

Rereading the Long Poem: Introduction

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OUR INTEREST IN THE LONG POEM grew out of an informal reading group held at Columbia University during the spring of 2011. Our readings originated in our different fields—namely, English and Hebrew—as well as in our various shared European backgrounds, and our sessions were dedicated to reading “difficult” or even “impossible” poems that by virtue of their sheer length challenged or defied conventional reading practices and to all appearances aspired to exhaust and finally to defeat their readers. As congeries of impossibilities that somehow shed light on possibilities, modernist long poems soon became the focal point, and we quickly understood that while long poems appear in many, if not all, literary traditions, the meanings of their length have always been local and localized, inevitably inscribed in practices of reading involving collaboration, conversation, criticism, and the logics of community and friendship.

A second version of this group convened a conference at the Heyman Center at Columbia University in the fall of 2016, and this is where the present collection of essays originated. We thought to extend the scope of our discussions by focusing on structural questions regarding the nature of the length of long poems: What makes a poem long? When does a poem become long? What does length do, and how does it go about doing it? These are some of the questions that we will not be answering directly here, although the essays included in this special issue of *Dibur* work toward addressing them in multiple ways.

Attempts at reading and explaining what could barely be grasped from within the field allowed for an unusual variety of perspectives to emerge. Not surprisingly, for all the writers and critics involved, long poems appear in response to particular historical circumstances; in their modern forms, they are often inspired by large-scale political and sociological crises, which they

work to grasp and bring into some sort of critical perspective. Long poems handle long events: the collapse of civilizations and civility, war, revolution, pogrom, refugee migration and displacement, and other sundry occasions of violence and trauma. Long poems deal with issues of human failure, and in doing so, they court failure themselves: Pound's *Cantos*, Wordsworth's *Excursion*, Browning's *Sordello*, the broken endings of *Paterson* and *Maximus*, all come to mind. War, that most catastrophic of human failures, requires a large canvas, as in *The Iliad*, *The Song of Roland*, *In Parenthesis*, or HD's *Trilogy*. Reznikoff's dry documentarian *Holocaust* deals with the nadir of human failure, the systematic murder of children by the state.

For our purposes, taxonomy was not the issue; what *allows* for a poem to become long was the question. A poem is long in a meaningful way when it asserts itself as such: *The Waste Land*, while size-wise not such a long poem, casts a long shadow via the historical depths it charts and the literary landscapes it maps. The poet Robert Grenier once asked, "If I look at a short poem for a long time, does it become a long poem?" Questions of temporality and endurance are not trivial—long poems get boring; they're exhausting and exhaustive. They fold and warp; they run out of steam; they belabor, and they get belabored. As Pound says, although it is possible to write a long Vorticist poem, a poet cannot get a vortex into every part of every long poem: hence the dry stretches of *The Cantos*. Long poems always contain their own waste lands.

The long poem is by definition capacious; it contains multitudes. Tending to the encyclopedic, it carries its own unique set of formal armatures: lists, ledgers, catalogs, calendars, inventories. Long poems accrete; they work by anaphora, *The Cantos*' "and and and"; they collect and amass; they layer, ply over ply, or they "inwreath," as in Zukofsky's "A-12." Long poems are cartographic; they map; they anatomize. They can accommodate landscapes; they're panoramic; hence they deal in tone, always a matter of distance, of foreground and background. In fitting mountains into poetry, long poems traffic in the mechanics of the sublime.

Some long poems are less about length and more about depth: NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* plumbs Atlantic deeps; long poems can sound vertically. They speak in tongues; they are dialogic, polyglossic, heteroglossic: Homer already do the police in different voices. They stage debate and argument: the scholastic Owls and Nightingales of medieval long poems, the idiot questioners of the book of Job. Long poems can describe journeys, travels, adventures, all necessarily matters of scale and size. They are excellent vehicles for satire and parody: a certain amount of sheer space and scope is needed to build comedy. And of course long poems go cosmic: they describe the architectures of the fantastic, the machineries of myth and allegory.

The modern long poem is, figuratively speaking, always at war, which along with the descent into the infernal allows for its *gravity*: Odysseus emerges from battle but must pass through hell in order to return to the world. The visit to hell is a trope that allows for the growth of the poem as a teleology. In *The Aeneid*, war and hell form a composite vision of the past justifying the imperial present; Ovid, on the other hand, offers compilation itself as a self-sustaining long mode, one in which war is only one important element within constant metamorphosis. These two types of long poems, the teleological and the compilative, converge in Dante's *Commedia*, and perhaps all great long poems strive for such a convergence.

Dante is inevitable for the occidental modern long poem. The very form of poetic progression, the movement from Inferno to Paradiso, is compelling, practically binding. Pound's circling around this form leads him to outflank Dante through Cavalcanti, but *The Cantos* remain in constant dialogue with Dante, culminating in the "Italian Cantos" with their Fascist infernality

and in the crystalline sepulchers of “Thrones.” This tradition of death is what leads Zukofsky to his overwhelming commitment to life in his anti-*Waste Land* “Poem Beginning ‘The’”:

36 “O do you take this life as your lawful wife”

37 I do!

In many ways, Zukofsky emerged as the nexus of our gathering, with Hebrew, English, and Yiddish singing in the background of his verse, itself imbricated in the networks of friendship and mentorship that motivated and mobilized so much of the long poetry of the twentieth century. In defiance of hell, Zukofsky in “A” overcomes war and blazes a path for the great American long poems of the second half of the century. “A” goes beyond modernism in opening up to a variety of posts—and to a poetic length that brings music and speech to a new paradiso of sound emerging from the impossible and the unsayable.

We invited two contemporary American poets—Bob Perelman and Craig Dworkin—to read from their long works on the first evening of the conference. Both derive in many ways from Zukofsky, and both depart altogether from Homeric/Dantescan/Poundian paradigms, with their vertical orientations and preoccupations with war and underworld. Representing, respectively, Language and Conceptualist poetics, which arguably produced the longest long poems over the past forty years, Perelman’s and Dworkin’s poems—the first based on phenomenological improvisation, the second on bibliographical proceduralism—use length less as a means for treating the interminably mutating circumstances of modern political history and more as a metonymical modality baked into the very projects at hand: how to map the ongoing literal fact of waves on the sea, and how to chart the endlessly spiraling constellations of definition as the logic of the dictionary is turned upon itself? Perhaps these are openings toward the future of long poetic projects, or that which comes when length has been exhausted. A