

A note on Robert Kelly's *Calls* (Lunar Chandelier Collective: 2018), and The Island Cycle

Calls is the fifth and final long poem of the Island Cycle (this includes: *Fire Exit*, *Uncertainties*, *The Hexagon*, and *Heart Thread*). As with each of these books there is a formal constraint, here found in the form of three-line stanzas. Throughout the cycle Kelly has explored a vision of number as an emergent quality, one that has its own agenda, and is encoded into our reality, everyday or otherwise. There is a twoness, threeness, fourness, etc. to which historically, and also spontaneously, the innumerable things respond.

Where Kelly attends *eights*, in the preceding book, *Heart Thread*, he is forced to deal with issues we might find, for example, while contemplating Gurdjieff's eight-fold ray of creation. Both of these eight-forms concern themselves with all of experience, and it is the diversity of eightness in anything and everything that Kelly's study of the number reveals, rather than the mere numerical fact of there being eight things, or eight themes identifiable in creation; in fact, Kelly's use of number is paradoxically non-configurative, and it is only by what presents itself that we find any order suggested. His are numbers without self-consciousness. Angels.

Here are three sections from *Calls*:

2.

The calls are causes
listen to me
three times round the island

and stay your hand
no one is guilty
only the gull can look down on us

angustia that narrow thing
angina, a squeeze, *anguis*, a snake,
anxiety the coil of worry

round the moment when
every stroke of time wants to be free.
Be me (I wanted to tell her)

be me looking at you,
watching the slither of your absence
the panoply of human evidence

but these are fancies

bred of remembering too well
what I should never have seen in the first place

now I am a slave to what I observed.
Serve it, serve
the imaginary perceiving we call real.

3.
Every wall has a door in it
waiting for the door
not easy to find

every wind has a door in it
every air
or open the light and go through

it is all about doors today
the number three
the in the out and the between

daleth a door they say is four
I counted three
for *aleph* is zero, what has never been said.

4.
Ice was. And then.
Refrigeration. Engineering
grandfather. Great circle.

We are here on the boat,
boat on the water, water on the planet
the boat goes round.

There are religious reasons for everything
the serious ton of local conversations.
"Thoughtful" was a word I overheard.

Lighthouse lovers estuaries
youthful voices of old men.
Community a kind of song,

living out loud all

the special anxieties of music
among the animates.

Threeness. Kelly has pointed out to me the inherited three-fold division of Roman society, the invention of the concepts past present and future, among many others. The Scottish *glamour* (magic, enchantment), as in *to cast the glamour*, is a variant of *gramarye*, from English *grammar*. Grammar is itself an enchantment upon words, and our world, and number is another kind of grammar.

There is a threeness in *Calls*, which may be found tercet by tercet, but this number comes with another sense, that of a trinity, which is a sublimation of each precedent part whose enchantments linger on in the whole.

I wonder if the threes of *Calls* perform in the diverse registers of the whole Cycle. *Calls* does not particularly read that way, despite the idea's obviousness; rather closer to the truth is that since this is the fifth book of The Island Cycle, it is ruled by the number five, which proves itself to be deeply concerned with threes. Nonetheless, we might contrast it with Zukofsky's A24.

A24, "*L.Z. Masque*" is a musical arrangement of previous sections of that same long poem, along with selections from his other works, and the music of Handel. These are organized into five voices by Celia Zukofsky. Five threads move simultaneously through the *L.Z. Masque*, and recall to mind when one first read them, while resounding from their new context in flashes of multidimensional significance. I find it is worth mentioning, as the only corollary I know of to this last book of the Island Cycle, though I don't mean to mislead: *Calls* does not read as if it were from five distinct places, and these projects are not obviously similar on the page. *Calls* remains ever at the level of the immediate, to such a degree that the moment itself becomes something sensuous. The *L.Z. Masque* is a conscious fabrication, something put together, arranged, and presented as such. *Calls* on the other hand, if it can be said to contain the Island Cycle's previous measures *as such*, does so organically, prehensively: so that we cannot be sure the poet, intrepid voyager, was aware of the sublimations these threes wrought.

The Island Cycle has a noticeable organic evolution, and shows clearly Kelly's visionary attitude towards these forms: one book comes from the next, harmoniously, though without intellectual overdetermination. I am not the only person to have visualized several books of the Island Cycle at once in an archetypal, crystalline form.

A curiously prescient and very similar description to my vision of these texts is found, perhaps unsurprisingly, in Kelly's early novel, *The Scorpions*.

My mind saw a five-pointed star tracing itself luminously, silver on dark blue, and a deep voice in me said this is the Jesus pentagram, draw it, make it, worship it. Desperately I tried

to trace it, from bottom left to apex, down to bottom right, up to upper left, across to upper right, back down to lower left again. But this was not a simple star, it was a great expanding pattern, proliferating parallels out in all directions, parallels that yet had to join at the apices, figures impossible on a plane surface, yet I saw them there in all radiance; they were to the outline of a five-pointed star as a tesseract is to an outline square, yet I seemed to see every line, joining, extension of the figure. Each time I tried to trace it, after endless miles of joining parallels, always I would falter as the last line leapt down leftward to the starting point. Tormented and obsessed, my mind grasped the word *pattern*, saved itself, *refused* to follow the lines, *refused* to draw the pentagram. Instantly the lines vanished, the weight of the cross eased.[...]

–*The Scorpions*, Doubleday: New York; 1967 (p.134). Reissued and still in print from Station Hill Press.

Kelly's poetry, though erudite, suggests itself to intuitive understanding not only at the level of the line, or stanza, or book, but *from book to book*. This achievement cannot be overstated as an evidence of the living work, and the lived work, and few are the parallels in American poetry, that great academy of eternal masters not on earth.