

Review of Adina Bozga's *The Exasperating Gift of Singularity: Husserl, Levinas, Henry* (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2009)

With her latest foray for Zeta Books, Adina Bozga looks to pursue the possibility of singularity within the history of phenomenology. No less discontented with totalizing schemes of meaning-formation than with general relativism, Bozga takes up singularity as a hidden third which, in avoiding integration into a wider generality while simultaneously serving as a pole of sense and signification, may very well overcome the pitfalls that plague both camps. Bearing this in mind, Bozga assesses possible phenomenological relations to singularity through an elucidation of Edmund Husserl's pertinent texts in the first of this two part book. In the second part, Bozga then expands on this phenomenology *on* singularity with a phenomenology *of* singularity, as seen through the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Michel Henry, respectively.

Beginning with the first segment, singularity is initially parsed out in hyletic data, in its singular simplicity, as non-compounded, non-synthetic orphans to intentionality which, quite apart from serving as brute sense-stuff awaiting constitution from a noetic act, themselves "impose their particularity on the constitution of objects" (67). This, at any rate, is certainly the position of Michel Henry, who shows concern for the ego as an "I am affected" more than as an "I think," and who, accordingly, rebukes Husserl for, among other things, failing to discern either the ability of *hyle* to immediately impact subjectivity, and, conversely, the latter's ability to directly receive and undergo it as a „me“ rather than as an „I.“ *Hyle* for Husserl dwells in a dualism, one where it is simple content to consciousness's intentional *morphe*; it is passive to the latter's activity, much as the body has been in relation to reason in classical Western ethics.

Though Husserl does venture so far as to acknowledge that hyletic data is temporally anterior to any animating intention, he quickly insists that, prior to the deployment of the latter, consciousness does not enjoy some primal unconscious receptivity (74). *Hyle* is first encountered by retentive consciousness, not the unconscious, "which makes possible the

existence of reflection” (ibid.). Yet this inner-time consciousness structure, whereby the hyletic datum is wedded to retentional consciousness, creates an environment that is refractory to any fixed now, spawning turtles that do indeed go all the way down.

Herein lies Henry’s chief concern: rather than open itself to the self-giveness or auto-donation of the impression, to its originality and sufficiency, which, as auto-affectivity would enable phenomenology to accede to that which it has always at least claimed to seek—a return to the things themselves—classical phenomenology filters and denies the present and engages in an endless sliding through time, in a preference for simulacra rather than the original, for the tired, and indeed tiring—though endlessly profitable!—binary of lack and repletion rather than an immediate and unprotected affectation of oneself by oneself (auto-affectivity).

Curiously, Jacques Derrida objects to Husserl for the very opposite reason: the now-point figures too prominently in Husserl’s conceptual edifice (85-86). Husserl affords primacy to the trace, to hyletic data, even if it is only ever given to consciousness, and its structure of retention and protention (84). Derrida draws out the seemingly contradictory nature of this position, emphasizing the present as always already shot through with non-presence, and thus the utter naïveté, of which today examples abound, of this attempt to mingle in the Now.

Derrida thinks better of an opening to radical alterity, to the caesura, of which traces are only ever retained, repeated, re-presented as signs falling through time, and not outside of it, in what Husserl refers to as primordial expression, as the pure and silent language of the pure ego, where “meaning precedes public context, or human linguistic communities” (80). The sign and all such sense-data always unfold in temporality, and are, as a result, not simple or singular but variegated in and through their inherent temporal shifts (89).

A hyletic singularity thus seems sunk, and Henry’s privileging of it, in turn, may be seen as an original slant on a markedly traditional prejudice, that of the exalted present. One may, to be sure, elect an ejection from temporality, as Henry in a sense does, yet the problem then becomes how this non-temporal hyletic datum immanent to subjectivity can possibly be experienced and, more difficult still, how it can be discussed and assessed in a phenomenology proper.

