The Villanelle 1574-2005

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The villanelle, as practiced in contemporary Anglophone poetry, is a fixed poetic form consisting of six stanzas: five tercets and a quatrain, nineteen lines in all on only two rhymes, with two refrains that alternate in a fixed pattern. The form is easier to exemplify than to explain: Dylan Thomas's 1951 poem "Do not go gentle into that good night" is one of the most famous modern examples. It is given on your handout with the villanelle scheme represented next to it. Contemporary poets often interpret the rules of the form somewhat more loosely than Dylan Thomas, especially by using off-rhyme instead of perfect rhyme, by repeating words or phrases instead of repeating an entire line, and by writing "against" the form's tendency to become incantatory by using a conversationally chaotic diction--as in Elizabeth Bishop's influential "One Art" of 1976, also given on your handout. Villanelles strict and loose, grave and comic, turn up again and again in recent poetry, as for instance Steve Kowit's "Grammar Lesson," one of two villanelles in Billy Collins's 2003 anthology *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*. This new popularity of the villanelle is partly the result of a literary movement called "New Formalism" that began in the mid-nineteen-eighties; New Formalism sought to reclaim poetic forms from the perceived dominance of free verse, as well as to make poetry more accessible to mainstream educated readers. Few scholars of contemporary poetry would dispute the observation that it is much more acceptable today to write formal poetry than it was twenty years ago, even though the New Formalist tide is receding.

According to most contemporary poetry reference works, the villanelle form was first established in sixteenth-century France. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland's *The*

Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms (2000) is a fair recent representative of these reference works. The entry on the villanelle from this work, given in full on your handout, reports in sum that the contemporary villanelle was originally a medieval Italian peasant song that became popular as a poetic form in sixteenth-century France after the success of a particular lyric poem by the poet Jean Passerat. Passerat's poem, titled "Villanelle" and hereafter identified by its first line, "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," was most probably written in 1574 and was first published in 1606, after Passerat's death. It is given on your handout in an unmodernized exact transcription from its first printing.

Strand and Boland's account of the villanelle--like many other, shorter accounts in poetry handbooks--is inaccurate in several important respects. The first minor point to make is that the Italian *villanella* was not an authentic folk song. It was a courtly song that may or may not have been popular among the *bourgeoisie*; it was certainly not grown in Italian fields among the peasantry. The scholar Ronald McFarland, for instance, reports that "It is best then to consider the Italian villanella of the sixteenth century not semipopular, but quasipopular, the product, for the most part, of conscious imitation of a popular source" (24-5). In other words, the composer of a *villanella* invoked the simple, the rustic, the romantic for an artistic effect, just as Cambridge-educated Christopher Marlowe did in the poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" (1599/1600). Unlike the refined and polyphonic madrigal, the *villanella* was a simple homophonic part song. According to the scholar Julie Kane, just such a pastoral song became fashionable in sixteenth-century England under the name "Neapolitan" or "*Napolitane*" (the *villanella*

was associated with Naples), and these terms too were sometimes adopted by English poets for pastoral poems.

A second and more important point to make about Strand and Boland's account is that the nineteen-line alternating-refrain form of Passerat's poem "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" has in any case nothing to do with the villanella, so that the question of whether the villanella was a folk song or a courtly song is essentially irrelevant in the history of the schematic poetic form. Structurally, the villanella was marked by nothing more idiosyncratic than a refrain, an "idiosyncrasy" it shares with the folk ballad, the blues, the ghazal, and any number of sung or chanted forms from every era and country. Passerat's French title "Villanelle" alluded not to the form of the Italian villanella, but to its themes: simplicity, agrarian landscape, embodied rather than intellectualized emotion. The title of Passerat's poem probably also indicated that the poem could be set to villanella music, although so far as we know this was never done. Other Renaissance poems designated by the title "Villanelle" or "Villanesque" were, like Passerat's poem, simply lyrics with rustic themes, and they adopted whatever scheme they liked. The nineteen-line alternating refrain form was a nonce invention of Passerat's own, not an inheritance from the villanella.

The third, final, and most important point on which *The Making of a Poem* and other contemporary poetry reference works have it wrong is that the form of Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" was decidedly *not* popular in the sixteenth century. No other poem written in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth century adopts the scheme of "J'ay perdu ma tourterelle." and only three prose works in those three centuries can be found that even mention the poem. According to the scholar Julie Kane, there are only

eighteen sixteenth- or seventeenth-century poems with the title "Villanelle" or "Villanesque," and not one of them shares the form of Passerat's lyric.

