

The Ontology of Art: Six submissions

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This is a verse-essay in the form of six extended villanelles that discuss various aspects of the relationship between poetry, music, and the visual arts. More specifically they concern issues of ontology, autonomy, endurance, expressive power, and formal resistance to the vicissitudes of cultural change. The rhyme-scheme (tight but highly musical) is used to point up and differentiate the range of aesthetic attributes involved in this running debate.

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1. Poet to Painter

“It must be abstract”, as the poet said.

No painting, pot or sculpture makes the grade.

What use have we for Plato's painted bed?

Our poetry takes wing as soon as read,

Like Yeats's body-soul to music swayed:

“It must be abstract”, as the poet said.

So many kinds of mishap they must dread

Who ply the painter's, not the poet's trade.

What use have we for Plato's painted bed?

Our art alone has wherewithal to shed

The sorts of stuff that crumble, crack, and fade.

“It must be abstract”, as the poet said.

'No things but in ideas' we say, instead

Of “things first”, like the Imagist brigade.

What use have we for Plato's painted bed?

No eye so keen but bids we use our head

Lest we repeat the same mistake they made:

“It must be abstract”, as the poet said.

Let's grant he saw it standing there, that red
Wheelbarrow; still no conjuring the shade.
What use have we for Plato's painted bed?

Though some may ask themselves "whither is fled
The visionary gleam?", they're self-betrayed:
'It must be abstract', as the poet said.

It's that crude picture-theory must have led
Them to seek out the painter's accolade.
What use have we for Plato's painted bed.

Ut pictura poesis: if they're fed
That line it's thinking's role that's underplayed:
"It must be abstract", as the poet said.

Plain false that poetry goes best if wed
To picture-words that call a spade a spade.
What use have we for Plato's painted bed?
"It must be abstract", as the poet said.

2. Painter to Poet

Don't kid yourself: words perish soon enough.
Fine-tune them as you may, they'll not endure.
Each vowel-shift says it's all just language-stuff.

They give way when the going gets too rough,
When mere diachrony leaves sense unsure.
Don't kid yourself: words perish soon enough.

Each change of usage calls the poet's bluff;
Your tricks of form afford no lasting cure.
Each vowel-shift says it's all just language-stuff.

If the best rhymes turn up right off the cuff
Then classic-talk's a trifle premature.
Don't kid yourself: words perish soon enough.

Best take my words to heart, however tough
The gist: reject that old Platonic lure!
Each vowel-shift says it's all just language-stuff.

Let's get this right: not sheer linguistic fluff,
Your poems, but semantically impure.
Don't kid yourself: words perish soon enough.

Inverted Platonism's just a puff
For goods displayed in every verse-brochure.
Each vowel-shift says it's all just language-stuff.

Why take what I say as a rude rebuff
And cling to errant thoughts you'd best abjure?
Don't kid yourself: words perish soon enough.

Else you may find the truth is apt to snuff
Out every bright star in your quadrature.
Each vowel-shift says it's all just language-stuff.
Don't kid yourself: words perish soon enough.

3. Composer to Poet

They got it right, the tribe of Mallarmé.
They saw that music was the Holy Grail.
Let sound and form shape content as they may.

Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s the only way;
French Symbolism on a vaster scale.
They got it right, the tribe of Mallarmé.

Though poets have some splendid things to say
Their splendour fades along the language-trail.
Let sound and form shape content as they may.

Our works endure while words of yours are prey
To time and its semantic car-boot sale.
They got it right, the tribe of Mallarmé.

It's form alone that keeps the threat at bay,
Plus meanings too precise for words to nail;
Let sound and form shape content as they may.

This year's *trouvaille* becomes next year's cliché
As poets fashion words to no avail.
They got it right, the tribe of Mallarmé.

They got it right because all words decay
And so refute the poet's' fairy-tale.
“Let sound and form shape content as they may”,

The Symbolist agenda went, but they
Were poets, stuck with words, so sure to fail.
They got it right, the tribe of Mallarmé.

Maybe his flower, “absente de tous bouquets”,
Already bore a fragrance slightly stale.
Let sound and form shape content as they may.

That's why our notes have something to convey
Of what's beyond the poet's language-gaol.
They got it right, the tribe of Mallarmé;
Let sound and form shape content as they may.

