From Horse and Buggy to Hovercraft:

My Research Before and After Google Book Search

[FIRST SLIDE] In his call for papers for this session, Michael Hancher posed what I thought then and still think is a very interesting question: "What difference does this new plenitude make?" My answer was, and is, this: All the difference in the world, so long as 1) You are doing historical research with primary texts, and 2) You are researching something fairly specific and obscure, especially a relatively unknown and unusual personal name, phrase, word, or quotation. Google Book Search will probably make little if any difference to those "doing theory" or doing chiefly interpretive work, although even there the benefits of convenient access to secondary sources are not insignificant.

Today, I will mostly be telling you a story, not making an argument: mostly, I want simply to narrate the specific and (I think) remarkable difference that Google Book Search made to a research project of my own. I know that Lisa Spiro has told [or will tell] a similar story, and I know of a few others, and I'd be very interested in hearing your own stories after the panel. But as I tell this story in all its banal scholastic detail, I'd like us to be thinking about this question: Why isn't everyone in the profession dumbfounded by these new scholarly research tools? Criticism is one thing: there are some very valid concerns about Google Book Search and other, similar tools. But why the deafening apathy in so many quarters? Is what I'm about to tell you really so unimportant, so uninteresting, so unnecessary?

Let's find out.

[SECOND SLIDE diss title]

My dissertation, titled "Refrain, Again: The Return of the Villanelle," is a history of a poetic form that has become startlingly popular with contemporary poets in recent years. Famous examples of the form include Elizabeth Bishop's 1979 "One Art" [SLIDE One Art] and Dylan Thomas's 1953 "Do not go gentle into that good night." [SLIDE Do not go gentle] The villanelle form has been described as "difficult" and "rigorous," but also as "fussy" and "strict" [SLIDE color schema]; poetic handbooks explain that it is a nineteen-line poem with two alternating rhyming refrains in a very particular pattern. [ANIMATE scheme, ANIMATE One Art, ANIMATE Do not go gentle]. Poetic handbooks also explain that the villanelle is a form that we have inherited from the medieval or Renaissance period, and that the best example of the Renaissance form is a poem titled "Villanelle" by Jean Passerat, which for reasons of clarity I like to refer to by its incipit, "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," or "I have lost my turtledove." [ANIMATE J'ay perdu] Jean Passerat (1534-1602) [SLIDE Passerat] was basically a Renaissance public intellectual; he succeeded the famous scholar Peter Ramus as the Chair of Latin Eloquence at the Collège du Paris in 1572, after Ramus had been killed in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. His "Villanelle" was first published posthumously in 1606 in a collection of Passerat's poetry edited by his nephew. [SLIDE *Recueil*] Mark Strand and Eavan Boland cite this poem as the progenitor of the villanelle in their 2000 Norton anthology of poetic forms [SLIDE Strand and Boland], reporting that "With the publication of this villanelle ["J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle"] and because of its immediate popularity--amounting almost to popular-song status in its day--the form defined itself through contact with an audience: a striking but not uncommon way for poetic form to

find itself" and speculating that the rhythmic and repetitive villanelle "may have taken its first, long-lost shape as an accompaniment to the different stages of an agricultural task. Binding sheaves, perhaps, or even scything."

As it turns out, however, this single poem of Passerat's is the *only* example of the early villanelle, if we consider "villanelle" to mean a poem in nineteen lines with two alternating refrains and so on, as contemporary poets and contemporary poetry handbooks certainly do. The scholar and poet Julie Kane, whose field is the Renaissance, had begun to research the villanelle only a few years before I had, and she had discovered that there simply were no other early poems with the same form as Passerat's. She paged through books, examined microfilms, sent e-mails and made phone calls to libraries, and managed to find a grand total of eighteen poems titled "Villanelle." [SLIDE Kane] None of these poems shared the same scheme, let alone the unique and particular scheme of Passerat's villanelle that had later become so important for Dylan Thomas and Elizabeth Bishop. The *villanella* and the *villancico* were Italian and Spanish dance-song forms, musically simpler than the polyphonic madrigal. French poets adopting the title "*Villanelle*" or "*Villanesque*" meant to indicate that their poems, if set to music (as was commonly done), should have simple rather than complex settings; the simplicity of musical setting usually suggested a "simplicity" of character or theme, too, best evoked by terms such as "pastoral" or "rustic." These French poets were sophisticates of the court, moreover, not French peasants; for them to title a poem "*Villanelle*" would have been something akin to a university-educated and employed poet titling a poem "Blues" today.