Passerat's French poetry in general was highly obscure in the sixteenth century, and for long thereafter; Passerat was best known in his own time as a classicist and a humanist. In 1572, following the death of the famous Protestant scholar Peter Ramus in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Passerat (a moderate Catholic) was appointed to the post Ramus had held as Chair of Latin Eloquence at the Collège Royal in Paris. Passerat held this prestigious academic position until his death in 1602. Probably three-quarters of the works by Passerat printed during his life and shortly thereafter are in Latin. Passerat's paradoxical encomium *Nihil* ("Nothing")--a satirical piece that according to Passerat's biographer Roger Patterson "was at one time his most frequently printed work"--was far more characteristic of Passerat's *oeuvre* than the pastoral love lyric "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" (33). Passerat was also one of the anonymous contributors to another satire, this one in French: the 1593 Satyre Ménippée de la vertu du Catholicon d'Espagne, et de la tenue des Estatz de Paris ("Menippean Satire on the Properties of Spanish 'Catholicocaine,' and on the Session of the Estates General of Paris"). Historians and literary historians of the French Renaissance generally mention Passerat, if at all, in the context of the Satyre Ménippée, a political pamphlet written during the siege of Paris that, some say, contributed to the eventual success of Henri IV in recapturing the city. Nihil earned early translation into French, and both it and the Satyre Ménippée produced English imitations and translations during and shortly after Passerat's lifetime. "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," by contrast, was not translated into English until 1906--exactly three hundred years after its first publication.

Passerat did move in the same circles as French lyric poets; he was quite friendly with Pierre de Ronsard--by far the best-known French poet of the late sixteenth century-and there has been some debate over whether Passerat can be considered a minor member of the Pléiade. Yet Passerat's vernacular poetry rarely follwed the ambitious and forwardlooking precepts of the Pléiade; his lyrics were simple and cautious, resembling the work of the previous generation's chief poet, Clement Marot. "J'ay perdu ma tourterelle" itself was little more than an ephemeral, official piece of flattery: the poem was part of a lyric sequence titled Le tombeau de Fleurie pour Niré ("The Tombstone of Fleurie for Niré"), written in 1574 to commemorate the death of the mistress of the new king, Henri III. Passerat, like other professional scholars and poets dependent on patronage (and like other moderate Catholics) may well have been anxious to secure the good will of the new king with his memorial sequence. Henri III, moreover, was well-known to have an affection for all things Italian--Italian culture was decidedly fashionable in France at that time--which doubtless helps account for Passerat's allusion to the Italian villanella in the *Tombeau.* But Henri III proved to be a disastrous king in the eyes of most of his subjects, and this helped contribute to the reaction against Italian culture that set in; Italian imports such as the *villanella* fell out of favor in France over the course of the next two decades. There is also no indication that Henri III took any particular notice of Passerat's lyric sequence dedicated to him, which was only one of many such flattering sequences. For instance, there is no mention of Passerat in the five volumes of Henri III's letters, nor does Passerat rate an index entry in modern biographies of the monarch. Passerat's Tombeau remained as unknown and unadmired after the sixteenth century as it had been during the sixteenth century.

How, then, did Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" gain its current reputation as one example of a common Renaissance fixed form called "the villanelle"? The short answer: through a series of errors made in the service of certain nineteenth-century artistic and critical agendas. The Parnassian movement and its Romantic and post-Romantic relatives in both France and England excavated archaic poetic forms, particularly medieval and Renaissance forms, as a protest against both the vulgarity of bourgeois materialism and the restraint of neoclassical rationalism. The archaic forms were meant to revive the fervent idealism and unselfconscious emotion of what the Parnassians regarded as a nobler era. In their general enthusiasm for the quaint, intricate innocence of the forms of the medieval French *trouvères*—the triolet, the ballade, the rondeau, the chant royale—nineteenth-century Parnassians swept up Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" and accorded it and its form a new consequence.

In the late eighteen-twenties, a number of important works of Romanticism appeared in France, challenging the lingering ascendence of neoclassicism. Not least of these works was Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve's 1828 *Tableau historique et critique de la poésie française et du théatre française au XVIe siècle (Historical and Critical Tableau of French Poetry and French Theater in the Sixteenth Century)*, which championed the revival of the emotional and idealistic literature of the Renaissance. During the eighteen-thirties and most of the eighteen-forties Romanticism clashed with the lofty conservative traditions embodied in the powerful and conservative *Académie française*. One of these clashes concerned poetic form. Literarily, the Romantic lion of the day in both prose and poetry was Victor Hugo, whose departures from the poetic norms of the eighteenth century were denounced as illegitimate by the neoclassicists.

