



The Phantom Quarry:
Translating a Renaissance Painting
Into Modern Poetry
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An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. The image is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perform, call a VORTEX from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. (Ezra Pound)

There's a long tradition of *ekphrasis*, that is, of writers responding to works of visual art, shaping in words some sort of corresponding work. The *locus classicus* in the European tradition is Homer's description in the Iliad of the shield of Achilles, but there are many examples also in both Chinese and Japanese traditions, for example. In fact, so familiar is this mode that it can seem almost natural to describe briefly the work, and then elaborate on it, suggesting, perhaps, what the depicted figures felt or thought, or imagining what had

just happened, or was about to happen in the narrative. Certainly, *ekphrasis* provides opportunity to writers to display their connoisseurship, to impress with interpretation, and to charm by sharing appreciation of an established icon.

Clustered peonies, towering pines,
peacocks in glorious exhibition
And red-crowned crane shouting at
each other;
Purple camel-humps seethe agreeably
in viridian glaze;
All is blended, and implied meanings
are deep, implicit and rather
fascinating.

Composition is exquisite, layout clearly demarcated.

It gives a splendid scene of the gentle people echoing and mixing in.

The plot of false or true, moving or still, has been organically linked.

Truly monstrosities natural interaction, is worth seeing a hundred times.

That's from *Spring Comes*, a poem based on a poorly translated Chinese account of the scroll painting of that name by Yuan Jiang of the Qing Dynasty, in which I had fun exaggerating some of these indirect self-flatteries.

It would be disappointing, though, if no deeper or more interesting correspondence were possible between image and word. Many visual works contrive, through articulation of shapes and colours on their plane surface, to construct a complex superstructure of intermeshed meanings. Can we not ambition, at least in some cases, a verbal work which develops resonances, parallels, and sympathies of another sort with crucial formal structures within that complex (an isomorphism, as the mathematicians might say), foregoing the easier pleasures of description and response in pursuit of something, perhaps more demanding, which would invite that rushing of ideas which Pound describes?

There's one particular image which has occupied me some forty years now with unpacking and translating it. As with all good translations, of course, my going concern has been to preserve, if possible to augment, that whirling vortex through which ideas come

rushing, and to dispense with all secondary details, fascinating though they be. The focus must be on the essential, not the anecdotal. Let me rehearse here first a rough first-draft translation, before the necessary triage.

Botticelli: La historia de Nastagio degli Onesti III (1483)

A row of figures, standing, seated, or part-way between the two, facing outward towards the viewer, and all arrested in mid-gesture. Despite the variety and force of their gesticulation, their heads are neatly on a level, as though pinned to the screen which hedges them round behind, as the meal-tables in front of them constrain them narrowly also. One figure, dressed like the diners in civilian clothes, but seeming very self-possessed, appears to address them with both arms raised, his back to us. This side of him, framing the scene along the lower edge, are the stumps of freshly felled trees, echoing the trimmed trunks of the trees beyond the screen, their canopies still intact.

This static grid of orthogonals is penetrated from right of canvas by an uncivil intrusion. A mounted figure, armoured and with drawn sword, follows his hounds who, centre scene, bring down a naked woman. She topples, arms outstretched, with feet still running, and dishevelled hair, like a cardboard cutout of anguish in extremity. This dynamic wedge motivates the expressive gestures of the slim band of upper bodies, in which the men, though centrally positioned, avert their gazes from the falling woman, looking instead at the horseman, or down at the scatter of goods on the table in front of them, or at their fellow diners. It is almost as though the victim were invisible to them.

Contrariwise, the women, from their vantage on the left, stare in evident horror at the naked victim, tipping over in their own upset their table, and spilling its service on the grass. It appears to be to them, primarily, that the young man with his back to us is directing his exhortation, arms raised to calm and control their excessive distress.

This whole action plays out for us before the privating screen, broken only at the extreme right, where several figures are gathered at some tents. Recognizable among them by his distinctive red leggings is that same young

man who, on the left and facing into the scene, gestures to control it. Now he does business with a young woman.

I first encountered this painting in the early 70s, in a guide to Madrid's Prado museum. As I had previously known Botticelli only through the consonant sweetness of his *Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus*, I was completely taken aback and intrigued by the clashing discords which here survived even the muddy colours of an execrable reproduction. A little research revealed that this painting was the third in a series of four from Botticelli and his workshop, the entire set illustrating one novella from the *Decameron* of Boccaccio, a tale, we are informed, which will elicit from us both pity and delight.

A young man of Ferrara, Nastagio degli Onesti, who has recently inherited a fortune, fixes his affections on the beautiful daughter of an even more wealthy and distinguished family. Despite his attentions and attractions, the young lady rejects him, and seems so repelled that he is driven even to consider suicide. Yet he continues to waste his fortune in trying to win her. In an effort to save both him and his inheritance, friends advise him to leave Ravenna for a while. He accedes, and with his entourage and traps, travels some three miles from the city. There he strikes camp, erects his tents and pavilions, and resumes eating, revelling and spending.

