parts of speech, sentences, or phrasal units models the relationships between individuals or between the individual and the collectivity. And he is also right that Language poets are concerned with developing a notion of a collective subject in opposition to a simplistic conception of the individual lyric voice. But he does not demonstrate why we should disregard their repeated insistence that their project is a constructivist one inassimilable to Chomskyan nativism. Even if they are wrong to think of language as the neutral, plastic ground of social determination, whose manipulation can yield up any number of contingent social forms (rather than containing a kind of inherent ontological deep grammar that remains inviolable), one could always respond that this criticism errs by thinking that literature traffics in truth-claims about the world. Rather, it seems entirely valid to suggest that literature is capable of acting *as if* it inhabited a universe with laws other than those that are in effect here and now, whatever the deep structure of the grammar in which such acting-as-if takes place.[1]

Intriguingly, a better object for Izenberg's argument would be contemporary "conceptual poetry," which builds on certain elements of Language poetry, and which Marjorie Perloff recently anointed as the twenty-first-century avant-garde to watch, passing to conceptual poets the torch earlier bestowed upon Language writers. These poets—many of whom celebrate their "unreadability" and the absolutely uninteresting character of their writing, apart from the concepts that motivate it—are a much better fit for Izenberg's account of an undifferentiated mass of characterless language. But, of course, it is through contemporary manifestations like conceptual poetry that elements of the past become visible. It is through the various arguments made for conceptual poetry, for instance, that we can come to see Language poetry as participating in an earlier, related project (along with an even earlier moment of sixties and seventies conceptualism in art and writing, to which it returns). All our arguments about the past, that is to say, take the present moment as their secret object.

One unacknowledged "present" to which Izenberg's book might respond is the era of profound scarcity and gutted university budgets in which twenty-first-century literary criticism proceeds. Academic institutions—and they are not alone in this, of course—produce a structural compulsion upon writers to distinguish themselves from each other, to make hyperbolic claims, to draw lines in the sand (lines which the waves quickly wash away), a process that intensifies as resources vanish. Taking exception to a milieu characterized, all too often, by hair-splitting and the narcissism of small differences, Izenberg produces an account of particularity, style, distinction, and difference as a kind of violence. One sees immediately, however, the double-bind into which he quietly walks: to valorize universalism he must identify a particular "type" of poem; to valorize indistinction, he must make distinctions. If he refuses to do so—if he acts as his objects do, and refuses distinction—the field of poetry manifests as pure difference. Abstract and universal personhood, as he defines it here, seems less like "the ground of social life" than one of its forms of appearance.

Notes

1. See T. J. Clark on Picasso for one example of how such an argument might run (213–14).

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Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960
by Amy Hungerford
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. 224 pages

Steven Belletto

Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* mounts an ambitious and important intervention into the study of postwar American literature and culture. Hungerford draws together two seemingly unrelated strains, postmodernism and religious belief, to show how a late-twentieth-century "belief in meaninglessness" became a significant form of religious belief in an increasingly secular, irrevocably pluralistic world. As she explains in her introduction,

> This book will argue that a century and a half later [after Emerson], with religious critique so firmly a part of our secular condition, belief without meaning becomes both a way to maintain religious belief rather than critique its institutions and a way to buttress the authority of the literature that seeks to imagine such belief. Belief without content becomes . . . a hedge against the inescapable fact of pluralism. (xiii)

Hungerford thereby sidesteps more familiar accounts of literature as either embodying or condemning religious belief in order to theorize how "belief in meaninglessness" may tell a different story about postwar literature and culture. Hungerford looks at numerous works of literature and literary and critical theory, and she ranges over Derrida and de Man (both key thinkers for her first book, *A Holocaust of Texts*) with the same confidence she displays when recontextualizing the New Critics or noting a renewed interest in the literariness of the Bible in the 1970s and 1980s; she offers similarly nuanced readings of writers such as J. D. Salinger, Allen Ginsberg, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, and Marilynne Robinson, among others. In each of these cases, Hungerford's method is to place a work of literature or theory in new contexts, inventively reframing the work of individual writers in order to demonstrate the importance of belief in meaninglessness as a frame for understanding postwar American writing.

Those coming to the book with backgrounds in critical theory may be most interested in how the argument reconfigures the relationship