

Refrain, Again: The Return of the Villanelle

This study is an extensively researched history of the villanelle, the nineteen-line alternating-refrain poetic form that has recently become fashionable with poets writing in English. It is a comprehensive literary history that stretches from the villanelle's purported origin in Renaissance France to twentieth-century Britain and America, tracing the form from poet's hand to poet's hand over continents and generations. Moving from biographical detail to historical context and back again, the work might be called a genealogy of the villanelle. This research shows that the villanelle clearly belongs primarily to contemporary Anglophone poetry, despite its persistent reputation as an archaic French form dating from the Renaissance or earlier: the vast majority of villanelles are in English and postdate Elizabeth Bishop's famous 1976 villanelle "One Art," and there was no such thing as a villanelle form until 1844, when a poetry handbook by a little-known French Romantic writer named Wilhelm Ténint codified the scheme. More broadly, this study argues that poetic forms and their meanings are not inherited, immanent, inert, and immutable; forms and meanings are loose and fluid, continually recreated by living people, specific texts, and poetic communities lodged in particular historical moments.

The introduction documents the current popularity of the nineteen-line fixed-form villanelle in Anglophone poetry and its absence in Francophone poetry. The first chapter offers a history, collation, interpretation, and new translation of Jean Passerat's 1574 "Villanelle [J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle]," the poem that is almost invariably represented as an example of a then-nonexistent poetic form called "the villanelle." The second chapter describes the highly politicized aesthetic context of nineteenth-century French and

English post-Romanticism, when professional poet-critics Théodore de Banville and Edmund Gosse claimed a false history for the villanelle "form" based on Passerat's nonce lyric. The third chapter examines the sunken status of the villanelle and the other "French forms" in the period of high modernism, discussing works by Joyce and Pound as well as patriotic poems by Canadian authors who largely rejected modernist tenets. The fourth chapter explores the sources of Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" and discusses its influence on later poets, especially Elizabeth Bishop. The conclusion places the villanelle firmly within the polyvocal context of contemporary poetry.