One Friday evening, he goes brooding alone in the pinewoods. Suddenly he hears a screaming, looks up, and sees a beautiful girl running towards him, naked and crying for mercy, lacerated by the underbrush and by two large mastiffs who savage her. In pursuit is a dark knight on a black horse, cursing incessantly and threatening murder.

Wanting to save the girl, Nastagio picks up a tree-branch and moves to intervene, protesting the cowardice and savagery of this hunt, but is warned off by the horseman, who identifies himself as a former citizen of Ferrara, whom Nastagio knew when a child. He tells how he had been in love with a woman who had cruelly rejected his advances, and how as a result he had killed himself with his sword. The woman had initially rejoiced in his death, but soon died also. Both were condemned to hell, but with a specific punishment appropriate to their

sins: he to pursue her, and she to flee before him. Each time he catches up with her, he kills her with his sword, tears out her heart, and feeds it to his dogs. Soon, however, she resurrects unscathed, and the chase resumes, always at the same times, in the same places where she had rejected him. Specifically, the horseman avers, at this time every Friday, he hunts her down in this very spot.

Nastagio, fearing to interfere with divine justice, draws back, and watches as the screaming girl is dragged down by the hounds, and the rider rips out her heart and other organs, and throws them to the dogs who devour them. Almost immediately after this, the girl picks herself up, and runs on again, with the dogs in pursuit, and the rider remounts his horse and follows them.

Nastagio is initially nonplussed, but then sees how to turn this predictable horror to his own advantage. He arranges a banquet for this exact spot in the woods at exactly the same hour on the following Friday. Promising that he will cease his expensive courtship, he insists in return that the girl he loves be invited to the festivities.

This is reluctantly agreed. The tables are set, the guests gathered, and the banquet begun at the scheduled hour, when, dead on time, the infernal hunt breaks in upon them. Several of the guests attempt to intervene, but the knight addresses them just as he had done Nastagio, and like Nastagio, they withdraw as the action repeats exactly. Amid the immediate hubbub of discussion, Nastagio's inamorata recognizes her own situation in that of the victim of the hunt, and signals complete compliance to Nastagio's wishes, and so they are swiftly married. Since then, says Boccaccio's narrator, the women of Ferrara have grown far more tractable to the desires of their menfolk.

Botticelli's Series

Evidently, the Botticelli I have described above illustrates only one segment of this tale: the arranged banquet in the woods and Nastagio's consequent acceptance in marriage. In fact, this is the third in sequence of a set of four *spalliera* panels in which Botticelli laid out the entire narrative. The first two show Nastagio's wandering in the woods, his encounter with the infernal hunt, his recoil from the knight, and the resumption

of the hunt after the death of the victim. Both feature the device of continuous narration, whereby distinct episodes in the timeline of a story are shown within a single setting. In the first panel, the figure of Nastagio is twice shown; in the second, both knight and victim twice occur. The final panel depicts the wedding ceremony, in which Nastagio, still in his trademark leggings and smock, sits facing his bride, as two files of servants serve the feast in conspicuous symmetry, and the best ware is displayed in the centre of the scene, just where the murder was enacted in the third panel.

Progressively, throughout the sequence, the forest is shrunk, its trees trimmed or completely cut down. In the third panel, those nearest the viewer have been felled, granting sight of the action. In the final panel, the only remnant of the woodland is a little greenery, trimmed and shaped on either side of the dining area, over which built arches replace the natural canopy, as genteel banquet now altogether supplants the earlier shambles of the hunt.

Returning for a moment to the term *spalliera*: it denotes a type of panel used as the backboard of a bench, or on a marriage chest. They were often commissioned as wedding gifts, characteristically illustrating some moral designed to induce appropriate behaviour in the newly-wed bride. There are treatments of Boccaccio's tale by other artists also. Two panels from a sequence by Ghirlandaio, for example, may be found in museums in Brooklyn and Philadelphia. These Botticelli panels were, in fact, probably commissioned by Lorenzo de Medici as a gift for a wedding he had himself arranged, uniting two leading Florentine families. The two banquet scenes include portraits of several leading citizens, including the groom's father.

So, these panels by Botticelli were themselves intended to function just as did the intervention of the hunt in the third panel: they illustrated the unavoidable and violent destiny of any woman who comported herself coldly to her man, and thereby ensured the tractability of women in society, and safeguarded the civil order.

Repetition

Discovering all this context, my interest in

Boccaccio's tale, and in its representation by Botticelli grew and deepened. What drew me was the intersection of the various material world of appetite and consumption with the spare and exactly repeating realm of eternal justice, and how the latter was enlisted by opportunistic impresarios - Nastagio, Boccaccio, Botticelli - to reinforce a repressive order, though not, perhaps, without irony in the cases of the latter pair.

