

A Snakeskin e-chapbook

The Plinth Poem

By George Simmers



August 2009

In Trafalgar Square, London's busiest meeting-place, there is a plinth that stood empty for nearly 150 years. It was originally intended for a big equestrian bronze depicting King William IV, to match the statue of George IV opposite. That sculpture was commissioned, but the money ran out, as maybe did the desire to commemorate a less than memorable monarch.

Since 1988 the Fourth Plinth Project has used the plinth as a showplace for contemporary sculpture. In 2005, Mark Quinn's sculpture, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, made a big impact. A 3.5m high portrait of disabled woman when she was 8 months pregnant, it was carved out of a single block of white marble.

For the summer of 2009, the plinth is home to Anthony Gormley's *One and Other* project, which places bog-standard citizens of Britain on the plinth originally intended for a king. Altogether 2,400 participants (one for each of the twenty-four hours of a hundred days) have been chosen at random by computer algorithm. The population of the UK will be represented proportionally by choosing a certain number of people from each region. Participants can use their time on the plinth as they like – to perform, to preach, or simply to stand and look at the world.

Anthony Gormley has expressed his intentions and aspirations for the project: "*One & Other* will be a picture, or representation, of a very different kind from the statues around the square or the paintings in the National Gallery. It is not about myths, power or privilege, nor about war and certainly not about death – it is an opportunity to look at life. The making of this living monument has changed through the participation of its makers; the 'Plinthers' as they have come to be known. It is amazing how quickly the idea took hold – it started as a relatively simple idea but now in becoming real it has an energy and vitality all of its own."

On August 6th, at the unsocial hour of one in the morning, George Simmers took his place on the plinth. He used his time to read this poem. A video of his reading can be seen at: http://www.oneandother.co.uk/participants/George_Simmers.



ONE

Introduction

So. Here we are. Trafalgar Square.
And I'm up here and you're down there.
I'm part of Gormley's installation;
And as for you, your motivation
For being here late at night is known
To you and maybe you alone
But what ever it may be –
Thank you for your company.

Last May I volunteered, and so
I'm here, where, as you doubtless know
Each one of Gormley's posing shower
Can have his (or her) public hour
To do whatever is his schtick
(Or hers) and cameras may click,
And little crowds may clap or sneer
At jolly oddballs posing here,
Who in some future may define
Our Britain of 2009.

Well, back in May I'd no idea
What kind of folk would stand up here.
Artistic? Goofy? Or just weird?
What the hell? I volunteered.
Though rain could make the hour a bummer
It's undeniable - this summer

Plinthing is the thing to do -
That and stockpiling Tamiflu,
Sheltering while rain buckets down
And moaning about Gordon Brown.



But though my name was up for choice
I couldn't stop the inner voice
That asked: 'So do you really care
To be on show above that Square
Maybe getting mocked or frozen?'
Then I got an email. I was chosen.
They gave me One a.m. It's not
The most invigorating slot.
The question then – should I be miffed
That I was on the graveyard shift,
When any audience might have shrunk
To three insomniacs and a drunk?
Well no, I shall not be annoyed
If I'm reciting to a void.
I'm not just speaking to the square,
For over there, and there and there
Are cameras from Sky TV,
And they at least are watching me,

And so I speak not just to you,
But idle channel-hoppers, too,
And to the nerds and geeks who get
The live stream on the Internet,
And natter about who's on here
Via Twitter and the Blogosphere
With comments that they think are droll
(Mostly PSML and LOL).

We're on Week Five now, and I've watched
Some plinthers triumph, though some botched
Their chances badly. I have seen
A girl disguised as a machine,
A man who stripped, and one who prayed.
This is a various parade.
Some preach, while some play jolly tunes,
Dress as a duck, release balloons,
Emote about the planet's troubles,
Take photos, or blow soapy bubbles.
Some are verbal, some are dumb;
Some make phone-calls to their mum.
Some are very slightly bonkers,
Some brilliant and some total plonkers.
Some have passion; some have wit.
Some have neither; some just sit.
Some are serious, some are jokers –
(But have you noticed? None are smokers.
A health and safety regulation
Forbids all kinds of conflagration.)

I thought I'd not be one of those
Who use the time to stand and pose.

You've noticed – I'm no supermodel;
You've noticed that my portly waddle
Is not a catwalk strut. O. K. -
If posing's out, then how today
Can I make sure my plinthing session's
Not just a source of dumb depression,
A cheesy bore or something worse?

