WORKING WITH POUND

SESTINA: ALTAFORTE

Ferrick Gray

Prefatory Remarks

I was thumbing through Faber's 2005 reprint of Pound's **Personæ** and came across one of my favorite poems by the master. His **Sestina: Altaforte**. **Personæ** was originally published in 1926, with Pound creating a body of his shorter poems. Much of his earlier work was omitted from this definitive edition, as he was prepared to dispose of it. He sought something that would define him as both a **person** and a **poet**.

Back to the poem. Sestina: Altaforte is recognized by its form and is alluded to in its very title. It is a sestina with the distinct, magical, and somewhat mysterious touch of Pound. One has only to listen to Pound read this poem to appreciate how much of a dynamic reader he was, and how dynamic his verses are. Pound was very much into music, and he read a number of his poems, accompanying himself with drums; this, too, added to the dramatic effect of his reading.

The poem itself was first published in 1909. It is said that when he read this poem a couple of months earlier, a screen had to be placed around the gathering to prevent a public disturbance. Now that is what I call powerful!

The poem's speaker is the war-loving troubadour **Bertran de Born**, who lived around the second half of the twelfth century. In his introduction to the poem, Pound cites **Dante** stating that Born is a *stirrer-up of strife* (Canto XXVIII of the **Inferno**, carrying his severed head).

The poem is set in Born's castle, **Altaforte**, with his complaint to his *jongleur* (singer) **Papiols** that their home stinks of peace, much preferring tumult. Pound makes great use of alliteration, especially in the fifth stanza, and evokes the voice of a man delighting in violence. In some ways, the construction, wording, and rhythm seem to be a precursor to his Cantos — or maybe not.

Pound wrote about how his poem came into being:

> I had had De Born in my mind. I had found him untranslatable. Then it occurred to me that I might present him in this manner. I wanted the curious involution and recurrence of the Sestina. I knew more or less of the arrangement. I wrote the first strophe and then went to the Museum to make sure of the right order of permutations ... I did the rest of the poem at a sitting. Technically it is one of my best, though a poem on such a theme could never be very important.

There are various recollections of Pound reading his sestina (which became known as **The Bloody Sestina**). A somewhat humorous one was regarding his introduction to the young sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska:

Clearly, Pound's pronunciation of the word **peace** made it sound somewhat different to the Frenchman's ears.

Sestina: Altaforte

Ezra Pound

LOQUITUR: *En* Bertrans de Born.

Dante Alighieri put this man in hell for that he was a stirrer-up of strife.

Eccovi!

Judge ye!

Have I dug him up again?

The scene is his castle, Altaforte. "Papiols" is his jongleur. "The Leopard," the device of Richard (Cœur de Lion).

I

Damn it all! all this our South stinks peace.

You whoreson dog, Papiols, come! Let's to music!

I have no life save when the swords clash.

But ah! when I see the standards gold, vair[1], purple, opposing

And the broad fields beneath them turn crimson,

Then howl I my heart nigh mad with rejoicing.

II

In hot summer have I great rejoicing

When the tempests kill the earth's foul peace,

And the light'nings from black heav'n flash crimson,

And the fierce thunders roar me their music

And the winds shriek through the clouds mad, opposing,

And through all the riven skies God's swords clash.

III

Hell grant soon we hear again the swords clash!

---

[1] Vair is a fur tincture in heraldry, describing a two-color pattern covering the field or a division of the field in a manner considered similar to red squirrel furs, formerly much used in noble and royal mantles (Wikipedia).

And the shrill neighs of destriers[2] in battle rejoicing,
Spiked breast to spiked breast opposing!
Better one hour's stour than a year's peace
With fat boards, bawds, wine and frail music!
Bah! there's no wine like the blood's crimson!

IV

And I love to see the sun rise blood-crimson.
And I watch his spears through the dark clash
And it fills all my heart with rejoicing
And prys wide my mouth with fast music
When I see him so scorn and defy peace,
His lone might 'gainst all darkness opposing.

V

The man who fears war and squats opposing
My words for stour, hath no blood of crimson
But is fit only to rot in womanish peace
Far from where worth's won and the swords clash
For the death of such sluts I go rejoicing;
Yea, I fill all the air with my music.

VI

Papiols, Papiols, to the music!
There's no sound like to swords swords opposing,
No cry like the battle's rejoicing
When our elbows and swords drip the crimson
And our charges 'gainst "The Leopard's" rush clash.
May God damn for ever all who cry "Peace!"

VII

And let the music of the swords make them crimson
Hell grant soon we hear again the swords clash!
Hell blot black for always the thought "Peace"!

Construction of a Sestina

The sestina is a twelfth-century French form attributed to **Arnaut Daniel**. It is a form closely related to blank verse, and involves **lexical repetition**, not rime. It is a thirty-nine-lined poem divided into six sestets and one tercet, known as the envoi, a final farewell, and gives a conclusion to the poem. There are six words repeated in a specified order at the end of a verse; these words are sometimes known as

[2] War-horses

teleutons. These are not to rime.