What then to say of repetition that has not already been said? The motif of damnation as the eternal same had already figured in Dante's *Inferno*, and is more recently employed in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*. It features prominently in the thought of both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and as 'reproducibility' is a demand of the experimental method in science. It is familiar in patterns of trauma and addiction, and is characteristic of modern industrial processes. Furthermore, correlation of the binary *change/stasis* with that of *life/death* is well-established, and to be found formally deployed from the "never, never, never, never, never" and "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" in two of Shakespeare's tragic climaxes to the persistent *ostinatos* of Beckett's late prose in *Lessness, Ping* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Last in this inventory, I would draw attention to the way the absolute predictability of the infernal hunt is harnessed to repress the social unpredictability of women in marriage, and how Nastagio turns the occasion of his own helplessness into a means towards mastery of his world. Invoking anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer on de Sade, Nastagio exemplifies "the pleasure felt from the observed modifications on the external world by the observer."

It was these considerations, along with the conspicuous human drama of the story, that interested me in the mid-seventies. But how to enlist these for poetry? I'd got bored with what I had been writing, and could see little point or interest in doing a conventional retelling of the tale, even if specifically foregrounding those aspects which interested me.

Instead, I was taken by the notion of somehow 'translating' from the narrative only those dynamics which attracted me, and ditching the period shtick, which had so absorbed the poet John Dryden, for example,

in his retelling of the tale, as admired by his early-nineteenth century editor, Sir Walter Scott:

Nothing can be more highly painted than the circumstances preliminary of the apparition; the deepening gloom, the falling wind, the commencement of an earthquake; above all, the indescribable sensation of horror with which [Nastagio] is affected, even ere he sees the actors in the supernatural tragedy. The appearance of the female, of the gaunt mastiffs by which she is pursued, and of the infernal huntsman, are all in the highest tone of poetry, and could only be imitated by the pencil of Salvator.

Indeed. It's exactly this over-reaching to mark the language as high-toned *poetic* (so much so, here, as even to be able to describe 'the indescribable') that's most necessary to avoid. Ezra Pound demanded of the poet a supercharged language, but here we get go-faster stripes instead.

What I wanted to retain was the display of exact repetition and violence, and their exploitation to quell difference in the interest of social stability and civility, narrowly defined. To do this, I needed to find or invent a possible formal implementation, which might bring over those, and only those elements of the original.

Volved, Involved, Convolved

There are a couple of further characteristics of the succession which any intervention must bear in mind.

To start with, any translation now must take its place within a recursive series of previous versionings, each with its own significant subtractions and additions. This recursive pattern has eight levels: 1) the courtship and deaths of the original suitor and Ferrarese lady; 2) the divine condemnation of the pair to the infernal chase; 3) Nastagio's encounter with one episode of the hunt; 4) Guido, the original suitor's version of the story to Nastagio; 5) the witnessing of the same episode of the hunt by Nastagio's guests; 6) Guido's second explanation of the situation, for the guests - the moral is brought home, according to Botticelli at least, by Nastagio as well; 7) Boccaccio's version, with the coda of

Nastagio's marriage and the new regime of compliancy; 8) Botticelli's recruitment of the tale on behalf of his Medici patron, stressing the intersection of austere eternal with sumptuary present. Among these only the second, almost mechanically played out like the elaborate action of a Renaissance clock, involves exact repetition. All the others are recursive reframings, taking that repeating nub to heart.

Second, as *spalliera*, the painted images find themselves in the display of wedding gifts, objects among objects, like those on show dead centre of the final panel. They lie comfortably in the human horizontal, the social dimension, and only when interrogated by the curious reveal their vertical reach, which finds divine above, hell below, and judgement and control through all.

And we have no account of the female victim's feelings in the matter. Not only is she nameless, but she is effectively speechless also, rising only to generic cries for mercy and mournful complaint, represented in the third person. Guido, the vengeful knight, can tell us of his suffering in love, and of the shape and reason of his personal hell, but all we glean from his quarry is an incoherent sense of her pain. What is the status of a phantom's suffering? Is her agony greater than that of, say, a stag torn down by hounds in the chase? Or of a fish landed by an angler, or a squashed fly? Why do the men in Botticelli's third panel ignore the victim, and look instead to the armed assailant? Why do the watching women act so distressed, contrariwise? What response does a cry for help elicit when it has been already uttered many thousand times, and gone unheeded, and even within the painted image, the victim seems cardboard, her gestures stiff, the stuff of cliché? What does the body-language of agony *in extremis* portend when the body appears naked to make a scene at a formal repast? What matter an unseemly death immediately supplanted by a wedding, cancelled by assurance that things will take their course as before, and that these sad events may be put to constructive social use?

Certainly, through pity and terror, this cruel lady is made an example of. Her agony may be great, but it serves well *pour encourager les autres*. And don't the audience, and their opportunist impresario, all live happily ever

after? And how can any later teller of the tale decouple themselves from this train of moralizing? How detach from the purchase of such deep and extensive indoctrination, without becoming prosy, without seeming oneself to break a butterfly upon a counter-moralising wheel?

Let me break off.

Cube As Constraint

In writing an account such as this, there's a danger that the whole thing be made to seem too clean, too much a product of volition. My own experience with this sort of a business is that what's worthwhile is usually the outcome of an encounter as multiply recursive as the Nastagio story, and that was certainly the case in this instance.