My hobby, as you'll see, is verse,
And therefore I shall use my time
Up here in questioning in rhyme
This project where I play my part.
Only the very dull at heart
Ponder the question – Is it Art?
I know it's Art, and that's the thing
That inspires my questioning.
Why should Art mean so much to us?
And is this project worth the fuss?
A marvel of sheer organization,
Has it real value for the nation?
And then the question that's occurred
To me too often, has the word,
The printed word upon the page,
Lost status in this visual age?
The plinth is here – folks come and look,
But maybe if they read a book
Mightn't that more enrich their hearts
Than all the merely visual arts.
These are my questions, and to ask
And maybe answer them my task
For this next hour, and though I know
No rhymes for 'plinth', I'm set to go.

I warn you, I'm the kind of bard
Who writes iambs by the yard,
Or even sometimes by the mile.
This poem could take quite a while.



Tiff's hour on the plinth (1st September) was spent changing from male to female.

TWO

The Square

We've lots of time, so let's begin
By looking round and taking in
This Square, where tourists love to tarry,
Boldly designed by Sir James Barry
In a style that's grand yet rational.
He also built the noble National
Gallery just over there.
It is a most impressive Square,
Monumental yet unsolemn.
The centrepiece is Nelson's column.
Topped by the admiral, that fabled
Role-model for the war-disabled.
Nelson's is still a resonant name;
That column has prolonged his fame.
Yet other statues here suggest
Fame can be short-lived, at the best.
Behind Lord Nelson stand two men
Who were immensely famous when
They lived and died. They were indeed
Not only famous – loved, too - read
On Napier's plinth the declaration
That the bulk of the donation
Came from the private soldiery
Whom he had led to victory.
I fear that victory's lost its fame.
Does any schoolchild know his name?
'Peccavi' Napier who took Sind –

Oh fame is written on the wind.
 And these days when we hear his story
 We feel that there's but dubious glory
 In forcibly annexing parts
 Of what's now Pakistan. Our hearts
 Aren't in Imperial operations.
 And we've quite given up annexations
 Though of course our politicians
 Still send troops on policing missions
 (With not all the appropriate gear)
 Off to the North-West frontier.
 If they had known a little more
 About the Anglo-Afghan War
 1839 to 42,
 Would this have seemed the thing to do?
 Might our leaders have held back?
 The massacre at Gandamak
 Should have been a strong reminder
 That a foreign force might find a
 Welcome less than bountiful
 Near to Helmand or Kabul.
 Was this not told to Tony Blair
 Before he sent our troops out there?
 Did Tony Blair, when just a stripling
 Never read the words of Kipling?
 *When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
 And the women come out to cut up what remains,
 Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
 An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.*

 To the South-east, standing on his block,
 Stands General Henry Havelock.

Who received the benison
 Of the Laureate, Alfred Tennyson
 (Aged just two hundred yesterday)
 When Havelock died, he'd this to say:

*Bold Havelock march'd,
 Many a mile went he,
 Every mile a battle,
 Every battle a victory.*

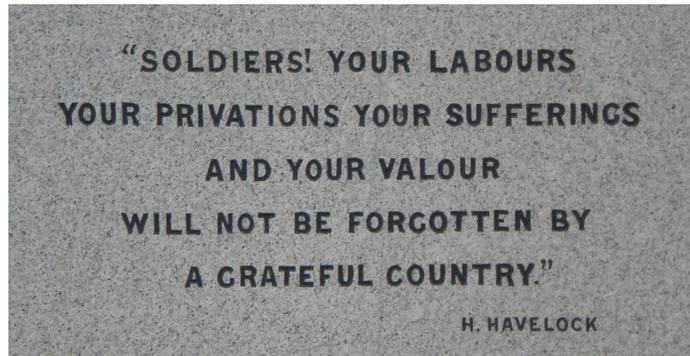
*Bold Havelock march'd
 Charged with his gallant few,
 Ten men fought a thousand,
 Slew them and overthrew.*

*Bold Havelock march'd,
 Wrought with his hand and head,
 March'd and thought and fought,
 March'd and fought himself dead.*

*Bold Havelock died,
 Tender and great and good,
 And every man in Britain
 Says, 'I am of Havelock's blood!'*