We will at this point note only that Bozga continues to try and ferret out an effective singularity from within Husserl’s corpus, this time through a conception of singularity as particularity. In brief, as temporality affords no permanent presence, the identity forged by an assemblage of

particularities never achieves singularity in and of itself, but only ever manages identity through their repetition, through their relation to yet other complexes, and their position in the unity of intentional aims that inhere in absolute consciousness. In fact, this dissolution of singularity into ever wider wholes aside, as the hyletic datum is never wholly there, never simply given, instead requiring apperception and an infinite hermeneutic, an outright singularity is never accomplished, or seen, but always delayed, put off, and ultimately out of reach.

The first and largest section of Bozga's book then concludes with a search for singularity in absolute wholes such as Husserl's conception of time-constituting flow. Bozga begins with the contrasting views of Levinas and Husserl concerning a "pre-egoic anonymity" or sleepy ego (138). For the former, existence is first the presence of absence. Anonymous and indeterminate, this positive absence oppresses and overcomes the sluggish existent who, as a mode of defense, constructs the world and its work, the self and its freedom, its identity-making procedures and other such self-satisfying melodies (137-138).

Husserl, on the other hand, regards this somnambulant subject as similarly dwelling in an anonymous backdrop, but not one of "the universal, or of repetition," rather one of "the event, the stream of time outside time" (138). If the ego generally shines forth as constituting agent, this „egoless“ subject, dwelling as it does in inner-time consciousness, would be the ego in its lowest light, as the "fundamental form . . . that makes all other syntheses of consciousness possible" (ibid.). The inner-time consciousness of this egoless subject, this immanent self-reference, as yet reflective, not only reminds of Henry, but also situates "consciousness of time within a sphere of constitution which is not posited in time" (139). It is thus "the pre-phenomenal time-constituting consciousness" that acts as "a pre-condition with respect to the constituted temporal objects" (ibid.).

Inasmuch as this immanent consciousness of time goes without repetition or any kind of unification within a larger whole, it does indeed stand as a singularity, however, it is one which again falls outside the sphere of temporality and phenomenality. Absolute time-constituting consciousness may inaugurate temporality, but, as Bozga concludes, it cannot itself be inscribed therein, and therefore does not easily lend itself to phenomenological investigation.

Bozga associates this characteristic of time-constituting consciousness with Derrida's theory of the gift, yet the analogy is ultimately less than effective in cementing this position. Derrida argues that the gift cannot enter the sublunary plane of presence, where its basic

being-there would spur on recognition and reciprocity and thereby integrate it into the circuit of exchange and commerce, nullifying it as such.

Jean-Luc Marion, in contradistinction, points out that this view presupposes that coming forward and subsisting in presence is the only mode of manifestation. In short, Marion argues that the gift's inability to enter the present does not in any way hinder it from giving itself, but to the contrary, enables it to do so all the more, inciting very real and noticeable effects in the phenomenal realm. To the extent that this argument stands, we may say that time-constituting consciousness, itself a singularity that cannot stand in a dual or reciprocal relation, a "gift of a pre-phenomenal givenness," is perhaps not off the table for any and all phenomenological studies (152).

This brings us to the second segment of the book, which contends with a phenomenological givenness of singularity, specifically through the works of Levinas and Henry. Let us begin by pointing out however that whereas Bozga is probing and incisive in her command of Husserl, exhibiting him in a way fit only for those with a solid background in his body of work, her treatment of Levinas and Henry, though no less accomplished, is more that of an introduction, and will serve the experienced and inexperienced alike. In the case of Levinas, this perhaps means little, given the widespread level of commentary already garnered by his work, however, with Henry, who remains still very much a question mark, this is no small point.