For one thing, by the early '70s, my own technical development as a poet hadn't got much further than the standard Irish bag of tricks: lyrics of description and expression dressed in the most transparent of formal attire; the emphasis being almost entirely on the language as carrier of information, with little heed to other possibilities.

Luckily, I came across Rayner Heppenstall's book on Raymond Roussel. Roussel (1877-1933) was a French novelist, poet, and dramatist, who was for a while championed by the Surrealists, until it became evident that the strange works he produced, far from being the spontaneous outpourings they had seemed, were in fact the outcome of highly conscious strategies of composition. It was Roussel's notion of 'composition under constraint' that attracted me, as it had also drawn Raymond Queneau to found the OuLiPo movement.

In crude terms, Roussel's method was to invent for each work a non-trivial set of non-traditional rules, and to generate the work accordingly, with little attention to the standard 'poetic' niceties of language. By this means, he produced a series of works which feature passages where the most bizarre of tableaux are described in language more akin to a user manual than to conventional fine writing. To me, less unconcerned than Roussel about questions of meaning, this suggested the possibility of generating complex formal dispositions of language which might correspond in some way to

certain aspects of the world which interested me, and then to implement these forms using every literary device I could find or invent.

As, in the mid-70s, I began to earn my living as a systems analyst, this method appealed to me as a way of 'modeling' the world in language, as an alternative to simple descriptive/expressive approaches. My approach was to try to set up certain constants of texture or structure, and then to set loose within those constraints an apparently free subjective voice, the intent being to simulate in various ways the common experience of seeming to act freely and spontaneously, while even a minimal self-awareness reveals that this freedom is to a great extent generated and governed by forces and concerns in which one has had no hand, act, or part. Without some reframing of this sort, I fear that the language of description, expression, aspiration, is constantly being sucked down the sink of calculated, monetized use. Moreover even our means to refresh it have been appropriated. Weep me a tear for the victim

of our eternal hunt, which hasn't been glossed by television and advertising, and isn't already co-opted to its place in the sump of a readymade politics.

Accidentally or not, this period of experimentation coincided with two taciturn decades, during which I published almost nothing. The up side of this was that I had plenty of unpressurized opportunity to pursue the most unlikely lines of thought. Also, I had been playing a good deal of three-dimensional noughts and crosses, and thought I had found a way to use the 4x4x4 grid on which I played to serve as a matrix for composition. But after about a decade's experimentation with these approaches, I was in the end left only with two sixteen-line poems and one isolated line (these were incorporated into my mid-nineties volume, *stone floods*). It was, nevertheless, this apparently unfruitful idea which at last suggested a way to implement a sort of "translation" of the aspects of the Nastagio story which interested me.