Tennyson called Havelock 'tender'.
 Really? When he forced surrender
 On the sepoy who'd rebelled,
 He turned upon the foes he'd quelled
 And answered Indian cruelties
 With British-style barbarities.
 The mutineers had indeed been cruel,

So hatred was not short of fuel,
And hot revenge was in demand.
Havelock's second in command,
The sternly pious Colonel Neill,
Forced Hindu prisoners to kneel
And lick blood from the scenes of slaughter.
These soldiers were not milk-and-water
Types. They beat the rebels, and, that done,
They had the leaders tied, each one
Across the barrel of a gun.
The big guns blew those men apart.
England took Havelock to its heart,
And placed his tall stern statue where
It got most honour, in this Square.



But neither his triumphs nor his crimes
Are much remembered in these times
By Britons who've preferred to let
The past be past, and to forget
Harsh history, as is our wont,
Well, I suspect the Afghans don't.



The average Briton, vaguely loyal,
Prefers a statue that is royal.
There, on his horse, towards the North,
Is unimpressive George the Fourth.
The only skills he ever mastered
Were amassing debts and bastards.
Yet he is not the king who's reckoned
England's worst – that's James the Second.
His statue's round there, planted on
The next lawn to George Washington.

The kind of folks that plant a statue
Show the kind of *Chutzpah* that you
Cannot help admiring. They
Assume that what they place today,
Deserves unquestionably to stand
Forever on its plot of land.
They think posterity will revere
Forever what they've planted here.
They think that fame will last and last,

But future can't be like the past.
One day even Nelson will
Be unremembered; time will fill
New heads with new thoughts, new emotions
History, cruel as the oceans,
Will wash away the things we've made,
And everything that's here displayed,
The things we know, the things we care for,
All will fall in time, and therefore
We know just this: the fame will fade
Of every thing we've ever made,
And each great action, every cause,
And Gormley's will, and mine and yours.



George Simmers and James
II consider one another.

THREE

Mr Gormley

In this project's pages on the Net,
Each plinther's had a chance to set
Down his or her short explanation
About the sort of motivation
That has brought them to the Square.
Some come for fun, and some for charity,
But a large number state with clarity
That they're huge Gormley fans and thrilled
That their presence will have filled
A small piece of his grand design.
Well, if they feel that way, that's fine.

Although I quite admire the man,
I would not class myself a fan.
His work's not always pleased my eye,
Although I have to say that I
Enjoyed the odder and more wayward
Parts of his show at the Hayward.

He filled a tank of huge capacity
With a fog of white opacity,
And made participants exist
In an all-enclosing mist.
Once in there you'd experience
A most invigorating sense
Of lonely awe, till, with a bump,
Colliding with some other chump.



No-one could find you in that cool
 Delightful fog. I've heard of school
 Trips hiding giggling in the mist
 While their teacher, deeply pissed
 Was at the doorway, agitating,
 'Girls! Come out! The bus is waiting!'

And this was Art, and, as art, nifty.
 But I recall in nineteen fifty-
 Something, dense November days.
 When fog was smog, and not mere haze.

Thick and yellow, evil-smelling,
 Lord of the evening, compelling
 Traffic to a resentful crawl.
 And I was nine or ten and small.
 Between myself and home there flowed
 Dense traffic on a busy road.
 I could not see the traffic light
 Across the way, and stood in fright
 Uncertain, nervous, at a loss
 When it might be safe to cross.
 I nerved myself to walk at last,
 But then a lorry blundered past,
 Pavement-crunching, and too fast.
 And that was fog, and I knew fear.
 Gormley's mist inspires a mere
 Funfair-attraction kind of thrill.
 And it's no worse for that, but still
 The moral we might take to heart
 Is that there's something safe in art.
 See those nets stretched all around
 To stop me falling to the ground?

Then there was Event Horizon
 Inviting us to cast our eyes on
 London's rooftops, noting where
 Iron men stood here and there
 On roofs, and each impassive male
 Told us about his building's scale.
 There was a real instructive pleasure
 In seeing what a human measure
 Shows about a cityscape,
 But, more than man as measuring tape,

This make us look, and see anew,
One of the best things Art can do.
I watched young children search the skyline,
Delighted when Gorms met their eyeline.

