

Return to "Villanelle of the Temptress"

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New research on the history of the villanelle bends a brighter light on the episode in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in which Stephen composes his "Villanelle of the Temptress." While poetry handbooks have stated for over a century that the villanelle is a French form dating from the Renaissance or medieval period, it turns out that this is a mere legend that began with nineteenth-century Aestheticism. Joyce, of course, like his contemporaries--and indeed like ours--was surely never aware that the villanelle was not an authentic Renaissance poetic form. But this news makes clear the full extent to which Stephen the immature artist relies on *fin de siècle* artistic fashion and the full extent to which Joyce the mature artist has weaned himself from that reliance. "Villanelle of the Temptress," as Stanislaus Joyce reports, was written by the eighteen-year-old Joyce in 1900; the villanelle scene, according to Hans Gabler's careful inspection of Joyce's manuscripts, was added to *Stephen Hero* in 1911 or, more likely, in 1914, just before *Portrait* began to appear serially in the modernist journal *The Egoist*. By returning to one of his own early compositions, Joyce dramatizes how far he has traveled as an artist in the years between "Villanelle of the Temptress" and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*--or, to speak more precisely, how far art itself has traveled on the wine-dark seas in those years.

Yet it is only a secondary purpose of this paper to reiterate that point. Even without a full understanding of the history of the villanelle, Joyce critics have essentially resolved the debate that began in 1961 with Wayne Booth's question about how Stephen's

"precious villanelle" is to be regarded. Robert Scholes and other critics defended the quality of the villanelle and performed acrobatic close readings of it to support their admiration, but in 1987, Robert Adams Day pointed out that Stephen's choice of the villanelle form "shows that he is thinking in clichés, for the villanelle, though an ancient and beautiful French form, had had a great vogue among the precious poetasters of the naughty nineties in England, and by the time *A Portrait* appeared had already become as wearily conventional and thoroughly exhausted as the Petrarchan sonnet had become by the death of Queen Elizabeth" (77-8). Even though he believes the villanelle to be "an ancient and beautiful French form," Day perceives rightly that Joyce and his modernist readers would have recognized the villanelle as a debased form when *Portrait* was first published. Most Joyce critics now agree that Stephen's villanelle is meant to be regarded as a promising but fundamentally immature and derivative composition that bears no comparison with *Portrait's* remarkable innovations of subject and style. Stephen's experience of composing the villanelle is what is important, not the villanelle itself.

The chief purpose of this paper is to place *Portrait*, that masterpiece of fiction, within a context highly unfamiliar to it: the literary history of lyric poetry. This will entail tracing both the ancestors and the descendants of "Villanelle of the Temptress" rather than examining the villanelle scene in *Portrait*--but I hope that you will return to *Portrait* on your own and consider the scene in light of the history I will here relate.

First, the ancestors. In the eighteen-forties, French Romantic poets began to revive the poetic forms of the Renaissance and medieval periods. These forms, including the rondeau, rondel, ballade, chant royale, and triolet, were intricate poetic schemes characterized most frequently by refrain and by a high number of rhymes on a low

number of rhyme sounds. For the French Romantics, these forms represented an innocent and chivalric ideal that could be wielded against the neoclassical rationalism and bourgeois materialism of Enlightenment era poetry. Similarly, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, Romantic poets from the English Wordsworth to the German Goethe to the Polish Mickiewicz had revived the long-abandoned sonnet and ballad forms.

In 1844, a minor Romantic author named Wilhelm Ténint published a partisan poetry handbook titled *Prosodie de l'école moderne* (Prosody of the Modern School, i.e., Romanticism) that held up Jean Passerat's "Villanelle," given on your handout, as an example of a common Renaissance form. In the Renaissance, the term "Villanelle" had meant merely "Italian pastoral song," with no formal scheme implied. Passerat's nonce lyric, written about 1574 and first published in 1606, had gone virtually unmentioned and certainly unimitated for two and a half centuries before Ténint held it up as the model for a schematic type. Ténint's error was picked up and much more widely disseminated by the Parnassian poet Théodore de Banville, who himself began to write poems modeled after Passerat's formerly obscure lyric, thus inventing a new form where none had previously existed. Banville's extremely popular 1872 poetry handbook, *Petit traité de poésie française* (Little Treatise on French Poetry) helped to entrench the error in French prosody and even more so in English prosody.