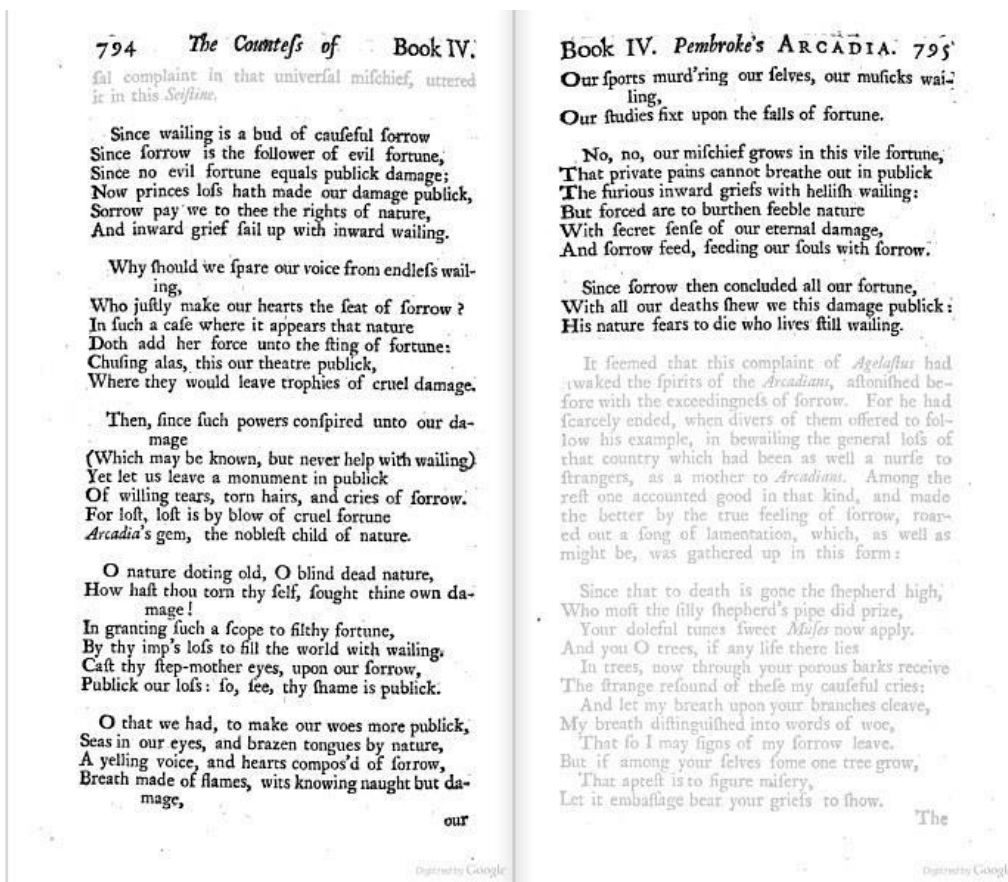


Figure 1

Sestina Form

There is, as it happens, one traditional poetic form whose structure enforces an almost obsessive repetition: the sestina. This has also the virtue of only slightly pre-dating Boccaccio's story, having been invented in 12th-Century Provence. Here, by way of example, is one of the first sestinas written in English, this one by Sir Philip Sidney in the 16th Century. Note how, instead of the line-ends being marked by rhyme, in the sestina we have instead a repetition from verse to verse of the same small set of end-words: **sorrow, fortune, damage, public,**

Nature, wailing (see figure 1).

So, as you can see, the heart of the sestina is six six-line stanzas which are bound together by recurrence of the set of six identical end-words permuted in a strict pattern. As you can see from the Sidney example, the form traditionally ends in a three-line stanza, the *envoi*, but I omit this as inessential to my purpose.

Here's a nice diagrammatic version from Wikipedia, which shows that the reordering of the end-words is less arbitrary than it seems (see figure 2).

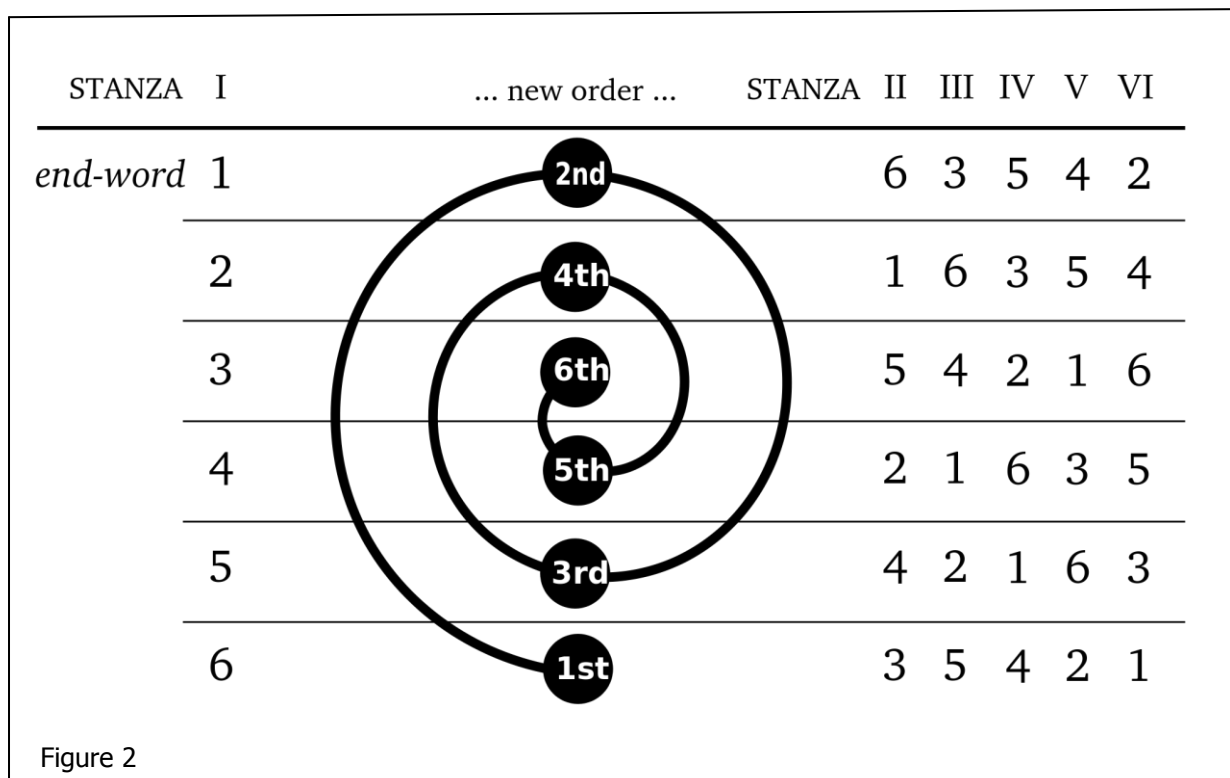


Figure 2

Sestina As 6x6 Cube

Given that I had been playing for over twenty years with the possibilities of using cubes as a compositional device, it's not surprising that at last the penny dropped with me, and I saw how I might version the Nastagio story using this armature. Without retracing every step of the process, but substituting instead a regrettable amount of hand-waving, I'll try to indicate what I was at.