And yet – those figures... If you care
To visit Oxford, you'll see where
A single Gorm is perched up on
Blackwell's Art Shop, slightly wan.
Big contrast to where down the street
The Clarendon Building comes complete
With rooftop statues of the muses,
Artistic and flamboyant floozies
Done in a style that's pure baroque,
So O.T.T. it's partly joke,
With a big message to impart
About the power and worth of Art.
Such contrast with that iron Gorm,
That blankly standing human form.
If he's a statement, it's restrained,
He's vulnerable, yet self-contained,
The naked creature who's there under
All our clothes. Which makes me wonder –
The muses' sculptor wants to fire us,
Impress us, thrill us and inspire us.
What's Gormley's message – that we must
Stare at life blankly, till we rust?

And what's the message of this work,
In which we human puppets jerk
About above Trafalgar Square
While complaisant tourists stare.

Mr. Gormley has been most emphatic
That his aim is democratic,
In contrast to that horsebacked King,
We're modern humans doing our thing,
But as we plinthers play our part
In this high-concept work of Art,
Each one of us appearing here
Has Gormley for a puppeteer.
He's the One, and we're the Others;
His overarching purpose smothers
Those that we might choose to bring
To this artistic gathering.
Not obviously pulling strings,
He lets us do our separate things,
But his plan arches overall.
We're turned to Art –
and I recall
The old Greek tale of how Pygmalion
Turned mere stone, so cold and alien,
By his artistic touch to fresh
Alive and feeling human flesh.
Is Gormley doing the reverse?
We are, for better or for worse,
All humans, we who'll stand our hour
Up here in sunlight, storm or shower.
Yet for that time we play our part
He's turned us to mere works of art.

Pygmalion, when he saw what he
Had made, responded passionately
Expressing for his own creation
Wild delighted adoration.

And he longed then to possess
Galatea in her loveliness.
Galatea, when he'd had his say
Simply turned and walked away.
It was when Galatea told
Her maker she'd not be controlled
And so rebuffed his artist's vanity
That she displayed a true humanity.
She claimed full freedom for her heart -
She would not be a work of art.

Gormley invites us each to be
A thing up here, a thing to see.
Some person who is over there
On the far side of the square
Sees no detail, sees no feature,
Simply sees a poor forked creature.
He cannot hear us speak or sing,
But merely thinks – 'That's Gormley's Thing.'
Such a spectator cannot fail
To sense disparity of scale
Between the merely human figure
And this plinth, designed for bigger
Far more grandiose creations.
It's our human limitations
That this work brings into focus.
Up here, exposed, we have to cloak us
Nothing but the chilling air
As we face the public stare.

To put us here, bleak and exposed,
A deal of cash has been disposed.

And great efficient care bestowed
In getting this show on the road.
The single-minded artist's dream
Is made real by a busy team.
They control this whole adventure;
Gormley's mostly *in absentia*.
There's meeters, greeters and security,
And those who ensure the project's purity
By checking we've no guns or liquor.
There's drivers of that cherry-picker,
And others who play vital parts –
The video people from Sky Arts,
And those who full of high-tech cunning
Keep the website streaming running
On this apparently low-tech
And simple operation – heck,
This thing requires a mini-army!
You have to wonder – is it barmy
In this grim recession year
To expend such effort here
All to what purpose? In the Square
Some passers watch, and some don't care.
And of the plinthers very few
Provide the fun that buskers do
In Covent Garden. Yet, I feel,
The plus is that – yes – we are real.
We're human, yes, and most of us
Are not especially glamorous,
And while some might look great undraped,
We're mostly averagely shaped.
(I've always thought the vicars odd
Who claim that a deliberate God

Fashioned us carefully in his image.
 Haphazard evolutionary scrimmage
 To me seems likelier by far
 To have put us in the shape we are.)
 This is this project's saving grace;
 It does display the nation's face
 And figure up on this high shelf.
 It lets the nation see itself,
 In all our oddness, and we see
 A goodness and a decency
 As people come up here and shout
 For causes that they care about,
 Or entertain, as some have done,
 Or simply join in for the fun.
 The Britain that these folk express
 Is not that of the tabloid press -
 There's no self-pitying celebs,
 No bent M.P.s, no drunken plebs.
 The best of Britain's taking part -
 But in an artwork. Art? Why Art?



Scottie taught the Square to Lindy-Hop on July 30th.

