

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

emerges from her study simplified? She has exchanged the propriety of an assigned identity for these charitably promiscuous folds.

The essays in *Nilling* are a demonstration of this process and a record of Robertson's encounters with texts, and therefore also the obverse of her personal reading list, her thoughts on Lucretius, Réage, Lucrece, Arendt, Eva Hesse, Atget, and others. Robertson's ethic is egalitarian and anonymous, and strikes me as a political stance: for her, anyone can be in the study. But I am suspicious of how we get to the study and what happens when we emerge. I wonder if we can trust *complexifying* the reader as the mark of a quality text, and whether the complexity of a text counteracts the egalitarian nature of reading and writing.

Complexity—the exchange of identity for enrichment through reading—sometimes undermines a democratic premise. While Robertson rightly celebrates the raw potential of the “invisible space of reading” and the “utopian ungroundedness” of thinking, her enthusiasm may be colored by her choice of texts. By treating texts as she does readers—that is, by valuing their proclivities rather than their histories—she is able to put these texts in conversation with each other. But what happens, for instance, when texts are propagandistic, solipsistic, or lack a social consciousness? Can texts take advantage of us as we ebb from willful reading into nillful receptivity? Robertson's own library (the British Library) is already stocked with safe volumes, made innocuous by the passage of time. And at points, Robertson's academic language becomes a barrier to her democratic premise, reminding us that literacy is not egalitarian, and that access to books isn't, either. Becoming more complex requires both the simplification of the reader (the abandonment of a preconditioned self) and of texts (a willful forgetting of their histories and incompatibilities).

Robertson is particularly attracted to vulnerable texts: she revels in the lucky survival of a certain volume, or the monk's pornographic drawing on an irregularity in the vellum. It is worth giving ourselves over to Robertson's vision of a flat history, a time in which all readers are in conversation with each other, in order to see how endangered texts can be safe havens for dissident politics. Take Robertson's essay on Réage's *Histoire d'O*. This tale of a young woman who gives herself up completely to a cult of men and their progressively violent sexual humiliations opens up for Robertson a “problematics of pleasure”:

The ambivalent stance towards complicity in the text has to do with the discomfort in recognizing the organizing, determining strictures of a code, its work and trace on the body, as a form of experienced pleasure.... Réage is radically opening identity as a non-teleological, inconspicuous work of

abnegation, of nilling *as* agency. In her text, identity is not *for* power nor governance.... [The text's] anarchism is as sustained, feral and relentless as it is elegantly poised.

O, like our reader, consents to be passive and receptive, and watching this happen is uncomfortable. In O's nilling, and in our uncomfortable moral reaction to (willing) but identification with (nilling) her "punitive sadism," our conceptions about sexual identity, power and desire are "systemically obliterated." Thus the parallel structures of willing and nilling in the narrative and its reading demonstrate that the voyeuristic nature of the text can become a "resource" through "abject pride": the reader's politics are reinvented by the feeling generated by the actual text, and the reader emerges with more of an open mind. In that sense, the text is political: it is "anarchism."

In another essay, "Disquiet," Robertson follows a path of Eugene Atget's photographs around Paris. Her meditations on the photographs are complemented by "soundscapes," recordings she made on the streets. Robertson's recordings are structured by Atget's choice of location, but are passive and receptive: we hear yells in a market, cars passing, distant music, the din of people talking, the sounds of the outside. The addition of ambient noise reminds us that the conditions of reading can be imperfect, and Robertson's recordings prompt her to reflect on the history of the sound of urban experience:

The legal categorization and treatment of some sound as pollution is a recent behaviour which can be traced to new regulatory protocols in the 19th century city, and the advent of noise by-laws: On the one hand, pedlars, hawkers, rag pickers, street musicians, prostitutes and other wanderers from the centralizing capitalist economy were silenced with new civic ordinances. On the other hand, mechanized factory din was confined to labouring class quarters.... The concept of sound pollution ironically functioned to camouflage the concentration of new capital.

Thus, because human noise pollution was outlawed and the sounds of capital and industry were embraced, the sound of the streets became a vehicle for social history. Robertson's recordings, then, are both passive and intentionally resistant to history's totalizing.

In the final section, Robertson brilliantly shows that text also resists totalizing gestures. She ties the politics of poetry not to its content or the pages on which it is printed, but to the structure of its language: "The urgent social abjection of the poem might act as shelter to a gestured vernacular." The invisible space where the reader goes suddenly becomes the safe haven for vernacular, the subject, who needs the poem. If grammar is the willing

of language, its active structure, then vernacular is the inventive version that comes from being lax about rules, “a prosodic gift whose agency flourishes in the bodily time of an institutional and economic evasion.” Like the soundscapes, the liberation from grammar in its printed form allows the material text to be a vehicle for alternative histories. Nilling is an important ethic for both the creation of such works and their reception: “Poetry may show us that when we sing to the subjectivity of the other, without determining that subjectivity, this is politics.”

Robertson is not occupied with what a text can do, but rather what it can contain. Inside the study, Robertson finds warmth and companionship: “Turning the pages, my desk-lamp joining the complicitous glow, I become a member of anonymity.” But, read differently, anonymity becomes an escape. Why must we always abandon our history? And why must we turn our prose into essays? Robertson shows us the beauty that a text can harbor when its own nilling is met with ours. In less pacifist situations, when a text’s will meets our will, or our will butts up against understanding, the outcome is less certain. The social content of Robertson’s best examples is accidental and incidental, and the writing itself achieves egalitarianism when her words are least wrought and academic; when she remains close to the texts at hand; and when the will to read her work and the concentration it requires fall away.

Nausicaa Renner

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Ivan Vladislavic, *Double Negative*. London: And Other Stories, 2013. 204pp. \$15.95

One of the most important moments in Ivan Vladislavic’s *Double Negative* comes early in the novel, when the father of our protagonist, Neville, arranges for Neville to spend a day following Saul Auerbach, a famous South African photographer and family friend, around the city of Johannesburg. Shortly after meeting Auerbach, Neville, a disaffected college student struggling with his place in South Africa’s apartheid system, follows him up a hill high above the city to apprehend what lies below. “You think it would simplify things, looking down from up here,” Auerbach says, “but it has the opposite effect on me. If I try to imagine the lives going on in all these houses, the domestic dramas, the family sagas, it seems impossibly complicated. How could you ever do justice to something so rich in detail? You couldn’t do it in a novel, let alone a photograph.” In one sense, the moment alludes to the novel’s original mixed-media format. *TJ/Double Negative* is Vladislavic’s collaboration with the South African photographer David Goldblatt; putting literature and photography together represents an attempt at helping the reader “see”