Cultural Daily

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On the Kalevala

Robert Wood · Wednesday, July 4th, 2018

There is a house in West Philadelphia around the corner from a deli down the street from a liquor store past a school near a frat across the road from a sorority next to a campus where there is the Kelly Writers House. The Kelly Writers House is, of course, an important site for contemporary literature where lots of writers gather to discuss ideas, give readings and lectures. But in this house, the one in West Philadelphia around the corner from a deli down the street from a liquor store, there is the best collection of Australian books I have ever seen. It is a private library that has been amassed by a librarian during trips down under, visits to auctions around America and careful selection through the digital repository. With four full floors of books in all the corners, it was my unofficial 'National Library In Exile' when I lived up the hill to the right down past the garden behind the doctor's surgery next to the trolley stop before the tennis court. On the top floor is the master bedroom lined with Byzantine Jesus drawings and in that hall there are Keith Haring stickers and soft core gay porn – Vaseline focused shots of six packed young men in bathers, gents riding horses in white underpants, and sports players caught unawares while they practice in contemplative seclusion, tops off, oiled up. Nearby there is a shrine to the Essendon Bombers Football Club.

The most striking thing about the house is not Australian or soft-core porn at all, but the collection of *Kalevalas* that sit on a shelf in the lounge-room on the first floor. The *Kalevala* is, of course, a 'great book' in the tradition of folklore, and folklore is one building block of literature. That is true of our collective world inheritance and in any given individual. We learn from nursery rhymes, fables, morality tales and they are the epics that endure over time. They last in the collective unconscious and in our own minds.

In the folk telling, Philadelphia is Ben Franklin's town as much as anyone's. He looms over the city as a friendly, if eccentric, patrician figure not as a displacing occupier. In his *Autobiography*, he describes a moment that contains within it a type of parable, a kind of fairytale that would not be out of place in a throwaway line in the *Kalevala* or any other epic of world literature. He writes:

In my first voyage from Boston, being becalmed off Block Island, our people set about catching cod, and hauled up a great many. Hitherto I had stuck to my resolution of not eating animal food, and on this occasion I considered, with my master Tryon, the taking every fish as a kind of unprovoked murder, since none of them had or ever could do us any injury that might justify the slaughter. All this seemed very reasonable. But I had formerly been a great lover of fish, and when this came hot out of the frying-pan, it smelt admirably well. I balanced some time between principle and inclination, till I recollected that, when the fish were opened, I saw smaller fish taken

out of their stomachs. Then thought I, “If you eat one another, I don’t see why we mayn’t eat you.” So I dined upon cod very heartily, and continued to eat with other people, returning only now and then occasionally to a vegetable diet. So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature*, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do.

This is a kind of a law of the jungle, a kind of ‘do unto others’ logic for how one may continue in the world, while at the same time justifying one’s actions as a type of ‘reason’. It seems against an ethics that would hold fast to the fact that we are higher animals duty bound to stop the meaty food chain as we see it somehow.

But the focus on diet is, of course, part of religious edicts the world over. What one eats is a central part of how one behaves and the feast has been part of epics, autobiographies, stories and poetry, part of the classics for as long as we have shared them. For example, Ilmarinen’s wedding feast in the *Kalevala* states:

Then the hostess of Pohyola
Served her guests in great abundance,
Richest drinks and rarest viands,
First of all she served the bridegroom
On his platters, honeyed biscuit,
And the sweetest river salmon,
Seasoned butter, roasted bacon,
All the dainties of Pohyola.
Then the helpers served the others,
Filled the plates of all invited
With the varied food of Northland.
Spake the hostess of Pohyola:
“Come, ye maidens from the village,
Hither bring the beer in pitchers,
In the urns with double handles,
To the many guests in-gathered,
Ere all others, serve the bridegroom.”

Thereupon the merry maidens
Brought the beer in silver pitchers
From the copper-banded vessels,
For the wedding-guests assembled;
And the beer, fermenting, sparkled
On the beard of Ilmarinen,
On the beards of many heroes.

Although one cannot help but wince at the gender politics, there is so much joy in food and beer here, so much joy because their freedom seems to be unrestrained and they can cross boundaries and indulge themselves. We know what a feast is because we do not have one every day. It is like that with folklore rather than History. We know what one is because it is not the Other. History has a relationship to science whereas lore implies a relationship to the imagination. Edward Gibbon and Leopold von Ranke were not, of course, the same as Carlo Ginzburg and Liz Cohen. But nor were they Vladimir Propp or the Brothers Grimm let alone the *Kalevala*. What we might learn by letting go of ourselves, of letting go of our diet, of enjoying what we think is possible, is that in the

folklore we have, the poets and the sages had words of wisdom to soothe what ails us when all the ale has been drunk and we have been left out in the cold with not even a piece of cod to call our own.

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