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Justin Clemens, *The Mundiad*
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In 1928, a young doctoral student named Milman Parry published a dissertation on the Homeric epics. Parry contended that most of the phrases in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were constituent parts of larger, and to an extent, predictable linguistic formulas. This controversial discovery transformed the conception of Homer from creator par excellence to something more like an assembly-line worker, mechanically connecting the cultural clichés of ancient Greece. Between 1933-35, Parry, along with his assistant Albert Lord, made two trips to Bosnia, to a region where most of the population was illiterate. After interviewing dozens of locals, it became evident to Parry and Lord that in a predominantly oral culture, knowledge has to be constantly repeated or else be lost. Oral knowledge production, Parry concluded, invests great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned over many centuries in order to maintain the world as it has been passed down from previous generations. Epic poetry is the literary expression most suited to oral tradition; its formulaic language patterns become essential in passing down wisdom. This, Parry argued, explains why Homer wrote like an assembly-line worker: his epics represent a collected record of oral knowledge, a previous conception of the world developed by our pre-literate ancestors.

Walter Ong, in his book *Orality and Literacy,* suggests that as writing and print developed in Europe, the epic lost its original world-sustaining function, but maintained its cultural aura; poets imitated the epic form to lend to their work a sense of authority. However, by the 18th century, once writing and print had become fully integrated forms of knowledge production, poets, particularly in Italy and England, began questioning whether the epic could play any further function in literature, and consequently began satirising it. These satirical works used the techniques of the epic form and applied them to unworthy and oftentimes petty contemporary concerns. For example, Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad* – a play on *The Iliad* – can basically be read as a snarky denouncement of authors who wrote poetry for the sole sake of making money. *The Dunciad*, and those many hundreds of other mock epics like it written in the eighteenth century, worked as satire because epic poetry, which was once so crucial in the formation of culture, no longer had any relevant application to the contemporary world, besides posturing toward it.

Justin Clemens' *The Mundiad*, published originally as three books by Black Inc. in 2004, and re-published with an additional three books in 2013 by Hunter Publishers, appears, on face value, to be a twenty-first century revival of mock epic form. Like Pope's work it deploys a number of techniques associated with the epic, while concerning itself with contemporary and "un-heroic" subject matter. However, unlike the eighteenth century – when mock epics formed a network of poets taking the piss out of each other, flexing literary muscle, and simultaneously dismantling the austerity of an anachronistic form – Clemens' mock epic more or less exists as an island.

Delivered mostly in heroic couplets of iambic pentameter, the action of *The Mundiad* centres around the birth of a baby girl called Mundia. Her parents – a drug-addicted nurse and an in-patient who had his face punched in at a nightclub – conceive Mundia accidentally in a moment of passion on the hospital bed. Mundia, who can speak to the world from inside the womb, pushes herself out of her mother's uterus prematurely, falls asleep, and has a dream in which she talks to something called a Dream Parrot. Then she escapes the hospital and takes up residence at an unlicensed brothel, which is where the story ends. The action is punctuated with the narrator's musings on psychoanalysis, philosophy, technology, the state of human existence in a modern metropolis, as well as some justifications for using the epic form:

> But in this final age one can't see how
> A lyric voice could smooth the furrowed brow,
> Nor, in the braying tumult of the hunt,
> Discern the winged goddess form the runt –
> And so, past gates of ivory and horn,
> Three thousand years of poetry will mourn
> Their end in fire-dark archives of cracked urns.
> Yet it is only when a structure burns
> The secret parts of its constructions are
> Exposed to inklings of another star,
> And – through disaster and anachrony –
> Restored to lost potentiality.

Perhaps the most direct statement of intention in the book can be derived form its title – *The Mundiad* – and the name of its heroine – Mundia. Clemens explains that 'mundus' means "the World", "mundane but everything, pure matter whirled to matter, peoples spaces, dreams, and needs, the taking place of place which starves and feeds, relentless, painful in its ecstasy."
With this in mind, Clemens' epic begins to seem less satirical, and more like an investigation into whether the form is able to provide new insight into the contemporary world and the human's place in it. There are even scenes in the book that appear to address "the World", in the sense that they are about "real global issues".