In England, the scholar, critic, poet, and generally indefatigable man of letters Edmund Gosse read Banville's *Petit traité* and began to champion the French forms to poets writing in English. Gosse's 1877 piece in *Cornhill Magazine*, titled "A Plea for Certain Exotic Forms of Verse," included a villanelle of Gosse's own composing, also given on your handout. Under Gosse's influence, the schematic villanelle became more

popular in English poetry than it was then or ever had been in French poetry; only about half a dozen poets writing in French have *ever* attempted the villanelle from that day to this, in fact. It is a form marked with "Frenchness" for Anglophone poets. At the end of the nineteenth century, use of the French forms including the villanelle became a hallmark of the Grosvenor Gallery schools of poetry, Aestheticism, Parnassianism, Art for Art's Sake, Decadence, *vers de société*--post-Romantic movements that all shared the goal of fostering a cosmopolitan, anti-bourgeois revival of stylized verse. Swinburne, for example, wrote several poems in French forms such as the rondel and the chant royale, and, as you can see by your handout, Oscar Wilde also wrote a few villanelles, including this one, "Theocritus."

What the young Joyce shared with these post-Romantic Aesthetes was especially the conviction that literature in English had become narrow, bourgeois, xenophobic, and rigidly moral, and therefore needed to be refreshed by Continental poetic form and a Continental sophistication that could appreciate the sensual innocence of the faux-pastoral. Joyce's literary career of course virtually began with an admiration for Ibsen, and this is a link to Gosse, who was one of Ibsen's first admirers and translators in England. Joyce, like Gosse, might also have read Théodore de Banville's *Petit traité* directly--that popular handbook went through ten editions between 1872 and 1900, any one of which Joyce might have consulted. Joyce also read Wilde, of course, and when Buck Mulligan says, early in *Ulysses*, "We have grown out of Wilde and paradoxes," he sums up the implicit attitude of Joyce the author of *Portrait* and *Ulysses* toward Stephen the author of "Villanelle of the Temptress." Another likely immediate model for Joyce's early villanelle is Ernest Dowson's "Villanelle of Sunset," published in the *Book of the*

Rhymers' Club in 1892. Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson were the star members of the London Rhymers' Club, which had been founded in 1890 by a young W. B. Yeats before he achieved and far surpassed those poets' stature.

In 1902 Joyce sent a poem to Yeats for comment. Yeats, while encouraging, was also frank about the shortcomings of Joyce's lyrical attempts:

I think that the thought is a little thin. Perhaps I will make you angry when I say that it is the poetry of a young man, of a young man who is practicing his instrument, taking pleasure in the mere handling of the stops. (qtd. in *My Brother's Keeper* 208)

In the same year of 1902, probably as a result of this honest assessment from Yeats and a similarly unenthusiastic judgment from the renowned critic and Ibsen translator William Archer, Joyce destroyed most of his poems, saving only "Villanelle of the Temptress" and a few others. In the years that followed, Joyce turned ever more resolutely away from poetry and toward prose. Ellmann writes that Joyce, "quite independently" of his authoritative critics, was "uncertain about his verse":

The principal source of uncertainty, as he acknowledged candidly to Stanislaus and to himself, was that he could not rival his countryman Yeats, whose volume of lyrics, *The Wind Among the Reeds*, had awakened his intense admiration when it appeared in 1899. About his prose, however, he had no such modesty, and he was already beginning to feel he might outdo George Moore, Hardy, and Tureen, if not Tolstoy. In prose he thought he might achieve more subtlety than in meter. (Ellmann 1959, 83)

Joyce seems to have transformed his uncertainty about his own verse to a negative judgment of verse in general as an artistic mode. Stephen's aesthetic philosophy, expounded just before the villanelle scene in *Portrait*, relegates lyric poetry to the lowest rank of art: "The lyrical form is in fact the simplest verbal vesture of an instant of emotion, a rhythmical cry such as ages ago cheered on the man who pulled at the oar or dragged stones up a slope. He who utters it is more conscious of the instant of emotion than of himself as feeling emotion" (*Portrait* 214). "Villanelle of the Temptress" conveys only an instant of emotion; *Portrait* conveys Stephen.

I invite you again to look at *Portrait* more closely with this distinction in mind, but in the rest of the time allotted to me, I would like to address this thorny question: Has Stephen's villanelle influenced later poets? Joyce scholars may not be aware that the villanelle is enjoying an unprecedented and remarkable popularity among contemporary poets. What role, if any, does *Portrait*, with its prominent villanelle, play in this contemporary revival?