FOUR

Art

I want to speak of Art, because
 Art simply isn't what it was.
 Once you knew what 'Artist' meant -
 A person who could represent
 The real world using clay or paint.
 But times have changed. Now paint seems quaint.
 As technologies have changed,
 The idea of Art's been rearranged.
 And arty types have had to scabble
 For new fields in which to dabble.
 And sometimes the results are great,
 And sometimes they get desperate,
 Like theologians who are faced
 With knowing that their God's displaced
 By science, and so hope perhaps
 God might find lodging in the gaps.
 For in these days when even dolts
 Don't think God hurls down thunderbolts,
 When most of us feel dubious
 At tales of the miraculous,
 And when the evolutionary line
 Makes more sense than divine design,
 Some theologians make the best
 Of gamely trying to suggest,
 That God, if he exists, just might
 Squeeze in the gaps, however tight,
 Between the things we know for sure

And though their gaps are getting fewer
These men of faith rejoice in doubt
And hope they'll never be without
Some tiny gap, where, they insist,
A god might possibly exist.
Determinism, they delight
In claiming, can't be proven right,
If *maybe* God's directing chance
At the level of the quantum dance.
I think their logic's full of fuzz.
God *might* exist – therefore he *does*?
That argument's a sorry mess –
I'm sure you see - but I digress.
Just as these theologian chaps
Have claimed a place for God in gaps,
So artists faced with various neat
Technologies have beat retreat.
Once artists were the ones whose skill
With paint enabled them to fill
A canvas with the plentousness
Of life in all its variousness,
They painted pompous kings and queens,
They painted lovely rural scenes,
They painted bowls of glistening fruits,
And ladies in their birthday suits.
In a religious age, their paints
Imagined lives of pious saints
With a zeal that was prodigious,
But when the times grew less religious,
Patrons preferred to saints or martyrs
Pictures of a plumptious tart as
Large as life and twice as willing.

So artists earned an honest shilling.
They did what they alone could do,
Mapped three dimensions onto two
With tricks of pigment, brush and wash
That made the layman cry out – gosh!
That's life itself, precisely caught,
Folks marvelled, asking, 'Who'd have thought
That human hand possessed such skill?'
A painting offered them the thrill
Of recognition – all they knew
Was captured, shown, and put on view.
And nothing matched the artist's touch,
Until Fox Talbot and Daguerre and such
Created photographs. Then painting looked
Rather stagey, overcooked,
While photos seemed, in contrast to
Mere paint, unmediated, true.
Which they were not, but so it goes.

For years now Art's been in the throes
Of wild convulsions, artists seek
New ways to look, new ways to speak
About that looking, and to find
New ways that Art can be defined.
Duchamp's much-acclaimed urinal
Was maybe meant to be the final
Word on Art and artistry
But it's kicked off an industry
Of academics, bluffers, loons,
And those investing in Jeff Koons.

Now Art's become a huge commodity.

There's premium these days on oddity,
Which means subversive masterpieces
Praised in many an M.A. thesis
Will end up furnishing the lairs
Of dodgy Russian billionaires,
Others, of course, may like Van Goghs
Stay dark behind big heavy locks
In cool Swiss bank vaults, permanently,
Too precious for mere eyes to see.
Less valued artworks vegetate
In the basement of the Tate,
Though once a grand committee's choice
As works most likely to rejoice
The future nation and endure.
But of one thing we can be sure,
Time will tick, and fashions alter;
Works which once spoke loud will falter.
Fashion will always play a part
In the fortunes of High Art.
Yet Art's caught the imagination
Of the bright youth of our nation
Times are buzzing at the Tate,
Where young people congregate.
They want to see, they want to look,
Though some will rarely read a book.
Ours has become a visual age,
Art has more kudos than the page.
Though some may think it quite absurd,
I'll now digress, and praise the word.
For words can go where visual Art
Can not; for they can reach the heart
Of arguments, and answer back.

When human freedoms face attack.
If you were there in the Sudan
Where vile men want to enforce a ban
On women who prefer to wear
Trousers than skirts, if you were there,
And knew a woman faced the lash
For how she dressed, then would you bash
Out paintings or an installation,
Or a multimedia creation?
Or would you rather take your chance,
Embodying thoughts in modern dance?
I hope you wouldn't. I hope you
Would go for words both strong and true.