Let's forget for a moment about language, and treat words instead just as objects. Focus only on the end-words of the sestina, ignoring the remainder of each line. We can arrange these words in a 6x6 grid, the verses

in columns, the lines-numbers in rows:

- 1 6 3 5 4 2**
- 2 1 6 3 5 4**
- 3 5 4 2 1 6**
- 4 2 1 6 3 5**
- 5 4 2 1 6 3**
- 6 3 5 4 2 1**

Now we've got this stripped-down version of a sestina, let's play with it, obsessively building in more repetition. We've reduced each line to just the end-word, so now let's build up those lines again, but using only those same six words. (Remember that we're treating the words just as objects at this point. Don't worry about whether or not they make sense.) In the same way that the order of these words is rigorously prescribed by the form, so, we, developing our own form, can prescribe an order of permutations for the words within each line. And so, we end up with a standard six-stanza sestina (sans tercet), each line of which is made up of the same six words in varying pre-set sequences. In other words, each word will recur thirty-six times. Doesn't make a lot of sense yet, but it's sure as hell repetitive!

But we can go further than this. Remember that the murderous knight and his victim are, as we have learned from science fiction to say, from another dimension. Their penal tableaux merely mark the moments when their austere universe of judgement intersects with our zone of bright commodities. There is in the visual arts an equivalent for this extra-dimensional incursion: the anomalous pale shape that occupies the centre of Holbein's *Ambassadors*, an anamorphic skull recalling otherworldly realities.

So, in order to represent its otherworldly status, let's take our cube, literally, to another dimension. As a straight line extends in one dimension, a square in two, and a cube in three, so does a tesseract or hypercube extend in four. Extend, then, those procedures we have used to generate from just six words, a 6x6x6 cube, and apply them one more time to get a 6x6x6x6 tesseract which, unlike the cubic construct, cannot be physically built in three-dimensional space unless it's partly unfolded, as is the tesseract which forms Christ's cross in Dali's versioning of the Crucifixion as *Corpus Hypercubus* (1954). So, as the infernal hunt, itself a stripped-down précis of Guido's courtship of his nameless lady, whirls through space and time with the merest suggestion of its meaning on show, and needs interpretation, by Guido, by Nastagio, to reaccommodate it to the social realm, we now have here a kernel of such sheer iteration that it exceeds our physical space.

How now to make it mundane again?

The Worldliness of Words

About sixty years before Boccaccio constructed the 10x10 grid of his Decameron, within which Nastagio's tale occupies the eighth position on the fifth day, the Majorcan philosopher, Ramon Llull was constructing his *Ars Magna*. This was a tool for converting Muslims to Christianity through rigorous logic and reasoning. With much intellectual labour, Llull conceived an infallible theological machine by which a reader could enter in an argument or question about the Christian faith, and the apparatus would then return the correct answer. Llull went on actually to construct a number of physical machines, along the lines he had set down, and it is through this work that he is seen as a progenitor of computer science. He was eventually stoned to death by recalcitrant Muslims in their rage against his machine. Llull's project also fits into another, related lineage, that of the attempt to create a perfect language. Often intended as a means to regain the divine language spoken in Eden, and since then whispered only by angels, this tendency was particularly widespread among the religious wars of the 17th century, when the flawed dissonances of natural human language perverted the divine order to mayhem and bloodshed. There have, since then, been many attempts to construct a perfect rational language, or 'conlang', the best known current examples of which are probably Esperanto and Klingon.

Primary among the aims of the conlangers are the elimination of the ambiguity and redundancy which are a feature of natural language. How can a bank be both a financial institution and the edge of a river? And why should a river also be known as a watercourse, and a man be simultaneously a bloke, a chap, a guy, a dude, and a gentleman? Writing to Sir Philip Sidney, and speaking of himself, Giordano Bruno gives us a glimpse of a less imperfect order, where things answer to their names:

Here Giordano speaks the common language, he calls bread, bread, wine wine, a head a head, a foot a foot, and other parts by their proper name, he calls eating eating, sleeping sleeping, drinking drinking. He holds miracles as miracles, prodigies and marvels as

prodigies and marvels, truth as truth, doctrine as doctrine, goodness and virtue as goodness and virtue, impostures as impostures, deceptions as deceptions, knife and fire as knife and fire, words and dreams as words and dreams, peace as peace, love as love. (Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast, Explanatory Epistle, Trans. Ingrid Rowland)

So, having ground down my iterative gem to six spare aspects, I must now bulk it up again if it's ever to be so at home in the world as Cosimo's wedding gift. And what I need to build onto this austere armature is precisely what conlangs throw away: ambiguity and redundancy.

