

Poetic Economy: Ellipsis and Redundancy in Literature

Poets and writers, artists in general, have time and again given evidence of their desire to get things right. The careful attention they pay to processes of revision, for example, may show that they want their work to meet certain ideas of what it should be like, and that they want it to achieve a most intense effect. But what does that mean when it comes to the actual composition? Writers and critics reflecting on poetic production have frequently answered that question by focussing on the necessity of avoiding superfluity; every single element of a work is to fulfil its function in the best possible way. Thus Aristotle says about the action of tragedy that “the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole” (*Poetics* 8). With a somewhat different emphasis, but still sharing the notion of every element being necessary, Sir Philip Sidney maintains that “one word cannot be lost but the whole work fails” (*An Apology for Poetry* 122). The concept is not restricted to classical and neoclassical aesthetics. When Virginia Woolf says that “[e]very ounce of fat has been pared off” (“On Not Knowing Greek” 44) she refers to classical Greek drama but makes us realize that “nothing superfluous” is a notion very much relevant to her own, modernist, view of art. The concept of functionality (each part is required and what is not functional is not required) combines organic as well as economic principles, as it is based on the assumption that there is no waste in nature. “Economy” becomes no less relevant when we take a step from considering inherent structure (elements in relation to the *organon* as a whole) to considering the function of a work as a realization of its author’s ideas, as an image of life, or as having a particular

effect on its audience. Eugene O'Neill, for example, recommended the use of masks in theatre because it entails "the greatest possible dramatic clarity and economy of means" ("Memoranda on Masks" 154). He was concerned with making visible conflicts of the soul and looked for the most telling and effective way of doing so.

This very limited range of examples already shows that while the principle, in its broadest terms, is ubiquitous, many questions remain. What exactly is the relationship, for example, between the idea that there should be no word that can be left out without risking the collapse of the whole work and the idea that much (a complex idea or subject matter) should be expressed by sparing means? The German word for poetry, *Dichtung*, fancifully indicates this very notion of density or compression, of much in little, but this is not the same as the idea that a work is not to be diminished (or added to) without destroying its very nature. Furthermore, does this mean that notions of economy work better with short works, the *haiku* for example? What about the economy of *War and Peace* and *Our Mutual Friend*? Condensation may go too far, a too compressed or too elliptical style may lead to (at best mysterious) vagueness or utter meaninglessness.

Furthermore, we may ask whether both these aspects of economy in literary creation are in any way related to literature as an image of life, as a response to or model of the world, etc. As regards "relevance," it is remarkable that the index to the 2500-page *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* does not have a single entry relating to aspects of poetic economy. Still, its relevance to life seems to have been seen from the beginning, as we come to realize that the *locus classicus* of the concept is to be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (and not just in the *Poetics*): Aristotle speaks of "the common remark about a perfect work of art, that you could not take from it nor add to it—meaning that excess and deficiency destroy perfection, while adherence to the mean preserves it" (2.6.9). Art thus becomes the evidence of virtue having "the quality of hitting the mean" (2.6.9); poetic economy, in this variant, turns out to be the model of ethics (cf. Leimberg, "What May Words Say...?" 38n111, 124, 154).

During our 11th International *Connotations* Symposium in the Black Forest from July 31 to August 4, 2011, we addressed these and other questions by mainly considering the economy of means or devices used in the production of literary texts. The means or devices comprise everything involved in the process of composition, i.e. diction, syntax, prosody and all kinds of rhetorical devices—but not just style in this more narrow sense, for genre, subject matter (themes, motifs), the evocation of specific contexts, etc. come in as well (for example, allusion can serve poetic economy). Ellipsis and redundancy concern all those features, that is to say, we use the terms not only in their linguistic and rhetorical sense but also to denote everything that Aristotle calls deficiency (ellipsis) and excess (hyperbole).

The papers and discussions during the conference showed that it seems to make sense to distinguish three interrelated contexts in which the economy of “too much” vs. “too little” is to be considered. In each case the rhetorical criterion of *decorum* or *aptum* comes in, for we ask, “too much” or “too little” with regard to what?

