

THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Volume 6 | 1997

David Ignatow's Against The Evidence: Selected Poems 1934- 1994

Donald L. Soucy

© Providence College

The author(s) permits users to copy, distribute, display, and perform this work under the following conditions: (1) the original author(s) must be given proper attribution; (2) this work may not be used for commercial purposes; (3) the users may not alter, transform, or build upon this work; (4) users must make the license terms of this work clearly known for any reuse or distribution of this work. Upon request, as holder of this work's copyright, the author(s) may waive any or all of these conditions.

The Prose Poem: An International Journal is produced by
The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress)
for the Providence College Digital Commons.
<http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/prosepoems/>

BOOK REVIEWS

David Ignatow. *Against the Evidence: Selected Poems 1934-1994*. Wesleyan University Press. Published by University Press of New England. 180 pp. Paper \$14.95.

I did not come to the poetry of David Ignatow easily. As a young literature student in the 60s, I had failed to hear the poetry in his straightforward verses, the Art in his art. The cool anger of his protest poems confused me, and he seemed to be writing about things too familiar in language too colloquial. Later, when I became a teacher, I came across Ignatow's "Get the Gasworks" in an anthology of American verse, and for the first time I heard his voice in my head: strong, insistent, impassioned. The images of the poem—the "river, and barges, / all dirty and slimy. / How do the seagulls stay so white?"—and the tough, no-nonsense sounds of city life—"gaswork smoke-stack whistle tooting wisecracks"—snapped me back to consciousness. Clearly, I had missed the point; I did not know this poet at all.

One way to know this poet may be found in David Ignatow's latest collection, *Against the Evidence: Selected Poems 1934-94*. A scant 180 pages does not seem adequate to sum up a poet's life, but the sixty years represented in this volume reveal a richness and a variety of forms and concerns that go well beyond the covers of the book. (I was about to use the word *transcend* but having immersed myself in Ignatow's work, I see the value of sticking close to the Anglo-Saxon roots of the language.) As Ignatow himself explains in his introduction, he has always seen his work as an "organic whole," but the present collection, divided into decades, has given him and the reader the opportunity to see that "the poems, each in their decade, as a body offer a cross section and ... an in-depth portrait of life and living of that particular time, allowing the authenticity of the whole _ "

For the purposes of this review, I intend to focus on Ignatow's contributions to the prose poem. But that does not mean I am dismissing his lyrics or other forms. On the contrary, poems such as "Gasworks," "The Gentle Weight Lifter," "Ritual One," and many others have already established him as a major American voice. And yet his conscious decision fairly late in his career to attempt a form that at that time had few formal adherents and practitioners strikes me as a quintessential measure of the risk-taking and inventiveness that comes with being an authentic artist.

In an interview with Gerald Malanga, Ignatow disclosed why he turned to the prose poem for particular concerns.

I was looking for intellectual content, I was trying to broaden my intellectual horizons, because I find that the lyric is an emotional response, whereas the prose poem is an intellectual response.

The intellectual is an imaginative response. There's the difference. That is to say, in the prose poem the undercurrent is emotional, and that can be recognized in the cadences that the language takes, but the language itself is imaginative and intellectual. Whereas, in the lyric form, the language is emotive.

In a later passage, Ignatow claims that the prose poem offered him "dramatic" possibilities: to him, prose poems are "almost like theater." The first two prose poems in the collection appear in the section "Poems of the 1970s," and just as Ignatow claims, both are inherently theatrical. The first, "My Enemies," reads like a dramatic monologue: "I know how I have learned to hate. I've turned on trees and animals and crushed the ant in my path." But the second, "The Diner," dedicated to Jean-Paul Sartre, is straight out of *Huit Clos*. "If I order a sandwich and get a plate of ham and eggs instead, has communication broken down? Is there a chef in the house? There's no chef. I get only silence." As Ignatow explains, the prose poem form granted him a "much more imaginative latitude."

The incident in the "The Diner" became a kind of essay on one of the principles of existentialism—the absolute aloneness of man in the universe and how he handles it. .. I could've been very emotional about it. Instead, I preferred the wry, acceptant, logical approach... I'm a poet of statement—I'm always somehow involved with the existential *angst*."

