

The First Villanelle: A New Translation of
Jean Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" (1574)

Poets and scholars are all wrong about the villanelle.

In an October 2003 issue of the *Washington Post Book World*, renowned poet and critic Edward Hirsch imparted a piece of information that is common knowledge in the poetry trade: that the villanelle is "a French form codified in the 16th century."¹ Recent scholarship has conclusively shown, however, that Jean Passerat's "Villanelle" ("J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle"), written in 1574 and first published in 1606, is the one and only Renaissance example of the nineteen-line alternating-refrain form now called the villanelle.² "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" was both formally unique and almost universally unknown for two and a half centuries after the poet's death; it was not until the 1840s that certain poets of the Romantic movement in France rediscovered the poem and mistakenly declared its form to have been a common one in antiquity.³ Poets at once began writing "villanelles," believing that in so doing they were reviving an ancient tradition. The tradition never existed.

What makes this a particularly dramatic discovery is that the villanelle is surprisingly popular with contemporary poets. Perhaps the most famous and most influential of twentieth-century villanelles is Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" of 1952, with its incantatory refrains that resolve into a final, urgent couplet: "Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage, against the dying of the light." Another celebrated villanelle, Elizabeth Bishop's 1976 "One Art," makes the same form sound entirely different: in Bishop's poem, the speaker seems to be trying to emulate

Thomas's insistent tone—but the refrains vary and the rhythms stutter, as though the speaker is involuntarily denied such certainty. The initial, seemingly confident declaration "The art of losing isn't hard to master" becomes by the end of Bishop's villanelle the much more troubled "the art of losing's not too hard to master / though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster." Ever since the appearance of "One Art," many poets of standing have published villanelles; the form is also becoming a staple of creative writing classes, with instructors asking young poets to write villanelles as an exercise in traditional poetic craft. Yet these poets seem scarcely—if at all—aware of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," and there has never been any major English verse translation.

Apart from its formal scheme, the most striking characteristic of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" is the simplicity of its style. The syntax is generally straightforward, the sentences are brief and declarative, there is no enjambment, the vocabulary is not Latinate, and there are no classical allusions in the poem—even though Passerat, who held the prestigious Chair of Latin Eloquence at the Collège Royal in Paris, was one of the most reputable classical scholars of the sixteenth century. The simplicity of Passerat's style showed, in fact, that Passerat was a little out of step with his poetic contemporaries. By far the best-known of the French poets of the late sixteenth century—now, as then—was Pierre de Ronsard, who was the most important member of the important group of poets called *La Pléiade* ("The Pleiades"). Ronsard called for a greater sophistication in French poetry, and his methods of achieving this goal included the employment of high

diction and tone, the coining of words, and the frequent use of classical imitation and allusion.⁴

To Passerat's more famous poetic contemporaries, a poem such as "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" would have looked both slightly dated and excessively ordinary. More than one critic has remarked that Passerat's style in this and other poems is reminiscent of Clément Marot (1496-1544), the chief poet of the previous generation, whose colloquial works fell out of favor with the learned ornamentarians of the Pléiade.⁵ Yet in his vernacular poetry Passerat was surely following his own prescriptions for the best Latin style: Passerat's biographer Roger Patterson writes that he was "opposed to those linguistic antiquarians who, in pushing to excess the search for a purified Latin style, deliberately sought out the most archaic of words. [...] In Passerat's estimation this deliberate affectation of archaisms was [...] an affront to good taste."⁶ The plain style of Passerat's French poetry is surely as intentional as that of his Latin compositions.

Previous English translations of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" have not chosen to or have not been able to convey this sense of its colloquial simplicity. I have found seven published translations of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" into English verse: one by George Wyndham (1906), one by Wilfrid Charles Thorley (1920), one by William Frederic Giese (1946), one by John Payne (1948), one by Elizabeth Gerteiny (1973), one by Phillip K. Jason (1980), and one by Anne Waldman (1987).⁷ None of these translations has been well-known, and they all, without exception (though to a greater or lesser degree), employ the "deliberate affectation of archaisms." My own translation of Passerat's "J'ay

"perdu ma Tourterelle" adopts a diction that is both simple and modern, and in this respect it resembles the original.

Another important characteristic of the poem that I have retained is its end-rhyme. One of the chief difficulties of translating "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" into verse is that by far the most natural translation for "tourterelle" is "turtledove," a word that in English has few rhymes. Jason omits rhyme altogether; Gerteiny, Payne, and Thorley choose easier rhyme sounds (though Gerteiny still uses off-rhyme); Giese employs eye-rhyme; Wyndham and Waldman employ both eye-rhyme and off-rhyme, and Waldman also chooses to render the poem as non-metrical. None of these solutions quite suits the original, with its insistent pulse and insistently perfect line-endings.

There is even reason to believe that Passerat (or possibly an editor) may have deliberately ensured that all the line-endings within a single poem were spelled alike, thus duplicating the rhyming aural effect with a "rhyming" visual effect. The word "fidelle" in line 7, for instance (which rhymes with "Tourterelle," "femelle," and other double-"l" words in the poem), is spelled "fidele" at the beginning of a line of another poem printed only two pages before "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle."⁸ This phenomenon occurs elsewhere in the volume as well; the word spelled "trouve" in one poem is spelled "treuve" in another when it occurs as a line-ending rhymed with "fleuve."⁹ Such a practice was of course quite possible then, before spellings had been standardized. The unanimous *visual* recurrence of "elle" and "oy" as line-endings, then, is quite possibly just as deliberate as their aural recurrence as rhymes, especially given the importance of *rime riche* in the

period. To modernize the spelling of the line-endings, as so many authors and editors do when quoting or reprinting "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" (the correct modern spelling of "fidelle," for instance, is "fidèle"), is to destroy this visual rhyme.