I talked of those six end-words in a sestina, but asked you to think of them just as things, not as words. Now, reverse the charges, and consider them as words again, with meanings and associations and grammatical functions. Select from the entire available vocabulary of English, six words which might be applied to our infernal hunt. As we will want these words to fulfil other strict criteria, I'm going to cheat a little here to save time, and present you six I've prepared earlier, along with some synonyms to suggest possible applications:

cover

to conceal, clothe, copulate with a female (esp. of horses), shield from harm, compensate or make up for, act as a substitute for, traverse a stretch of ground; a table setting, a false background

run

to move swiftly on foot, ply (the bus runs hourly), be valid in a given area, tend or incline (his taste runs to the eccentric), hunt or pursue (dogs running deer), cause to function (run a machine)

play

to sport, to flirt, to perform a role;

drama, conduct (fair play), freedom of action (give full play)

blood

vital fluid, a dandy; give (a hunting dog) its first taste of blood, animosity (bad blood), bloodshed or murder, noble descent (royal blood)

course

onward movement (course of events), route, mode of behaviour (best course available), customary passage (ran its course), part of a meal; to hunt with hounds

fast

swift, disposed to dissipation (a fast crowd), faithful (a fast friend), sexually promiscuous, firmly fixed, lasting; to abstain from food

Even this small sampling shows, I hope, that these are words one might use, each with several distinct applications, in recounting our Nastagio story. But even such polyvalent words as these can't but get tedious if they simply come around again and again in our transcendent text. Right, then, as it's a flawed quality of natural language that its words fan out in a span of synonyms, let's avail of that to humanize our neat inhuman: for each of our six chosen terms, take six synonyms, mutually exclusive in their senses. In other words, they should be as widely distinct from one another as possible. But, wait, it's more difficult yet. For each of these synonyms, generate another set of synonyms, following the same rules, and building in one further one, namely, that no word should recur at any level in this cascade of splayed ambiguities. Since I was at this point trying merely to achieve proof of concept, a maquette, as it were, for the fullscale work, I didn't yet proceed to the fourth, phantom dimension.

But this has all been not only complex, but densely abstract. Let me try to put verbal meat on the algorithmic bones (see figure 3):

play	toy	game	cast	drama	freedom	perform
	doll	crippled	throw	scene	liberty	act
	puppet	joke	shed	excitement	release	do
	miniature	quarry	copy	farce	exemption	execute
	kite	eager	squint	crisis	familiarity	impersonate
blood	plaything	plan	calculate	spectacle	privilege	effect
	trifle	flesh	born	turmoil	immunity	render
	gore	kin	passion	rake	initiate	bloodshed
	ichor	family	lust	gallant	enter	slaughter
	serum	relation	love	implement	train	butchery
course	plasma	race	rage	gather	originate	murder
	patch	class	grief	inclination	novice	assassination
	pierce	kind	agony	sweep	recruit	hit
	clot	connection	hate	drag	cause	massacre
	track	direction	hunt	layer	channel	dish
fast	wake	bearing	hound	ply	gutter	recipe
	slot	heading	chase	mason	furrow	wreck
	rut	order	pursue	hen	trough	bowl
	way	instruction	search	bed	canal	starter
	follow	commission	stalk	stratum	medium	main
cover	trail	supervision	harry	propagate	tube	finish
	extravagant	quick	constant	secure	abstain	firm
	vagrant	living	fixed	safe	lay off	hard
	excessive	rapid	reliable	sure	diet	company
	absurd	hasty	steadfast	certain	cease	concern
run	prodigal	swift	true	guard	not vote	stable
	exorbitant	pregnant	uniform	solid	refrain	sound
	wasteful	mobile	incessant	impregnable	stop	compact
	top	lap	screen	covert	penetrate	clothe
	roof	drink	pretence	brush	lay	dress
play	lid	lower front of body	partition	undergrowth	screw	invest
	head	circuit	surface	woods	bore	wrap
	capital	ripple	hide	secret	diffuse	rig
	summit	polish	riddle	disguised	mount	outfit
	best	turn	show	shelter	stab	suit
run	bolt	stand	flow	escape	convey	sprint
	gulp	halt	current	flee	smuggle	dash
	desert	group	river	vanish	carry	hurry
	abandon	perplexity	deformation	fugitive	transport	bound
	hasten	station	stream	leak	conduct	lope
play	fasten	base	glide	issue	transmit	jog
	speed	stud	fluid	elude	communicate	career

Figure 3

It should now be apparent that the reason for going through the procedure of deriving sets of synonyms, and for insisting that no word recur anywhere in the grid is to eradicate every last trace of repetition. Through the imperfections of natural human language, the unnatural repetitive logic of the hunt has been dispersed into an array of utterly undistinguished terms, just as in Cosimo de Medici's recursion — Botticelli's *spalliere* — the hunt is quelled as a gift among gifts.

My last stage was to take each of these 216 derived terms, and generate from it a poem. But to how relate each verse to its seed-word? Well, the simplest linking of this sort that I know of is as a riddle and its solution.

It's in the rock, but not in the stone,
 It's in the marrow, but not in the bone,
 It's in the bolster, but not in the bed,
 It's not in the living, nor yet in the dead.

What is it? (Solution: The letter R)

Construct a riddle something along these lines for each of the 216 derived words, and theoretically, an astute solver could reconstruct the grid, even though the solutions aren't given, and by extension, that solver could, equally theoretically, derive by reverse logic the original six words which generated our entire sublunary word-grid and its attendant verses. And what 'shape' should each verse be? Well, since our whole structure is derived from the sestina, it seems appropriate to take the total number of lines in the six verses of that form as our modulator: constrain each verse to be exactly thirty-six words long, and vary them within that to test and bend the constraint in every way that thematics, tone, and notation will allow.