Hugo and other French Romantic poets experimented with short line lengths and novel rhyme schemes, for instance, often creating unity in their verse with stronger degrees of rhyme than usual. The neoclassicists scoffed at the irregularity of such *vers brisés* ("broken lines"), and therefore Romantic writers such called for a new kind of prosody, one that would include and legitimize the new poetry.

This call was answered by a decidedly minor writer named Wilhelm Ténint, who, in 1844, published his explicitly partisan *Prosodie de l'école moderne* (*Prosody of the Modern School*). Prefaced by a vague but gracious letter of endorsement from the great Victor Hugo, Ténint's *Prosodie* championed the then-unfashionable *trouvère* forms as well-suited to the Romantic program. This work was the first poetic handbook to hold up Passerat's poem as one example of a poetic form called "the villanelle": the entry is given in full on your handout. Ténint's terms "grace" and "naïveté" are well-worn red flags waved in the face of the thudding rationality of the neoclassicists, and embodied in those two terms is the Romantic rejection of all that is bourgeois. Aristocratic grace or peasant naïveté, but nothing in the crass between. "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" would come to be admired by some nineteenth-century poets precisely for its naïveté, though it was, as I have argued, a perfect mimcry of naïveté rather than an "authentic" naïveté.

Shortly after the publication of Ténint's *Prosodie*, the young poet Théodore de Banville (who had almost certainly collaborated with Ténint on the *Prosodie*) published his "Villanelle de Buloz" -- the first poem to adopt Passerat's formerly unique poetic scheme. "Villanelle de Buloz" is so specific an imitation of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" that some have called it a parody, though in my view this is not exactly the right term. But the debt is obvious, as you can see from your handout. The poem hilariously

commemorates editor François Buloz's loss of the writer Paulin Limayrac from the staff of the haughty *Revue des Deux Mondes*; Banville published many triolets and chansons and rondeaus in the same sniping vein in this period, adopting a tone more Parnassian (i.e., opposed to social utility) than Romantic. More influential than Banville's villanelle, however, was the poetry handbook he himself would publish almost thirty years later. Banville's 1872 *Petit traité de poesie française*, excerpted on your handout, continued the error that Ténint had begun, with a far greater influence. English poets such as Edmund Gosse and Oscar Wilde became enamored of French poetry in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and fixed French forms such as the rondeau, ballade, and "villanelle" became a staple of turn-of-the-century Decadent society verse. English poets ignored Banville's assertion (exemplified in his own poems) that the villanelle could have any number of tercets, and the modern nineteen-line villanelle became established in English poetry.

After the villanelle's "revival" in the nineteenth century, the form went underground for several decades, surviving chiefly in a few conscientious or overconscientious poetry handbooks. James Joyce's 1914 autobiographical novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* included a villanelle that Joyce himself had written in 1900, at the age of eighteen; the villanelle in that novel represents an outdated hyper-aestheticism that Joyce's modern novel supplants. In the nineteen-thirties, the English scholar and poet William Empson wrote three villanelles that were highly modern in tone, image, and theme, and the poets W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas followed his example. Throughout most of the twentieth century, however, villanelles were quite rare; it was only with the

publication of Bishop's "One Art" in 1976 and the subsequent rise of her influence and that of New Formalism that the villanelle became a familiar sight in poetry journals.

Why has the myth been so tenacious? Partly because scholars of contemporary Anglophone poetry, like all scholars, know so little about other disciplines; partly because current poetry criticism values interpretation and polemic more than research, partly because the villanelle *does* greatly resemble authentic Renaissance fixed forms such as the rondeau; and, finally, because the generally low reputation of fixed poetic form in contemporary poetry makes the terms "French" and "Renaissance" useful as othering categories. Without sharing the despair of some New Formalists, it is still the case that free verse holds sway in contemporary Anglophone poetry and that formal verse is likely to be associated with hidebound conservatism. Designating the villanelle as a French Renaissance form without investigating too closely allows contemporary poets to explore the expressive capabilities of abstract poetic form. Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" sets off-rhyme and irregular diction in dialogue with the strictures of the villanelle scheme as though to enact the disorder of grief in the face of implacable losses; similarly, most contemporary villanelles frame themselves not as continuances of a poetic tradition, but revisions of it. That the tradition is far shorter than they realize matters little, for the idea of the villanelle as a French Renaissance form has been far more important to contemporary poets than any actual Renaissance poetry.