

Small Press / Absolute

We have to remind ourselves that we're not striving for absolutes. We're not unveiling the next Kafka, not signing a contract for *Peterson's Guide to Four-Year Colleges*, no reading tours for Jesus. There's a humility to what we do in creating books, even while there's an urge to "have it all." In reading a book, for instance, there's an approach that says it should solve things, be an answer, aesthetically, politically, personally, environmentally, comically, tragically, economically, democratically . . . And then as publishers our approach to *making* each book, bringing it forward or letting it through as something we work on and promote. We think it will speak to the masses, again that it will solve a lot of problems, that perhaps it should sweep people up, into the rafters, into the night sky. Maybe these things *should* happen. Maybe they will. And the author too will want the book to be everything, even if they've published other books, have others coming out with other presses, they need this one to finally be the one that will break the mold, that will take its turn through all the review venues and place its star at the root of the global syllabus. So be it.

And perhaps all this is the nature of the book, or any thought at all, a noncompromise.

But a small press tends toward the absolute as well. Yes, it gathers its mini-absolutes of books or texts and seems to be promoting mini-worlds everywhere you look, no different really from the big presses. It says hurrah! at all the different purchase points and shows its face metonymically, frontally, when it can. Still, the small press is here as a purity. It is unlike any of the presses with commitments, that is, a steady outlay, a debt, a budget, an active committee, a concern, the ivy of publicity that has grown perhaps for

decades, once cut back revealing a vacant lot, an absurd chamber of spiteful low-paid administrators, where pennies glint until everyone finally has a screenplay. Not the small press. The mandate of the small press is to unequivocally, absolutely, stay small, not to cross out of thinking its own birth. It stays where it is and takes all things to itself at that place. It's the most assured of all, it knows what it is doing, somehow, completely unlikely, breaking into the fanfare of the Spirit, breaking out again, talking to people, letting things rest, going with its carts and wagons into the halleluiahs of the set-straight. Bet on it again and again and you'll be right. The small press is, in the classic sense, "awful" in its purity. It brings down the wall that's used to bring down the wall. It gets where anyone knows it's going and demands to be caught-up to. The young are suddenly old, the old are nearly comatose in the birth canal, dogs are yelping and moping.

But, let it go. So the small press whispers years out in the nonexistent marketing plan, its progeny long buried, its mom-and-pop funders decayed and bankrupt of tears. What will the large press do if it loses its faith, shutter, rolls its backlist over to a nebulous noncommittal maitre d'? The small press is still there after all, asking why are *you* always inventing everything?; the small press will dodge, will burn, will difference, will exclude, will be the hard and soft light because it can. It gets up and says "I don't need anything." It goes on and on filtering through the world of strangers and not once does it stop to say hello. It fakes an orgasm with the screen turned down then mimics a headbutt with a piece of soot. Nothing will be held against it. Aimlessly we mill across the seminar floor, small histories looking for mystery.

But let it go. This piece of the small press is crucial. It comes at us outside all the absolutes and declares itself as their other. It is the piece of the small press that we most cherish, the element that while holding all of these extremes in its hand and seemingly

understanding them better than anyone, crushes each in its mythy palm, saying “Not I.” First and foremost it says no to the book, to everything we have been taught to care about what a book does, how it summarizes, how it paints the town, how it hurdles the arch enemy, how it pickles and pricks its papers in every little hole with ink. And the small press says “I don’t negotiate.” The press smacks down the book and makes it wish it never happened, turning away in disdain as it stomps off into another dimension, a future, we think, but described as “dirty” by the cretins and ingénues. “So be it,” says the small press, knowing no one else on earth can say the same. We’ve lost all comeliness.

But let go. Because just as the press grows into itself by refusing the book, it takes another leap by pushing down & compressing the mountaintop of the author. There will be no such thing. There is an all-out campaign to deny these “entities” a foothold in the real. Not until the masses exclaim “It makes perfect sense!” will the small press be satisfied. Yes, the *raison d’être* of the small press has always been to deconstruct this retrograde sincerity. They will their own weakness, which is a help, but look how the press will call the magnum opus a link in a series and then call the masterpiece a bird. Because the author has come to the press for the wrong reason, has come to the press with her absolutes and expecting the press to make it always and forever the more so. Now the press’s mandate of “I’m not sure” snatches the author by the pony-tail down to the dark water, everyone first thinking the beast is playful but slowly realizing otherwise. Everyone who bought the book is shuffled out of the auditorium. The global community hangs its head saying “what was I thinking.” Everywhere the press goes it hears these *mea culpas*, none of which are its own.

But let it go. Frighteningly, thankfully, the small press also valorizes its *own* demise. It dons thick black-rimmed glasses and says “every day I write the book,” holding its hand

over its heart, falling backward off the building ledge, passing gas into the twilight as it tucks and pikes. Only true devotees of the absurd can hear its “No more of this” before it is no more. Here and now you are witnessing its absolute achievement, to fall and flail out of the running. With each move it makes, a piece of it will run from the room, it will disappoint its faithful, it will divest itself of its founders, it will gravitate to gravity itself. “Get yourself over with” is the next thing we hear, the next epigram nobody asked for. We are so happy that the small press gets rid of itself. Look how little it asks *us* to do. None of the judges are wavering on the bench. There has been no evidence brought forward. We have light, we have fracture, we have a barista to whom we must reply. With its list the small press has provided a catalog of answers to the great questions of our day.

But let it go. In closing I would like to introduce the great friend of the small press, futility. He accompanies our every turn, without fail, and many know that he was there with us at the start. He showed us in the door, and showed us the temptation to forsake him. To the degree that he holds a sure place in our home, we can then call ourselves a success. That we are humble enough to let him take the reigns, that we know that we do not know, that seems to always be the answer the small press can give. No one else will lay flat on their back in the cold and look up at whatever is there. We hear the aggrandized whisper of “it is dangerous here” and have no intimation of what it means. We have no proper way to take ownership, no ability to weep. And so we sink into the imagination.