The first area with respect to which both writers and readers ask that question is representation. Is a certain subject matter too big or too small, does it involve too many aspects, agents, backgrounds etc.? And when we ask too big or too small for what, genre is to be considered, too. We may come to realize that we learn too much or too little about a subject (a character, an action) or that it is just right, but all this depends on the genre in which it is presented. Aristotle, we remember, demanded that tragedy should represent an action of a certain size. Similarly, the “small-room” (Samuel Daniel 138) or “narrow room” (Wordsworth) of the sonnet may represent complex ideas but certainly only a very limited number of characters. The function of detail also very much depends on genre and its extension. Jean Paul recommended a certain dramatic density (“dramatische Gedrungenheit,” 252) to the novel, which may thus become the “race-course of characters” (“Rennbahn der Charaktere,” 252) rather than ample scope or playing field of the story (“Spielraum der Geschichte,” 252).

Jean Paul's reason for recommending a certain degree of stringency even to the novel has to do with the looseness of prose form. And here we see the second area always to be taken into consideration when asking about poetic economy. This is the field of internal organization, which concerns both the *dispositio*, the general arrangement of parts, and every detail of verbal realization. In this perspective, the affinity of poetry (or literature in general) and music comes to the fore. In order to build up the musical structure not just of a line of verse but of a literary work as a whole, each syllable must be in its right place (which is just another way of saying that there shouldn't be a syllable too many or too few): "But Poetry with rule and order strange / So curiously doth move each single pace, / As all is marr'd if she one foot misplace," as Sir John Davies put it in his didactic poem *Orchestra* (stanza 93). This does not mean monotonous regularity; the very deviation from the metrical norm, for example, may be the most economical way of establishing a rhythm. The economy of organization, while falling under the general head of "form," is by no means independent of conceptual considerations; it is never "just" an aesthetic principle, for it is connected to ideas about the structure of the world, of which the *musica humana* and *musica mundana* (cf. Leimberg, "'Kein Wort darf fehlen'") are striking examples. Principles of iconicity (form imitating or reflecting meaning) come in here as well; the shape of George Herbert's poem "Easter Wings," for example, is strictly economical with regard to its subject matter.

A third area we should take into consideration besides representation and organization—I do not aim at completeness but am merely trying to open up the dimensions of our topic that are also addressed in the contributions to this volume—is communication and effect. When we think of Horace's basic aims of poetry, serving to either teach or delight (or to do the first by means of the second, as Sidney has it), we see at once that poetic economy is to be taken into account. There is definitely a "too much" and a "too little" when it comes to the ways and means of achieving those and other ends. When Roman Jakobson's concept of the poetic function is summed up by Vincent

Leitch in the statement “Poetry seeks to *maximize* redundancy; ordinary communication seeks to *minimize* it” (1256), I do not think I can agree. It is wrong with regard to representation and organization, but also with regard to communication and effect, for only think of the dramatic effect that may be achieved by *aposiopesis*, a form of elliptical breaking off. “A little month, or ere those shoes were old / With which she follow’d my poor father’s body, / Like Niobe, all tears:— why she[, even she]—O, God, [...]” (*Hamlet* 1.2.147-50). This is surely poetry but the very disruption of the syntax becomes most effective with regard to the fear and pity to be evoked by this tragedy. There is redundancy (in the repetition of “she” in the Folio text) but it is definitely not maximized; it is rather part and parcel of an economy of effect.

The symposium—and the articles assembled in this issue—showed that in most cases the three areas come together, or at least two of them, and it seems likely that poetic economy is, more often than not, achieved not only by trading off, say, a too detailed account of a character’s motivation against a too cryptically allusive one, or by achieving a balance between an emotionally striking picture and phrases marked by an ironical detachment which is to enhance the reader’s critical reflection. In the complex reality of literary texts, such a thing as poetic economy is also to be seen in the possible balance between the economies of representation, organization and effect.

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Matthias Bauer

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