

Ars Aeterna and Other Essays on Literary Structure. Maren-Sofie Røstvig.
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Ars Aeterna collects thirteen essays, originally published between 1969 and 1997, by the Norwegian scholar Maren-Sofie Røstvig. Trained at UCLA, she spent her career at Oslo and was the author of two monographs, *The Happy Man: Studies in the Metamorphoses of a Classical Ideal* (2 vols., 1954 and 1958) and *Configurations: A Topomorphic Approach to Renaissance Poetry* (1994). The second is the summa of her work on symbolic form, and it is that approach to literature that is represented in this new collection, published a year after her death. “Topomorphism,” a coinage of her Oslo colleague Roy T. Eriksen, is meant to compass the ways that recurring elements (*topoi*) are distributed in the body (*morphe*) of a text. That such patterns are central to our understanding of Renaissance poetry was the great argument of her career.

The title essay sets parameters for her investigations, and is worth reading for anyone interested in what is often called *numerology*. Røstvig disputes the term. It confuses what are for her two distinct positions, the occultist who “attributes intrinsic power to his formulas,” and those who “philosophise or theologise by means of numbers,” who

“always consider numbers as symbols of abstractions, all power necessarily being derived from God alone” (23). For the second sort of writer, the role of number in creation is a result of the Creator’s art, the fitting of the forms of things to their natures. Philosophers and theologians who discern those patterns undertake a rational project of recovering principles of design, and writers who shape their works accordingly are imitating the making of the first maker. The essay gives a few examples of number paradigms discovered in nature and scripture, notably the Pythagorean *tetractys* formula, in which the first four numbers stand, respectively, for point, line, plane, and three-dimensional space, and correspond to such important fours as the seasons and the elements. Augustine’s writing about the Trinity and about musical harmony is an authoritative conduit for such ideas, and Ficino and Pico della Mirandola are important inheritors.

The second essay, “Structure as Prophecy: The Influence of Biblical Exegesis upon Theories of Literary Structure,” begins to show how these ideas might be applied. Augustine’s account of the psalms illustrates how the study of significant numbers can point the believer toward the promise of ultimate unity with God. *Unity* is a central term, as is *perfection*; such perfect unity is discerned in the centrality to *Paradise Lost* of the Son’s ascent into his chariot, a figure that reconciles the fourness of Ezekial (the four wheels within wheels and so on) with the singularity of the godhead. Readings follow, in subsequent chapters, of Vaughn, Cowley and Herbert, Marvell, Henry Fielding, Milton, and Sir Thomas Browne. The spirit of the inquiry is captured at the beginning of a chapter on Edmund Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calendar*: “there simply *must* be more to this poem than the tiresome theme of the complaining lover” (114). What there is, when the numbers shake out, is “the greatest theme of all—the return of man to his origin in God” (115). The book is unapologetically written from a Christian viewpoint (“the theology of our church” [25]). The patterns can be intricate, but the conclusion is always passionately the same.

Røstvig cites with respect some disciplined scholars of symbolic form, such as Alastair Fowler and A. Kent Hieatt. Her significant numbers, however, are basic enough—she works mostly with two’s, three’s, four’s, seven’s—to afford almost infinite flexibility, and they tell a story more about interpretative devotion than about original craftsmanship, more about reading than making. The method is the bright mirror of routinized deconstruction, able to find what it wants everywhere it looks, and to draw the same conclusion each time. The interest in numbers does not extend to the statistical methods by which findings could be tested. These are poignant flaws, for every essay is written with uncommon urgency. (One reads too, in H. Neville Davies’s preface, of Røstvig’s bravery during the Nazi occupation of Norway.) Scattered throughout are formal observations of genuine interest. If there is no power of critique here, the book can also be read as a generous, fundamentally theological criticism of the field in which it arrives.

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