> Or think, perhaps, of a Rwandan child,
> Who, raped and tortured, rescued, still reviled,
> Forced, as she stands upon a UN stand,
> To mouth a language lawyers understand,
> And, shamed for that, returns back home to find
> She's damned the headman's relatives, who've lined
> Her house with pieces of her family's skin
> And they say they'll 'sew her up' and 'do worse then' –

Scenes like this make it difficult to determine precisely what function irony has to play in this book. Is Clemens maintaining the detached tone of the satirist while conveying the suffering of people in other parts of the globe to generate a type of irony? Is he trying to foster genuine pathos? The neither-here-nor-there-ness of this scene made me feel like I was reading the World News in verse.

Perhaps the desire to address "the World" in epic form has something to do with the fact that Clemens lives in Australia, a place that is often seen as being so far away from the rest of it. Australia does have some other examples of contemporary epic poetry. In 1975, Kevin Hart and Alan Gould wrote a mock-epic called "The Harrowing of Balmain", published periodically over four consecutive weeks the following year in the *Nation Review*. It was about the rise and fall of "The New Poetry" that arrived in Australia in 1968. Hart and Gould attempted to mimic eighteenth century satirists, and use the epic form to take the piss out of their peers – particularly John Tranter. TT.O.'s *24 Hours* is another example of a contemporary Australian epic, located in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy. TT.O. spent a decade sitting in cafés along Gertrude Street, Melbourne, recording with his notebook the way the local residents, many of whom were immigrants from Greece and various

Eastern European countries, spoke to one another. He then stitched the notes that he collected together into one epic oral account of Gertrude Street, a localised and microcosmic re-enactment of what Homer did with the oral culture of Ancient Greece. As such, *24 Hours* uses epic form not as satire, but as a means of sustaining and preserving the oral reality of immigrant Melbourne as it existed in the 1980s.

Like both of these epics, Clemens uses the form to explore inner-urban life in an Australian city. But his exploration is not lightheartedly satirical like "The Harrowing", which doesn't try to be anything more than a re-run of the mock-epic, set in inner-city Sydney. But it is also not as sincerely "epic" as *24 Hours* because the World it is representing is devoid of TT.O's sense of purpose and framework.

This lack of 'purpose' in the execution of the epic poem – a form usually endowed with such specific purpose, even it is one as petty as having a go at your peers – is disorienting. What is the subject of Clemens' poem? Is it the contemporary Australian city on a Saturday night? There are all the right props: drugs, sex, nightclubs, fucked up people. But iambic pentameter doesn't sound like Melbourne at night. It lacks multiplicity, simultaneity, the polyphonic and psychotic symphonies that enter you all at once while eating Lord of the Fries on the corner of Swanston and Elizabeth at 4am on Saturday morning.

It occurred to me that there is a more "meta" satire happening in *The Mundiad*. Maybe Clemens is satirising not any specific group of poets, like Pope did in *The Dunciad*, but the very idea of the "contemporary poet" – and therefore himself, too. On this reading, Clemens is using the ancient form – a form that is historically designed to be didactic, conservative and authoritative – to send up the mere notion that there is any world beyond the personal that the poet could hope to "represent". Now that the epic conception of human history is irretrievably compromised, all representations of the World, especially the "poetic", are hopeless, solipsistic, futile.

In Clemens' construction of the World in *The Mundiad*, we live dislocated, purposeless, teleologically void lives, with no sense of community and no shared language with which to commune with the millions of people who swarm around us like fleshy automatons.

> Today, of course, the question of the clone
> Compounds such dreadful fractures of the bone:
> When sixty-year-old couples breed; or kids
> Of different surrogates are split by bids;

Or grandmothers give birth to babies sparked
In daughters' eggs; or sperm is frozen, parked
In vats for decades, then selected, thawed
And spawns a child, though dad has gone to God –
What's this but Gnostic hatred of the fact
That Time must pass, and passing, will distract
All life from living, for what must prevail
Is not your Will but inorganic Veil?

The Mundiad is an up-yours not only to the contemporary world, but to the role of the poet therein. Any attempt at representing, through poetry, this world is going to fail. Clemens takes this forgone conclusion and laughs in its face: "what could be more ridiculous than writing an epic poem about the whole fucking world in the twenty-first century?"

When viewed like this, there is a definite satisfaction to get out of *The Mundiad*. Most importantly, it is funny. It takes the mock epic one step further, mocking not just the epic poem, but also the role of poetry in general. At the same time, when you read the book it is impossible not to be impressed at how painstakingly it is composed. I often caught myself thinking, "God damn, this must have taken so much time to write." *The Mundiad* strikes me as a disturbingly cynical, sarcastic project made hilarious by the fact that it is crafted with the skill and love of a master artisan.