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On Hegel

Robert Wood · Wednesday, June 6th, 2018

What is the building block of a book length poem? What was it for *Gesar of Ling* or *Gilgamesh*, Dante or Homer? This question is not the same as asking: what is the building block of a book of poems? The answer to that is simply ‘the poem’. And there are, of course, all kinds of poems that make up all kinds of poetry books. There are books of set structures and free verse, books of short pieces and longer ones, books that repeat and loop back on themselves, books that never seem to get going even as they fill up the beautiful white space of every page. However, the most common building block in today’s Anglophonic poetry book is a right side ragged, single page poem written in free verse.

Some poets, however, work to an established form based on syllables (haiku) while others have set rhyme schemes (pantoum) and yet more turn their attention to sequencing these overall. Some poets work to the length of a line, some poets to the breath. But whatever the case, it is more common to work to the poem rather than to work to the book. That might be why so many books of poetry today are 80 plus pages of individual pieces given a curatorial gloss of unity. In other words, people speak of their collections as *collections* rather than in the singular and they do so with an eye to ‘theme’ (desire, loss, ethics) or with a frame of ‘content’ (the West, food, identity) or ‘voice’ (experimental, lyrical, confessional). Nowhere is this clearer than in the blurbs that adorn covers.

Of course, one can make a book length poem from the dead bodies of small poems. This is most easily created through pagination, whereby one could link up individual ghazals as if they were no longer ants but rather an elephant, and in the process make a short form longer than it ever was before. But what is the unit of a poem with a length that can be stretched? How can we build from the letter to the word to the line to the stanza to the page to the chapter to the book? And what does this say about the relationship between the letter and the book?

In that way, the letter might be said to represent the smallest particle, even as this is quite false. Letters can be broken into even tinier fractions. Can’t the ‘t’ become an ‘l’ with the mere subtraction of the ‘-’? Can’t the whole range of ideograms in Mandarin be broken into constitutive parts that are nevertheless whole other words and with it worlds just like the *Star Gauge* of Su Hui? Can’t we split the atom further still, into protons and neutrons? If the scales of justice are fine enough can we no longer deal in grams but milligrams and micrograms? And in the age of Usain Bolt surely we know he runs faster than Jesse Owens if only because our clocks have become more precise if not more refined to match his skill?

The letter though is the constitutive unit in the universe of a book length poem if only because the author can make it bigger or smaller as they write, because even when it stands alone as ‘I’ or ‘a’ it becomes a word unto itself, it becomes the next unit in the universe and so through these letter-words builds a bridge in such a way that we learn how to move through and up into a category that is distinct still. And so the same logic propels us from word to line, line to stanza, and so on and so forth. The number of links can be infinite, but it seems to me like those three things matter the most when one considers poems. Of course, the number three matters in religions from the Holy Trinity to the Trident, but I draw mainly from Georg Hegel in my adherence to this division and multiplication. In that way, it is useful for seeing through the two party political system, the gender dichotomy that is so prevalent or even hollow literary oppositions. This might only be because a third way is not some simple, middling intersection but a consciousness, artwork, history that we must continually bring into a new existence. Quite simply, it is a way of making sense when there appears to be no way forward.

In speaking of poetry in *Aesthetics* Hegel found its best expression in the ‘drama’, preferring it both to ‘epic’ and to ‘lyric’. Reading him now, we see that his preference rests on anachronistic definitions of what those ideal types are, generically speaking. What if we can no longer agree on the terms? What if we cannot assume to know what ‘epic’ or ‘lyric’ are just like we do not know ‘tragedy’ or ‘Germany’? There are border cases that prove to us that these are only philosophical heuristics in language games that might be self-perpetuating or mysterious or that might give us status in different positions depending on where we sit.

In the common sense, straw man, everyman definition, the epic has become synonymous with the long poem. One cannot have a short epic even if one deals with gods, wars and heroes. The dramatic poem that Hegel was so fond of has become the province of the novelist writing in a grand tradition, and that is, surely, one of the biggest changes in the cosmology since Aristotle laid down the rules of what was poetics. The novel as the dominant literary mode today challenges all these archaic characterisations, which is not to give up on poetry. Afterall, there is merit to Derick Walcott’s *Omeros* even if it does not garner as much attention as *Jack Reacher* in the airport stores or even *Infinite Jest* in the literary journals.

There is a grand tradition of epic in Australia even as how we define that tradition and epic itself will depend on who we ask, when and where. Hegel considered Australia to be part of a New World, dismissing out of hand and without seeking to understand what has never been a *terra nullius*. This is, of course, political in so far as it justifies the story that if the place is empty, abandoned, unpopulated then one can benefit from such emptiness without recourse to preceding custodians. And that, we now know, is just plain wrong.

For the poet today, the more acute question might be how does one write an epic for the present without either ‘disappearing’ the past or calling into existence a futurity that is as violent as ever? That is the ethical question of aesthetics as we negotiate our history with an eye to predicting tomorrow, and though that depends on where one is speaking from, one also needs to go to sleep safe in the knowledge that we are able to continue the conversation at a later stage even if the only other thing listening is a brick that Hegel would argue is unphilosophical material.

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