Those words might fall upon deaf ears
And sometimes arguments take years
To win against dense prejudice.
But we must believe in this,
That reasoned words can find their way
To bring about a better day.
There is of course an Art that sticks
Two fingers up, the politics
Of gesture, Banksy's type of Art.
That's great for warming up the heart
Of someone who agrees with you,
But gestures simply will not do
For the job of positive persuasion.
You try that and you've occasion
To use your language every time –
So now I'll celebrate words, in rhyme.

FIVE

Words

When the pure in heart are forming ranks
And fingering their guns,
You'd best reach for a crossword
And polish up your puns.
When single minds say history
Is made of marching boots,
Seek out the wilderness of words
And live on roots.

For though the boots crunch down
Still the words twist free
And the song they sing
Is multiplicity.

Words aglint with wickedness
Wink from all around,
Though hygeinists with acronyms
Would stamp them to the ground.
One little word'll make them itch
To throw you in the quod,
Extend the laws of blasphemy
Or fetch the kneecap squad.

For the boots clamp down
But the words twist free
And I'm in love
With the O.E.D.

The single-minded have The Word
And slogan it in chorus.
Introduce it to some friends -
Recite the whole thesaurus

Of...

Words of granite, words of bone
Words you whisper when alone
Words in Bibles, words in drag
Words as British as the flag
Words that have the power to hurt
Words courageous, words inert
Words that stutter, words that flow
Words that only women know
Words abandoned, words precise
Words that may be breeding lice
Words that sailors use on boats
Words that bite each other's throats
Words galumphing, words effete
Words that bluster, words that bleat
Words exotic, savage words
Words as somnolent as turds
Words with Middle German roots
Words in Doctor Marten's boots
Words Miltonically tremendous
Words with bit-parts in East Enders
Words that glitter, words that droop
Words in recipes for soup
Words caressed in cocktail bars
Words like fetuses in jars

Words in love-songs, words in jail
Words that keening widows wail
Words delightful, words euphoric
Words that smell of paregoric
Words that bounce and words that buckle
Words that child-molesters chuckle
Words indecent, words in pain
Words we'll never use again
Words we gabble on the phone
Words that rural deans intone
Words resounding, true and brave
Words that market aftershave
Words unfit for human eyes
Words that children vandalise
Words that fondle, words that tear
Words describing Rupert Bear
Words as warm as cups of tea
Words in captions on Page Three
Words that fiddle, words that fake
Words that think they're William Blake
Words announced on railway stations
Words with Freudian connotations
Words like "voguing", words like "surd"
Words unlike every other word
Words that Mother used to sing
Words that suddenly take wing
And lift us in amazing flight
Through the terrors of the night
To gently leave us, open eyed
Smiling on the other side.

SIX

Sentences

So words are great, yes, words are hot,
But words are definitely not
The whole of language. Words alone
Say no more than this piece of stone.
This stone says 'plinth' and nothing more.
Words are great but words just stammer
Till they're given life by grammar.

In this section I shall sing
The sentence, that syntactic string
That is the greatest human invention.
What's that? You'd maybe like to mention
Fire, yes? Or the Wheel, perhaps?
Yes, these were great, but how could chaps
Pass on the knowledge of a thing
Until they had the skill to string
Their words together to explain
The ideas flowering in their brain?

That statue there shows Havelock's face
But of his glory and disgrace
Says nothing. You must read or hear
A sentence to know why he's here,
And different sentences to know
Why some folks think that he should go.
Saying this, I'll face the stricture
Of arty types who think one picture

Worth a thousand words. I don't.
A picture's like one word. It won't
Do more than represent one state
Of things.

Two pictures put together –
Say of fine and stormy weather.
May suggest a story – this
Rain came and spoilt this sunny bliss.
But you need verbs if you'd explain
What stopped the sunshine and brought rain.
Add verbs to nouns, you make a clause,
And you can then explain a cause.

What Mr Gormley's showing here is
Not a sentence, just a series
Of folks each with their own agenda.
Each separate one contrives to send a
Separate message. Disconnected,
We are random, undirected.
The person in the previous spot,
However admirable, was not
Anything to do with me.
Equally the he or she
Who comes along and follows after
May provoke tears, boredom, laughter.
May dance, may sing, may sit around
Or jump these nets and hit the ground.
I do not know. We're all disjoint.
For Gormley that's perhaps the point.

Then this whole plinthy sequence plays
A nicely rounded hundred days.