For Levinas, the singularity of the Other's face, which bursts through the visible image that appears to contain it, is the constituting agent's first encounter with a term that is irreducible to a term, and which thereby cannot be anticipated, known, or engaged in the sense of a dialectic. The Other, instead of fulfilling my intention, frustrates it with its own counter-intentionality, preceding me and coming at me as though from within me as a revelation, as a pre-phenomenal that also gives rise to the phenomenal itself. For prior to the coming of the Other, Levinas argues, the subject was caught in its own autism, in its continuous reduction of the Other to the Same; its gaze slid over things, but it never truly encountered anything outside of its own self and the dull thrum of its being(193-195). Here the subject's egoism is shocked and stirred by the singular Other as sense, as orientation, and thus as that where its own identity lies, where it moves toward uniqueness and the future (219-221).

In the eyes of Levinas, it is in one's response to the singular and, yes, ethical call of the Other that one accedes to uniqueness or, if you prefer, identity (ibid.). Bozga's call for singularity as enabling one to

escape totalizing schemas of meaning while simultaneously not giving onto a vicious relativism is thus answered well by Levinas's formulation of the Other. At the same time, Bozga does not seem greatly concerned with the recent critiques of Levinas and of contemporary French Phenomenology in general. A more sustained consideration of such contrasting viewpoints, as put forward by Dominique Janicaud, for example, would have made for a fine addition.

In any case, the real import of this second and concluding segment is found in Bozga's consideration of singularity in the work of Michel Henry. Where for Levinas singularity rested in the radical exteriority of the face of the Other, on account of which it escaped the identity-difference bi-polarity, Henry experiences it in a life without a face, in the individual as a tonality of absolute Life, which gives itself to itself in a radical immanence, and in so doing, makes the individual (or First Living) first feel and experience itself as auto-affectivity (274-275). The subject undergoes and feels this affectation on its own, which is enough to endow it with some manner of individuality, with a veritable I, yet, since this affectivity is not its own making, its product or effect, but is instead given to it by absolute Life, or what Henry will later regard as Christ, it simultaneously moves outside its isolated, empirical being and partakes in a community that has nothing to do with regions, customs, or habits developed over time (279-280). Henry's formulation of auto-affectivity as a radical immanence that permits no division or gap of light, on account of which it might see and regard itself, thus allows for a kind of uniqueness or singularity which is not isolating but strangely communal (277). Indeed, the consequences of auto-affectivity on the conception of community appear many and significant.

In the final section devoted to Henry, Bozga assesses auto-affectivity as pre-given, as a gift of life. As with the gift, which admits no recognition, reciprocity, or identity, the singular gift of absolute Life that, in thrusting itself into itself, gives each entity's affectation to themselves, admits no counter-gift (301-302). Bozga moves to suggest that, in this light, the gift of life calls for a sense of obligation, for a contrite or, as Bozga continues, "remorseful subject," who acknowledges himself as essentially gifted (300). How this obligation is to be paid out remains something of a question. Again, a more sustained look at Marion's work on the gift may have proven fruitful. Marion, in short, stipulates that in acknowledging oneself as gifted and making a proper response, one does not simply direct it back towards the presumed giver, which would make this a question of exchange and commerce and not of the gift, but rather, in one's own way, continuing the tradition and sending a gift further down

the line.

Still, while there is undoubtedly a humbling aspect to Henry's formulation of auto-affectivity, it is important not to lose sight of its distinctly positive dimension: more than anything, the auto-affection of the self is (as Henry says in *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*), the "eternal movement of the passage from Suffering to Joy." The self suffers itself as auto-affectivity, as beyond its own control, as "affected by something „more“ which is more of itself," and thus as growth and expansion. The subject's activity does not then wholly result in a proper contrition but in an increased ability to move beyond its abilities and endure and pursue the wealth of its gift, through art, literature, philosophy, and other more commonplace activities. Henry's philosophy thus has much to offer a phenomenology open to describing and interpreting the pre-original, non-synthetic auto-donation of life. Bozga's book, in turn, as a cogent and compelling assessment of many of the dominant themes that run through Henry's body of work, is an adept introduction into some of phenomenology's still barely glimpsed possibilities.

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