
REVIEWS

Eric Murphy Selinger. *What Is It Then Between Us?: Traditions of love in American Poetry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. 251p.

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Selinger argues that love is not an occasional subject for American poets, but is, in fact, a generic center of American poetry. He traces a line from Winthrop's lay sermon "A Modell of Christian Charity," to the poetry of James Merrill, demarcating differing ideas of love and poetics along the way, arguing that two strains of love — Petrarchian and Protestant — struggle within American poetry. Selinger begins by asserting, "since no one before me has put together a book of American poetry of love, either a critical study or an anthology, I have no monolith to undermine, no canon to shoot down" (1). This anti-caveat certainly comes as a relief: here is a book with no bone to pick, and an author concerned with close readings of poems through a subtle and interesting claim.

Indeed, the author is at his best when he engages in intimate readings, as he chides Emerson for being "too self-ironic and New Englandly proper" (30), or spends time explicating the fifth section of Whitman's "Song of Myself," in which "Whitman pivots from mystical insights to home truths" — a shift enacted by "a mention of love" (35). It is when the author moves away from his micro-readings of poems, when he decides that he is not merely seeing patterns but making rules, that his book ceases to be about poetics and begins to literalize the "lessons" of the poems via vague psychoanalysis.

Throughout his book, Selinger uses the poems as *lessons* in love, and substantiates his claims with an often intrusive and unnecessary gallery of Gallic critics: Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, Beauvoir. The poems, then, become psychological and ideological love lessons: wounds and reparations, self versus "the other," male versus female, lesbian and homosexual mutuality. Reading the poems as such, their successes and failures do not hinge upon the language they use or their artistry, but upon how well the poems help create "an America of Love" (184); that is, the poems are read as encapsulations of another great American genre: the self-help book. A critic is certainly in a bind when, to prove his model, he claims that Whitman had "faith in the power of language" (47). Selinger's analysis includes

too many of these non-insights as he tries to squeeze a particular theory out of the poetry he examines.

He also fails to distinguish between Love and love — one, the philosophical idea which, in America, is inextricably bound to the Christian readings of *eros*, *agape*, and *caritas*; and the other, love between two people. This lack of distinction presumes that the private and the poetic are always political — that American poems are the autobiographies of lovers and political manifestos exclusively.

Selinger's interest in the objects of the poet's love leaves many of his readings flat. His chapter on Creeley and Lowell is more about the poets' relationships with their wives and lovers than it is about their poetry. The author even admits as much: "In my reading of Creeley I have not, I realize, attended to questions of composition as much as the poet would like" (125). That sentence is appended with this endnote, a quotation from Creeley himself: "Some concerns have been persistent e.g. the terms of marriage, relations of men and women, sense of isolation.... But I have never ... begun with any sense of 'subject,' [since] the point I wish to make is that I am writing" (216). Writing is the very thing Selinger elides when discussing poetry. "To turn the beloved into a poem," Selinger claims in his chapter on Adrienne Rich, "does a certain violence to her sovereignty of self" (148). To take poetry to task for what people do to other people is wrong-headed and does a disservice to poem and poet alike.

Selinger's literalization makes it impossible for him to read the poems on their own terms. When Selinger struggles through Mina Loy's harrowing *Songs to Johannes*, he flips back and forth between considering the "I" of the poem a persona and Loy herself. He finds the poem "successful" when the "I" is ironically distant and "poised," but when "she" is "disappointed, she lashes out at herself and her lost ideals" (82). Of course, "she" is no longer the poised persona, but the troubled, jilted Loy. Selinger here uses Kristevan psychoanalysis to explain Loy's unwillingness to reconcile the two figures in the poem. This "unwillingness" is never considered as an aesthetic choice, but the inevitable working out of personal difficulties on the page. The strain of criticism that views poetry primarily as pieces of autobiography misses the point of poetry; indeed, it undermines the artistry of the poets if we read poems as only good or bad reflections of real life episodes.

Poetry is a theory in and of itself. When an author writes poetry, she is *theorizing* about the world or about ideas, finding metaphors to engage in the "seems" of the world. She is "seeing as," struggling to find the words with which to describe her vision and revision of her world. Treated as such, poetry *is* philosophy, psychology, and literary theory. Most often, though, poetry is not allowed to escape from the "limitations" of its historical periodicity or the personal lives of its prac-

tioners. Conversely, critics also find anachronistic attributes in poems — this poet or that is a “precursor” to whatever contemporary thing — in order to legitimize the poet through a contemporary idea or politic. This, of course, implies that what is contemporary is what is best — here, that means that American love poetry has been undergoing a progressive evolution. What we know about love today is more sophisticated — and therefore more helpful — than what poets knew and wrote *then*.

Selinger is closest to poetry in his final chapter on James Merrill. His respect for and obvious love of Merrill’s poetry allows him to read it more carefully as poetry. Selinger is at his most explicit here with his idea that American solitude and ideas of love are played out in American poetry, and carefully distinguishes between person and poem. He “addresses what human company, *in a poem*, looks like” (165) as opposed to pushing poems into being human company. If the author had been content to read the other poets with this in mind, he would have written a fascinating book on the limits of American love as engaged in its poetry. As it stands, the book does yet another disservice to poets who, like Emily Dickinson, deserve readings of their poetry, and not examinations of their sexuality, marriageability, or personal life. ✨