A hundred? Why? There is no reason
Except it spans the silly season.
If it were fifty more or less
The work of art would still express
About the same. It wouldn't matter.
You'd get the same amount of chatter.
The P.R. would be just as cheery,
Brian Sewell would sound just as weary.
The sycophants would be as glowing,
Mark Lawson would be just as knowing.
In pubs there'd be as much derision
At one hint of artistic vision.

A hundred's arbitrary, yes,
And so is so much else, I guess.
For instance, there's the random basis
Of the lottery for places.

Finally, you see, the whole
Aesthetic is of loose control,
An idea comes, and rules are made;
The artist then lets life invade
Within the limits he's invented,
And while it's happening he's contented
To sit back and simply watch
And if some bits turn out a botch,
Maybe that will be a shame,
But it's what happens in this game.
There's something in this loose aesthetic
I find quite antipathetic.
I hope I will not sound too daft
If I put in a word for craft,

And speak up for technique that's tight,
Where strict constraints mean constant fight
With tricky content. And since I'm
A word-man, I shall now praise rhyme.



Venus di Vetro on the plinth, August 24th.

SEVEN

Rhyme

A sybaritic friend of mine
Says: "Life's too short to drink cheap wine."
Whilst on the whole I do not choose
To share his attitude to booze,
(He doubtless thinks me a vulgarian
For soaking up the red Bulgarian)
His words find echoes in my heart
When what's in question's lyric art.
See - frankly I don't have much time
For poets who can't manage rhyme,
Though it's been made clear recently
How very many don't agree.
On blogs you'll always find a spate
Of postings bubbling with hate
For words and lines whose endings chime.
To some folk rhyming is a crime.

Admirers of the rawly felt
Think any polish far too svelte.
They value passion more than mind,
Energy more than both, and find
More beauty in the sprays of chance
Than in a neatly formal dance.
They'd like to cast to outer shade
What is deliberately made;
A rhyme is shocking evidence
That art is artful, a pretence.

And yet the action-painter's splash,
Exuberantly free and rash,
Is something poets cannot make
(Though many try - and fail - to fake).
Though paint can make a random stain,
Words have to travel through a brain.
No poem's likely to emerge
From letting rip an urge to splurge;
The emotion Wordsworth so respected
Must, for verse, be re-collected.
Craft is needed, and hard graft
To rise above the limply daft,
And proper verses cannot be
Achieved by duff simplicity.
(Does anybody still believe
That William Blake was just naive?
Or that the glories he created
Were somehow unsophisticated?)

Yet I've some sympathy for those
Who quite sincerely, I suppose,
Have in silent horror crept
Away from rhyming that's inept,
From the preacher's feelgood vanities,
Or from greeting-card inanities.
Damp hymnodists afraid of night
Adore a rhyme that's tweely trite,
But good rhymes are not glib - they're tonic
Triste, ironic or Byronic
Crazy, neat, precisely vicious,
Surrealistic or delicious,
Can speak rich springtime's harmony,

Can voice the darkness of the sea.

A rhyme can speak, a rhyme can sing,
Can fly or creep, or zing, or sting.
Rhymes can sparkle, and achieve
A vibrant sense of joie de vivre,
Or can be statuesque, immense,
Or else destabilised and tense
(Two feisty words a rhyme has wed
May fight like Sylvia and Ted)
Good rhymes may set fierce passions surging
Or find new shapes of thought emerging.
They won't allow blase so-whattery,
But like some shard of ancient pottery
Miraculously seem to cage
The ways and values of an age -
You think - This tells me things that matter;
All the rest is merely chatter.

It's strange, though, when nice kids who've done
Creative Writing 101
Attempt an authenticity
By copying insanity,
By snarling out disordered verses,
Wild images, unmetric curses.
They long for less schematic dreams
And therefore scrawl chaotic reams.
One hardly has the heart to say:
"Poetry works the other way.
Pope was bitter, Nerval nervy,
Coleridge drugged and Verlaine pervy.
Their existences were bleak

But each had an intense technique.
In formal verse a poet strives
To grab sense from disordered lives,
To take back something from despair
To make with passion and with care
A perfect something that redeems
The blasted body and lost dreams.
"This gift's reserved for very few -
Perhaps not me, perhaps not you,
But let us lesser mortals pay
Our tributes to the poet's way.
Let's love devices such as rhyme
That fight against forgetful time.
Let's love the art and love the craft
That serves our poets as a raft
To bring us from life's darkest coast
The writings that we value most."



