

A Selection of Poems in the Octagon and Octahedron Form

By Michael Bradburn-Ruster

Notes on a Poetic Form: Octagons & Octahedrons

As poetic forms, the *octagon* and *octahedron* are inventions inspired by my perusal of passages on the symbolism of the Octagon and the number eight, found in René Guénon,¹ Martin Lings,² and Annemarie Schimmel,³ as well as insights drawn from Nicholas of Cusa's *De docta ignorantia* (*On Learned Ignorance*).⁴

In sacred architecture, the octagon mediates between the terrestrial square (the “four corners of the earth”) and the celestial dome, at once bearing the latter and transcending the former. It thus corresponds to the dimension of human existence, both liminal and central, situated between Heaven and Earth, Unity and multiplicity. Whilst the octagon is “closer to the circle than the square”⁵, or in greater ontological propinquity to Spirit than to body, it nonetheless belongs to the realm of *psychē* (soul or ego), whose nature—like that of Janus—represents at once “a vehicle for the spiritual light” on account of its “nearness to Heaven”, and yet merely “the best of the corruptibles”, being “not of the Spirit”.⁶

Hence, the themes of poems in octagon and octahedron form tend to embrace the paradox and ambiguity of our nature and existential

¹ Chapter 44 of René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*. 1962. Trans. Alvin Moore, Jr. (Cambridge, UK: Quinta Essentia, 1995), 184-7.

² Martin Lings, *Symbol and Archetype: A Study on the Meaning of Existence*. (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), 90-2.

³ Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*. 1984 (Oxford UP, 1993), 156-63.

⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist P, 1997), 87-206.

⁵ Guénon, op. cit., 185. And cf. Nicholas of Cusa: “The inscribed polygon grows more like a circle the more angles it has” (*Ibid.*, 91).

⁶ Lings, op. cit., 91.

situation, the *chiaroscuro* of our yearning and our fragility: thirst for Vision of the Sacred, and poignant awareness of our distance from the Ultimate Centre. At once recognition of our fallenness, distraction and delusion; and hope of Blessed Felicity through Remembrance and Regeneration. The soul is amphibious, capable of *gnosis* through contemplation, intellection and virtue, and yet susceptible to “all the disorder and obstruction... of the fallen man.”⁷

As for the form itself, the *octagon* has eight verses of eight syllables; the *octahedron* eight verses of ten syllables, most often in iambic tetrameter and pentameter, respectively. The rhyme scheme is in pararhyme (“slant” or consonantal), in the symmetrical pattern of a fan, linking the outer verses (vv. 1 & 8), and proceeding in “centripetal” fashion (vv. 2 & 7; 3 & 6) until converging in a central couplet (vv. 4 & 5). The form thus chimes with the content, echoing the octagonal form of the traditional baptismal font as threshold of the spiritual realm, as well as the “eight gates” of the *Ming Tang* (Hall of Light) temple, symbolizing passage from the outward to the inward, from the exoteric to the esoteric, and the Rosicrucian *Rosa Mundi* with its eight rays signifying the four elements and four qualities.⁸

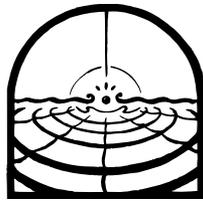
Theme and form therefore coalesce in these embers of verse, microtexts that reflect the macrocosm, inviting meditation, supplication and practice: a call to dwell on the eight beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-10), to practice the “circumcision of the heart” (Rom. 2:29), whose literal, physical rite took place on the eighth day after birth (Lev. 12:3), and in hopes of the Resurrection, the eighth day of the Passion.⁹ To this constellation of symbols the soul must be attuned by practice, that the principles within their Source be embodied in both word and in deed, lest the paramount prayer be uttered in vain: *Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra.*

⁷ Abū Bakr Sirāj ad-Dīn, *The Book of Certainty*, Ch. 6, qtd. in Lings, *ibid.*, 92.

⁸ Guénon, *op. cit.*, 186, 185 (f.n. 4).

⁹ Schimmel, *op. cit.*, 158.

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