There are other elements in the prose poems of Ignatow that also bear mentioning: his use of direct address, the wry humor, and the self-reflexivity. A poem such as "Talking to Myself," for example, documents how the poet consciously works through a poem (or how a poem actually works itself out; the speaker of the poem doesn't make the distinction for us, and doesn't hint at which is preferred). "About my being a poet, the trees certainly haven't expressed an interest standing at a distance," says the speaker, yet that doesn't keep him from describing the work of the poet: "Wouldn't these trees want to know what they'll be doing in a hundred years, what they look like now, how they stand, what is their name, where they are and what they actually do in winter and in summer, deaf, dumb, and happy as they are?" The work of the poet, then, is to describe what it is to be: to be a tree, to be human, to be a poet, to be a poem—seeming to echo MacLeish's "a poem should not mean / But be."

Consequently, the two most meaningful and moving prose poems for me in the collection help to define the experience of the form. "Prose Poem in Six Parts" makes clear the growing gap between Ignatow's earlier Whitmanesque concerns and techniques, and his prose-poem experiments as an "existentialist." As he explained to Malanga, "Whitman tries to straddle two concepts: the individual as a unique person with a strength of his own, and the concept

that beyond the individual... was a still greater force than he towards which he was progressing ... I had to throw all that out; I was left with the individual."

Ignatow acknowledges that he turned to other sources, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, even Kafka, writers who "dealt with pain, from suffering, from severe deprivation: mental, physical, social, universal. Yet they sought to expand their world." The form that best deals with these concerns, argues Ignatow, is the prose poem, with its inherent drama, its wry, savage humor, its surrealism, and, moreover, its power to sort out through force of intellect the mysteries of living. Thus, the speaker in "Prose Poem in Six Parts" narrates: "I'm so happy, he shouts, as he puts a bullet through his head. It leaves a clean hole on either side of the skull, no blood pouring out. I'm so happy, he shouts at his triumph. He knew it would happen this way, pulling the trigger. He knew it, he had imagined it, and he collapses in a spasm of joy." The passage resonates all the more chillingly in the wake of the Heaven's Gate mass suicide. Objectively, however, the poem may also explain the appalling attractiveness of such an act because the other sections of the poem deal with the community of the living dead. One of the characters lights up a cigar, looks firmly at the world, and yet, "He has his doubts. He chews upon the stump of his cigar. He can express himself but to what end? Language is not the solution." I was at first mystified by this phrase; indeed, if language is not the solution, if language cannot communicate our being, what else can? I went back to Wallace Stevens' "Emperor of Ice-Cream" to seek out the roller of big cigars, and encountered a profundity of language, but also death, which silences all, including language itself. Language is not the solution, for language must also have form and context. The form of the prose poem in the hands of a master practitioner like David Ignatow provides for that context.

The other piece in the collection that unnerves me while it also energizes in me the possibilities of language is "From the Beginning." In this poem, all of the elements of Ignatow's prose-poem technique come together: the surrealism, the bleak humor, the drama, and the profound mental grappling with the issue. The poem describes the "sweetness in man" that causes him to kill a stranger and to play upon "his clay pipe melodies about himself:

As he plays, suddenly, because he cannot solve the mystery of his own eventual disappearance, perhaps by the spear of his enemy, if not age— suddenly, in frustration with the question, he will begin to dance, to dance out the disappointment in thinking, in questioning, in searching in himself for an answer. He will dance unto exhaustion, and all who have been listening to him ... will join him...

I hear echoes of Blake here, but with the dark overtones of this skeptical age.

As I said, I did not come to the poetry of David Ignatow easily. For one thing, I was unable initially to make his concerns my concerns. For another, his language and his forms did not resonate for me, until I recognized that this

crusty, Whitmanesque character was eating, drinking, making love, hating, questing, admonishing, struggling for answers in a direct, piercing simplicity all his own. On a hunch, before wrestling with the rest of the collection, I turned to "Poems of the 1960s" and looked for those works that had mystified me with their seemingly detached, ironic tone. And there, in "All Quiet," I experienced for the first time the bone-chilling anger of his work. "How come nobody is being bombed today?" Here indeed is the voice of a poet of the first-rank, whose life work, bound between the covers of this slim book, speaks volumes. The language is spare, plain, and honest; the forms, steeped in the formal, Western tradition; but the context is life in Twentieth Century America. The reader who delves into these immense pages will come away having breathed the air of righteous indignation, and having been soothed by the balm of unalloyed vitality.

Donald L. Soucy