Iano and his mini-plinth, on the plinth, August 29th.

EIGHT

Happy Ending

Maybe I've now said quite enough
Concerning Mr Gormley's stuff.
Deliberately, I've been tough
And critical. The shallow puff
And easy praise are no more use
Than mere intolerant abuse.

Has there been, in my long verse
Too little bless, and too much curse?
Well, Mr Gormley is emphatic
He wants this artwork democratic.
Democracy should not just be
Replacing Kings by such as we.
For what's worse than the tyranny
Of a dumb majority?
No, that great word Democracy
Implies that people should be free.
Yes, to be true, Democracy
Depends upon the right to speak
And must find room for its critique.
I therefore think I've done my part
Completing this strange work of Art;
I hope that what I've said is sense,
But at least it's dissidence.

Well, in the last analysis,
What are we to make of this?
You've heard that I have reservations,

And yet this thing has compensations.
Firstly, let me speak in praise
Of those who stand here through these days.
Though some are odd, they're all appealing
And most of them, I have a feeling,
Are not the types who watch their backs
And spend their days evading tax,
Keeping their heads down to avoid
Whatever makes the boss annoyed.
Instead they're members of the party
Of the adventurous, the arty,
The curious, the 'have a go'.
Like most nice people that I know,
They are the sort who'll lend a hand
Whenever something lively's planned.
Many are better far than I
They have, when elevated high
Made the elevated choice
To speak with elevated voice
On elevated themes, to plead
For charity to those in need,
To raise awareness, slam abuse,
And rob their hearers of the excuse
Of ignorance. And this is good.
If they've been heard and understood,
That's excellent. I praise those too
Who've decided that the thing to do
Is entertain. They've started dances,
Sung their songs and read romances.
Praise to the caring and the sharing,
And praise as well to the more daring,
The stripper, the humanimal,

Praise indeed should go to all
Except maybe the tedious drones
Who've spent their hour on mobile phones.
Yet even these have helped display
The nation as it is today.

Plinthers have mostly justified
Mr Gormley's obvious pride
And confidence in his countrymen
And countrywomen. That's one plus.
Another – this thing brings home to us
A novel twist upon the theme
That's been the stuff of many a dream
And gothic horror. The living statue,
The doll that wakes and then comes at you,
The golem and the strange uncanny
Waxwork who can't be just wax, can he?
One stage-moment that can't fail
Is when in Shakespeare's 'Winter's Tale'
The statue of Leontes' wife
At last comes thrillingly to life.
The tale that threatened to be tragic
Finds a happy end through seeming magic.

Another instance of what I mean
Comes in an operatic scene:
That master of the erotic con,
Mozart's anti-hero, Don
Giovanni, has imposed his will,
On every lady in Seville,
Madrid, Cadiz and all point east –
He's just one rampant sexy beast -

But when he hears a statue boom
And sees it move, he knows his doom
Has come. There's simply magic that you
Can't beat in a living statue.

This project rejects magic, though.
The public's clearly in the know.
Although some plinthers have stood stock-
Still like old General Havelock,
There's really no chance of confusion;
This whole thing works against illusion.
And very few would think that we
Up here are really statuary.
This project asks we look afresh
At both bronze and living flesh,
And finally the exercise is
One that demythologizes.

I earlier spoke my reservation
About this large work's domination
Of its huge and motley cast,
But I ought to say at last
I think the plinthers may well win;
Their energies are not caged in,
They're straying from the expected track,
And may occasionally bite back.
And if that's what Mr Gormley planned,
I say, well done – it's turned out grand.

So, I've nearly done my task,
And frankly feel I ought to ask
Was verse the best of ways to share

My thoughts and feelings with the square?
Or are rhymes better if maybe
They are augmented musically.
Words go further, there's no doubt,
When set to tunes and belted out
With backing group of drums and synth –
At last! I've found a rhyme for plinth!

So thanks for letting me rehearse
My thousand lines of bumptious verse.
I've found it most engaging sport
And truly hope you haven't thought
My amateur tetrameters
Too utterly calamitous.
For me at least it has been fun.
So thanks again – for now, I'm done.



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For the record, the 'Words' and 'Rhyme' sections of this poem were written a while ago, but the rest was composed especially for this project.

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