The question then became: exactly how and when did we all come to be under the impression that the villanelle was a fixed form in the Renaissance? In her dissertation, Kane attributed the "fixing" of the villanelle's form to an 1872 French poetry handbook by Théodore de Banville titled *Petit traité de poésie françcaise* [SLIDE Banville], and indeed that work does claim that the villanelle is an ancient nineteen-line alternating-refrain French form, and it is the work that demonstrably affected English poets and thus ensconced the villanelle form in our language. But Kane also mentioned that she had tracked down an 1845 villanelle by Banville, the "Villanelle de Buloz," and Banville's 1872 poetry handbook cites as examples of the villanelle only his own earlier villanelles and those of a friend of his: no mention of Passerat, the only possible original source. There had been no other poems on Passerat's nineteen-line scheme between 1606 and 1845: not a single one, so far as Kane (a very thorough researcher) had been able to discover. What source had led Banville to Kane suggested that Banville had been influenced by a confusing addition to the 1751 edition of Richelet's *Dictionnaire de rimes*, but for reasons I won't go into here, I found that explanation insufficient. Kane, moreover, as a scholar of the Renaissance, had spent only a chapter on the nineteenth-century rise of the villanelle form: I took it upon myself to find the text or texts that caused Banville to believe that the villanelle was an ancient French form and thus to write his 1845 "Villanelle de Buloz" on Passerat's fanciful scheme.

I therefore began to search for any and all French poetry handbooks and anthologies published between 1606 and 1845, with special attention to early nineteenth-century works that Banville would probably have had to hand. I worried that I might have to search for works in other languages, as well, but it was surely best to begin with works

in French. [SLIDE library stacks] My chief resource in compiling the list of titles was WorldCat, which I regularly plied with various "poe*" strings. From my carrel in the stacks of Alderman library at the University of Virginia, I began to make forays into the stacks from which I would return with armfuls of books that I would then read through, looking for mentions of the villanelle form or of Passerat or of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," and looking for other poetry books to gather or to order from Interlibrary Loan. Whenever I visited the shelves, I would also scan the proximate volumes and, more often than not, scoop them up to take back to my carrel -- often, I'm sorry to say, without checking them out. I remember that it was a week or so into this process that I discovered a 1986 Slatkine reprint of an 1844 work by an author named Wilhelm Ténint. Standing at the shelf, I paged through until I found this entry, which both cited Passerat and claimed that the villanelle was an old fixed form. [SLIDE Ténint]

I was gleeful. I galloped through the rain to get a sandwich, hiding the precious book under my jacket to keep it dry. I came back to the library and e-mailed Julie Kane the news; we had just begun corresponding. I caught her in the very week she was proofing an article on the topic for *Modern Language Quarterly*, and she had just enough time to include a sentence about this new source. [SLIDE Myth] Another extremely thorough researcher, Patricia Siegel, had provided oodles of interesting and useful information about Wilhelm Ténint, including the nugget that there were marginal notations in Ténint's proof copy that were incorporated into his *Prosodie*. These marginal notations were in the handwriting of . . . can anyone guess? Yes, Théodore de Banville.

Remember, now, the year was 2003. I had not only the well-stocked stacks of an excellent research library at my disposal, but also Google, and also the WorldCat

database. Google -- the regular search engine, mind you, not Google Books -- gave me a few particularly good leads at other points in my research. After the Ténint discovery, I continued to look for other mentions of the villanelle form in early 19th-century French texts, but I found very little.