The general scheme of the teleutons (at the end of a verse) is given as:

> Stanza 1: 1 2 3 4 5 6
> Stanza 2: 6 1 5 2 4 3
> Stanza 3: 3 6 4 1 2 5
> Stanza 4: 5 3 2 6 1 4
> Stanza 5: 4 5 1 3 6 2
> Stanza 6: 2 4 6 5 3 1

where the repeated words are represented by the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

The envoi is subject to its own requirements, but in modern sestinas, these are often ignored.

> Verse 1: 2 5
> Verse 2: 4 3
> Verse 3: 6 1

where the first is embedded toward the middle of the verse and the second appears at the end of the verse.

Pound's Sestina

As we may expect, and it would come as no surprise, there are some variations to Pound's sestina. The repeated words are:

> peace
> music
> clash
> opposing
> crimson
> rejoicing

These words must then follow the order given above (Construction of a Sestina) for the end of each verse. Pound does not use consistent verse lengths (as in syllables), but this is not a requirement. His verses vary between nine and fifteen syllables, with eighteen verses consisting of ten.

The most obvious deviation is in the envoi, where Pound has chosen to omit the words **opposing** and **rejoicing**. Purely by the nature of verses two and three in the envoi, we may understand why they would have been omitted.

Another not-so-obvious change appears in the fourth stanza. The teleutons for verses three and four are in the wrong order. The correct order would have given:

> And I love to see the sun rise blood-crimson.
> And I watch his spears through the dark clash
> And prys wide my mouth with fast music
> And it fills all my heart with rejoicing
> When I see him so scorn and defy peace,
> His lone might 'gainst all darkness opposing.

This too is an appropriate rendering. Whether this has been a printing error or Pound made an error in the order is not known. However, this is not crucial as the effect is still dramatic.

Three Example Verse Metrics

As I have stated many times, metrical analysis is not the be-all and end-all of poetry. Mostly, it holds little interest for the poet, and in Pound's case, likely nothing at all. The most important task of any poet is to create a rhythm by selecting the most appropriate words and placing them in the best position. Any emphasis must occur on an important word, and not one having little or no relevance to the message of the verse. In the case of the sestina, it is the repetition of words that is important. Below are three verses from the first stanza to demonstrate the metrics and rhythm.

Stanza I, Verses 1 and 2:

> Dāmn ĭt ăll ⸗ āll thĭs | oŭr Soūth | stĭnks peāce
> Yoŭ whōre | sŏn dōg ⸗ ° Pāp| ĭŏls | ° cōme ⸗ ° Lēt's | tŏ mūsĭc

What we **do not** find is consistency in the metrical feet. What we **do** have is a definite and strong rhythm where the emphases change from the first to the second syllables throughout the verses. This simple exchange gives the speaker a noticeable voice of command. From the very beginning, we can gauge the personality of the speaker (Bertran de Born).

In verse one, we note the expected initial caesura after the first **all**, making an effective use of the dactyl. However, the pause is minor, but still noted, and is followed by a trochee and two iambs. We may be tempted to introduce a longer pause-foot after **this** for dramatic effect.

> Dāmn ĭt ăll ⸗ āll thĭs | — ° | oŭr Soūth | stĭnks peāce

In verse two, we have both initial and terminal caesuras, which will naturally create a pause. Of interest is the pause that is generated between the two syllables of stronger emphasis between **dog** and **Papiols**, **Papiols** and **come**, and then **come** and **Let's**. These may be seen as **compensatory pauses** to complete the metrical foot.

Stanza I, Verse 4:

> Bŭt āh ⸗ whĕn Ĭ seē | thĕ stān | dărds gōld | ° vaĭr | ° pūrplē | ° ŏppōs(ing

Verse four is the longest, consisting of fifteen syllables (not that this has any importance), and we still find a very pronounced rhythm. Again, we have the expected initial caesura and in the fifth foot, the compensatory pause separating the heavily stressed **gold** and **vair**. Similarly, the pause occurs between **vair** and **purple**. A pause is naturally introduced between the last two feet, indicative of the punctuation and sense. However, this final foot is not a paeon, but an anapest with a hypermetrical syllable.

There is little purpose in analyzing every verse, and from these three examples, we can easily see that Pound was a master in the construction of his verses. Not only are they technically brilliant, but they also convey the speaker's nature.

Miscellaneous Notes

1. The icon image (click on it, or mouse-over it in the plex) is by Manfred Heyde, licensed under Creative Commons. **The Chateau at Hautefort (Altaforte)**, once the stronghold of the troubadour poet and knight, **Bertran de Born**.

2. Listen to Pound reading his Sestina: Altaforte. The power and expression in Pound's voice are undeniable.