4. Poet to Composer

Why think our art aspires to form alone,
That abstract music from a distant sphere?
Let thought, speech, music jointly set the tone.

Much better we should occupy a zone
This side of any mystical frontier.
Why think our art aspires to form alone?

If music's what requires that we disown
Form's debt to living speech, the lesson's clear:
Let thought, speech, music jointly set the tone.

Take formal purity as sole touchstone
Of truth, and chances are you've a tin ear.
Why think our art aspires to form alone?

Verse-forms may probe the limits of the known
So long as all co-drivers stay in gear:
Let thought, speech, music jointly set the tone.

Put spatial form in charge and you'll be prone,
Like Mallarmé, to have the linkage shear.
Why think our art aspires to form alone?

It's when the music-talk gets too high-flown
Or theory-hooked that poems disappear:
Let thought, speech, music jointly set the tone.

Tough luck for theorists once their cover's blown
And they've no compass-points by which to steer.
Why think our art aspires to form alone?

No help from that direction if you've thrown
All else away in quest of one Idea.
Let thought, speech, music jointly set the tone.

Best not convince yourself that you've outgrown
All that while boldly bringing up the rear:
Why think our art aspires to form alone?

Else it's odds-on you'll turn out one more clone
Of Mallarmé, to cap your verse-career.
Let thought, speech, music jointly set the tone;
Why think our art aspires to form alone?

5. Painter to Composer

Hear how the rags of time hang on each note.
To every melody they clutch and cling.
For future ravages, what antidote?

No use those endless labours you devote
To master-scores that notate everything:
Hear how the rags of time hang on each note.

Just play the piece again, and what you wrote
Sounds as if processed via the I Ching.
For future ravages, what antidote?

Though music won the Auden prize as (quote)
An art of “pure contraption”, here's the sting:
Hear how the rags of time hang on each note.

We drift down-river on a leaky boat,
Us two, and cannot know what time may bring.
For future ravages, what antidote?

So if it's on such shifting tides we float
Then risk attends your every tonal fling.
Hear how the rags of time hang on each note.

Still, it's no wish of mine to get your goat
By voicing truths with all too harsh a ring.
For future ravages, what antidote?

Just that our twin arts share the asymptote
Of things whose Fall's prefigured in their Spring:
Hear how the rags of time hang on each note.

Let's have no more of doctrines that promote
Keats' “ditties of no tone” no voice can sing.
For future ravages, what antidote?

That's where you get it wrong: through your turncoat
Desire that sense-appeal play second string.
Hear how the rags of time hang on each note.

You think this adds a bit more puff to bloat
The culture-stock of all that music-bling:
For future ravages, what antidote?

But that's a thought you've likely got by rote
To elevate your latest offering.
See how the rags of time hang on each note;
For future ravages, what antidote?

6. Composer to Painter

No rivalry where no horizons meet.
It's hybrid forms conflict, not thoroughbred.
How judge where isolation's so complete?

The critics think there must be bounds to beat
But will keep mixing predicates instead.
No rivalry where no horizons meet.

See how their phrasing half-admits defeat:
An art of "form in motion", Hanslick said.
How judge where isolation's so complete?

When you and I survey the balance-sheet
It's whole ontologies go head-to-head:
No rivalry where no horizons meet.

If those fool commentators think to treat
It as some petty feud, then they're misled:
How judge where isolation's so complete?

Granted, I'm not immune to the conceit
Of "music first!", but just take that as read:
No rivalry where no horizons meet.

Say "painting first!" and I'll turn up the heat,
Though really it's a habit I'd best shed:
How judge where isolation's so complete?

Read Lessing and he'll tell you how discrete
Are static arts from those with time-line spread.
No rivalry where no horizons meet.

Maybe we'd render warfare obsolete
If we could just put art-world tiffs to bed.
How judge where isolation's so complete?

Small hope of that: no truce so bittersweet
As that which comes when pseudo-feuds go dead.
No rivalry where no horizons meet.

Ontology's the safest place to greet
Those in whose service once you struck or bled:
How judge where isolation's so complete?

Still – see above – these *contretemps* are meat
And drink for those to their own art close-wed.
'No rivalry where no horizons meet'

Is none the less a slogan to repeat,
As here, when partisans start seeing red.
How judge where isolation's so complete?
No rivalry where no horizons meet.