Flash forward five years, only five years, and imagine me now, if you will, engaged in co-writing, with Julie Kane, a new entry on the villanelle for the forthcoming revised edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Stephen Cushman, my dissertation advisor. This, obviously, was our big chance to correct the record about the villanelle in the gold standard of poetry handbooks, the big daddy. And so I revisited my search for mentions of the villanelle and of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" between 1606 and 1845, and this time I used Google Books. [SLIDE Google Books results] It's difficult to reproduce what Google Books can do without an internet connection, but here are some of the results that I saw (and they're adding new ones all the time) [SLIDE Google Books]. The first result in this image was fascinating to me: it's a popular novel published in 1839 that quotes Passerat's poem in full. This is a work that I could never have found by searching through poetry handbooks, and yet it's very likely indeed that Banville and Ténint would have known the work. The second work, from 1773, avers that the villanelle is just a form with a refrain (no mention of nineteen lines, two rhymes, or two refrains), and that no one writes them nowadays. The third work reprints a passage from the Richelet dictionary of which we were already aware (plagiarism was pretty big then, especially in reference works), and the fourth work is yet another work that Ténint and Banville might well have known: it's an annotated

bibliography of the private library of an eminent Frenchman. He owned a copy of Passerat's work and quoted the villanelle as one of his favorite pieces from that work.

It agonizes me to talk about it. I can't go on, source by source through all 38 results, discussing everything that could have enriched my work in 2003 that I simply couldn't have found then, even if I had the time in this paper. It agonizes me the more because Julie and I have already turned in our revised entry on the villanelle -- in July of this year -- and yet Google Book Search keeps turning up more sources in that trail of textual transmission, more evidence of what was known and thought about the villanelle in that fragile time when a mistake that would engrave itself in the record for more than a century was just beginning to flap its delicate butterfly wings. Julie wrote the first half of the new entry on the villanelle, and I wrote the second half. Fortunately, in a way, I didn't find anything that directly contradicted my claim that the Ténint work can be considered the chief entry point of the villanelle error, but what I did find were numerous texts that smoothed its way. To satisfy my conscience, I included two of the more popular dictionaries and encyclopedias that Google Book Search turned up for me in the PEPP entry. [SLIDE bibliograhy]

I'd like to conclude by musing a bit on my title, "From Horse and Buggy to Hovercraft." [SLIDE horse and buggy] It's a title that I just came up with because I thought it conveyed (alliteratively) the kind of wonder that I often do feel in the presence of the powerful space-age information-retrieval mechanisms that we're beginning to take for granted. I was actually trying to evoke something like this [SLIDE flying car], a flying car, something that doesn't really exist yet, something very Back to the Future and William Gibson-y, but as it turns out, there is actually such a thing as a hovercraft

[SLIDE hovercraft], and the hovercraft, so far from being a creature of futuristic science fiction, is pretty much obsolete. This is the "Queen Margaret," which was a ferry between England and France that chugged across that famous route on a cushion of air; the photographer notes in a caption that "The [hovercraft] service ceased in 2000 after 32 years, due to competition with traditional ferries, catamarans, and the opening of the Channel tunnel." According to Wikipedia, the first hovercrafts were built in 1915, right around the time that the picture of a horse and buggy was taken.

Now, this might turn out to be much more prescient and accurate an image than I might have liked, because the hovercraft, like Google Book Search, is something that makes me goggle and go "Oooh" and "Ahhh," but it is also something that might well moulder in obscurity due to competition with more traditional modes. The competition for Google Book Search as a tool for scholarly research is, I think, traditional humanistic inquiry: the asking of fundamentally unanswerable questions. I often wish that the profession had a much greater emphasis than it does on historical scholarship, not least because I suspect that the practice of debating unanswerable questions is one of the causes of the current crisis in the humanities; I also suspect that the practice of debating unanswerable questions is the deep heart's core of the humanities. But, my own wishes aside, I would really like to know is whether the existence of tools like Google Book Search, tools that so dramatically speed up and sharpen our historical scholarship, will actually change the profession as a whole. I have to say I see no signs of it yet: to write a biography, to construct a history, to contribute to a reference work, to produce an edition, to compile a bibliography, to trace a usage -- all these endeavors seem now to be mere

curiosities in a profession that values contention more than curiosity, interpretation more than investigation, argument more than answers.

However, it's early days yet: Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* only came out in 2003, and five years is about five weeks in academic time. We may yet see our colleagues look up, and we may see their eyes pop at the flying cars swooshing calmly by, going about their airy business.