Starting up the Engine

Those cells which are shaded in the grid of words are the ones for which, at that point, I had written verses. I'll quote a couple here by way of example.

the bell is
mercifully
undamaged

its familiar
note again
interrupts
women
at market
old men
at conversation
children
at their play

so they may
celebrate
this narrow
sea divides
their own good
settlement
from the main

The seed-word here is "sound." The verse plays with the idea of a provincial community held together by its ignorance of alternatives, and hence judging itself as "good". That is, of course, one sense of the word "sound," and others, taken in sequence as they occur are "undamaged, whole" (sound as a bell); noise; and a narrow stretch of water (as opposed to the main, or sea)

Here's another, simpler in its approach:

hard words

no jawbreak
ers though
nothing
obscure
in itself

no insults
either no
tonguelashing
or pieces
of anybody's
mind

instead
an oddly
constrained
formality

with fore

grounding
of occasional
details
specific
effects

surely it
must mean
something?

The seed-word here is 'riddle', which is, of course self-reflexive. It starts from a possible definition of a riddle as 'hard words' and then distinguishes the required meaning from other possible alternatives.

Note that the meanings of the seed-words used in the verses are independent of those used to derive these seeds, thus: fast > firm > sound and cover > screen > riddle. They have, as it were 'forgotten' their own histories, rather as in the medieval period saxifrage was, in a mistaken understanding of the etymology of the name, taken as a cure for gallstones, or as St. Agatha became, through error, the patroness of bakers. It is by these irrational means that the human world rubs along.

Eventual Fatigue

Stravinsky has observed that 'the more constraints one imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit . . . the arbitrariness of the constraint only serves to better precision of execution.' The point here, as with the OuLiPians, is that it is vital that one follow through the constraints, wherever they may lead. As I hope might by now be apparent, my purpose is different. To start with, my constraints are not arbitrary, but are chosen as analogues of certain aspects of the world. Also, specifically in this instance, it was intent precisely to escape the inhuman perfection of the seed tesseract, with its repeated six words.

The process of composition involved testing every conceptual link in the procedure. Thus, my grid of words which demonstrate, in principle, the feasibility of deriving synonym from synonym until all repetition is expunged. Similarly, I had to test the thirty-six word form, to see how much weight it could bear in practice, so to speak. There would be little point, for me, in creating an elaborate verse-writing machine if, in the end, those verses

were vapid and uninteresting. That, too, went well, and I quickly found these thirty-six word modules were developing a life of their own. There were, however, difficulties. The stipulation that the verses function as riddles of some sort, risked making the whole too difficult to resolve back to its original six-word seed, but I felt there would be enough redundancy in the system to make this possible. The other problem was much more serious. As composition gradually realized the overall plan, I found myself recursively revisiting the whole structure, testing whether its emergent meanings matched my intent. I found in the end a radical fracture between intent and realization. The plan had been to allow in composition the six seed-words to fan out semantically via cascades of synonyms, and then allow the reader reverse that process, reducing the whole back to the original six words. But I had wanted, precisely, to flee that otherworldly seed, not to return to it. I was, in fact, building for myself and the potential reader a repetitive machine whereby a variegated human world of actions, objects and apprehensions was brought almost within reach, but was always again subsumed back into its origins in a reditus worthy of Eriugena.

So, in the end, I cut the cord and let these thirty-six word units assume distinct identities, while retaining in their modular form the memory of the system which produced them, and retaining its thematics of compassion and coercion.

Given, then, that I failed to prove the viability of my phantom concept, what am I left with? Not, certainly, the fullscale meticulously planned set of correspondences that I had hoped for, but not, either, a mere debris field. The template of the thirty-six word module survives, and it bears now, simply by virtue of its history within the larger, aborted work, certain genetic characteristics. Because it draws its thematics from the presentation of the infernal hunt by Nastagio, Boccaccio, Botticelli, and Lorenzo de Medici, its focus is on social conventions, and on the covert coercion which enforces them. Because of its

brevity, it is severely cropped, like a snapshot, or a Hiroshige print; it marks a specific point within a process, from which a larger whole may be constructed. Like that third panel of Botticelli's, through which I first encountered the entire complex, it is often an enigmatic encounter of clashing registers, in which all elements are held for questioning; it is an interrogative rather than a declarative form. And, always, it remembers the calculation and ruin which generated it.

court
tombs
constitute
our earliest
examples

local sites
exhibit small
side chambers

transepted
galleries

only the
largest
slabs
remain

fallen
displaced

smaller stones
purloined for
nearby walls
or roadworks

the ideal form
exists
in imagination
only

(Solution: play > game > quarry)

Trevor Joyce is a poet and member of Aosdána. His work is collected in *with the first dream of fire they hunt the cold* (2001) and *What's in Store* (2007).



Sandro Botticelli: *The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti (III)* (c.1483). Mixed media on panel. 84 x 142 cm. © 2013 Museo Nacional del Prado.