The many forms of insistent reiteration in "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" made it seem allowable in my own translation to introduce a form of reiteration *not* present in the original, one that made the task of reproducing the rhyme scheme much easier. Surely no poet has ever had more legitimate cause to rhyme "love" and "dove"—even repeatedly, as I have chosen to do. This repetition is meant to suggest the visual repetition of the line-endings of the original. And although it is not my object here to interpret the poem, I will point out that the many formal doublings in the poem—the double refrain, the frequent etymological doubling, the visual doubling of the line-endings—mirror the many thematic doublings in the poem: the lover and his love, the humans and the doves, this world and the next.

Below is the full text of the first published version of Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," which appeared in the *Recueil des oeuvres poétiques de Ian Passerat* of 1606. The type of the original is italic, which I have not retained. I have also modernized "i" to "j"; "l" to "s"; "u" to "v"; and "ß" to "ss" according to standard practice, but otherwise I have been careful to retain the spelling of the original, as well as its punctuation and lineation. I also append my translation, which I hope will help to emphasize the similarities, rather than the differences, between the contemporary villanelle in English and its sixteenth-century French template. Formal poetry is often historically "othered" even by the contemporary poets who write it, but the bizarre history

of the late schematizing of the villanelle shows that the villanelle is far from ancient—it might even justly be called the *only* contemporary fixed form in English. Previous English translations of Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" have contributed to this historical othering by rendering the poem with archaisms that the original does not possess. It therefore seems time for a serious English translation of the villanelle that initiated the form—however unintentionally.

VILLANELLE.

J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle:
Est-ce point celle que j'oy?
Je veus aller après elle.
Tu regretes ta femelle,
Helas! aussi fai-je moy,
J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle.
Si ton Amour est fidelle,
Aussi est ferme ma foy,
Je veus aller après elle.
Ta plainte se renouvelle;
Tousjours plaindre je me doy:
J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle.
En ne voyant plus la belle
Plus rien de beau je ne voy:
Je veus aller après elle.
Mort, que tant de fois j'appelle,
Pren ce qui se donne à toy:
J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle,
Je veus aller après elle.

Villanelle

I have lost my turtledove:
Isn't that her gentle coo?
I will go and find my love.

Here you mourn your mated love;
Oh, God—I am mourning too:
I have lost my turtledove.

If you trust your faithful dove,
Trust my faith is just as true;
I will go and find my love.

Plaintively you speak your love;
All my speech is turned into
"I have lost my turtledove."

Such a beauty was my dove,
Other beauties will not do;
I will go and find my love.

Death, again entreated of,
Take one who is offered you:
I have lost my turtledove;
I will go and find my love.

¹ Edward Hirsch. "Poet's Choice: By Edward Hirsch." *Washington Post* 12 October 2003, sec. Book World: BW 12.

² The scheme of the villanelle is usually represented as A'bA" abA' abA" abA' abA" abA'A", with the capital letters standing for lines that repeat and the lower-case letters standing for lines that merely rhyme.

³ See Julie Ellen Kane, "How the Villanelle's Form Got Fixed," unpublished dissertation (Louisiana State University, 1999) for a thorough and scholarly account of the history of the villanelle, especially in the Renaissance. Dr. Kane informs me that an article distilled from this dissertation will be published in the December 2003 issue of *Modern Language Quarterly*. See also Clive Scott, *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1998). My own dissertation (forthcoming from the University of Virginia) will also contribute to the history of the villanelle, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

⁴ Michel Bideaux, André Tournon, and Hélène Moreau, *Histoire de la littérature française du XVIe siècle*, Études linguistiques et littéraires, ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris: Nathan, 1991) 188-99.

⁵ Kane 128; see also Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Tableau historique et critique de la poésie française et du théâtre français au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Charpentier, 1843) 121.

⁶ Roger Thomas Patterson, *Jean Passerat (1534-1602): A Critical Biography, Bibliography, and Study of Selected Works*, published dissertation (Belfast: Queen's University, 1994) 146-7.

⁷ George Wyndham, "Villanelle," *Ronsard and La Pléiade, with Selections from their Poetry and Some Translations in the Original Metres* (London and NY: Macmillan, 1906) 249-50; Wilfrid Charles Thorley, "Villanelle," *Fleurs-de-lys, a Book of French Poetry Freely Translated into English Verse* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1920) 90; William Frederic Giese, "Villanelle," *French Lyrics, in English Verse* (Madison, WI: The University Press, 1946) 67; John Payne, "Villanelle," *The Limits of Art*, ed. Huntington Cairns (Washington DC: Pantheon, 1948) 539; Elizabeth Gerteiny, "Villanelle (Jean Passerat: 1534-1602)," *Poet Lore* 68.1 (1973) 70; Philip K. Jason, "Modern Versions of the Villanelle," *College Literature* 7 (1980) 145; Anne Waldman, Ron Padgett and Teachers & Writers Collaborative., *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms* (NY: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1987) 197-8. There is also an admirably simple prose translation in Geoffrey Brereton, ed., *The Penguin Book of French Verse* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958) 91-2.

⁸ Jean Passerat, *Recueil des oeuvres poétiques de Ian Passerat augmenté de plus de la moitié, outre les précédentes impressions*, ed. Jean de Rougevalet (Paris: Morel, 1606) 344, 342.

⁹ Passerat 330, 326.