Thus, the history of the villanelle after *Portrait*. William Empson almost single-handedly smuggled the villanelle back into serious poetry from the backwater in which it had languished during the rise of high modernism. Empson enjoyed some reputation as a poet early in his career, although later he abandoned poetry for literary criticism, becoming best known perhaps for his landmark *Seven Types of Ambiguity* -- considered to be a seminal text in founding the New Criticism. As you can see from your handout, Empson's villanelle differs markedly from the earlier villanelles, not excluding "Villanelle of the Temptress." Its diction is scientific ("chemic," "toxin") rather than than pastoral; it introduces a recently fashionable semantic opacity, and, most subtly but

perhaps most importantly, it alters the formerly accepted line length of the villanelle. Earlier villanelles had unanimously adopted lines of three or four beats with from six to eight syllables; the rhythmic trimeter and tetrameter of these villanelles marked the form as a simple, folk, form, cousin to the ballad, outside the intellectualism of the long and asymmetrical five-beat ten-syllable line. Empson's villanelle is the first to use iambic pentameter, which may reflect a deliberate attempt to make the villanelle more serious. It may also reflect sheer ignorance of the earlier "tradition" of the villanelle; the poetry of the Aesthetics was so thoroughly and unanimously excluded from serious literature in the early decades of the twentieth century that Empson might never have encountered it. Unfortunately, Empson never seems to have mentioned in print exactly what he found to interest him in the villanelle. There is no clear evidence that he had read *Portrait*, although it is possible and even likely that he had. Empson may well have encountered a definition of the villanelle in a conscientious poetry handbook somewhere and attempted the form "in the raw," so to speak.

Empson's use of the villanelle was so unusual, in fact, that it led to mockery. Several poets, including Dylan Thomas, published parodic villanelles with Empson as their explicit target. Thomas, of course, would later go on to write what is perhaps the most famous villanelle of all time and is certainly one of the most important of twentieth-century lyrics: the 1951 "Do not go gentle into that good night," given on your handout. And for this poem, the question of *Portrait's* influence is particularly pressing. Dylan Thomas's own early set of autobiographical short stories was titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*--yet Thomas himself claimed that this title did not derive from Joyce,

and that Joyce had had no influence on his work. In a written response to questions from a student, the poet wrote:

I cannot say that I have been "influenced" by Joyce, whom I enormously admire and whose *Ulysses*, and earlier stories, I have read a great deal. I think this Joyce question arose because somebody once, in print, remarked on the closeness of the title of my book of short stories, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog," to Joyce's title, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." As you know, the name given to innumerable portrait paintings by their artist is, "Portrait of a Young Man"--a perfectly straightforward title. Joyce used the painting title for the first time as the title of a literary work. I myself made a bit of doggish fun of the painting-title and, of course, intended no possible reference to Joyce. I do not think that Joyce has had any hand at all in my writing; certainly his *Ulysses* has not. On the other hand, I cannot deny that the shaping of some of my "Portrait" stories might owe something to Joyce's stories in the volume, "Dubliners." But then "Dubliners" was a pioneering work in the world of the short story, and no good storyteller since can have failed, in some way, however little, to be benefited by it. (qtd. in Fitzgibbon 326)

Now, Dylan Thomas is notoriously unreliable on many subjects; he was known to have lied outright to many inquisitive and naïve questioners about the details of his childhood and the meaning of his work. Nevertheless, in this case, I think we should take Thomas at his word, not least because it is so clear that Thomas picked up the idea of the villanelle from Empson. It is also the case that *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* bears no

discernible stylistic resemblance to Joyce's *Portrait*, and hardly any resemblance even to *Dubliners*. Thomas's *Portrait* is in the first person, just to take the easiest example.

I won't bore this audience of Joyce scholars too much with a discussion of contemporary poetry, but I will close by saying that contemporary poets resemble Thomas, if in nothing else, by appearing not to have been influenced in the least by *Portrait of the Artist* and "Villanelle of the Temptress." Negative evidence is always difficult to present, but it is nevertheless the case that contemporary poets simply do not mention "Villanelle of the Temptress" as a factor in their decision to write villanelles, and, as the rest of the poems on your handout may reveal, contemporary villanelles show more evidence of responding to "Do not go gentle into that good night" than they do to the almost entirely separate tradition of the villanelle that prevailed at the turn of the nineteenth century. Theodore Roethke's famous "The Waking" was an explicit tribute to his recently deceased alcoholic friend Thomas, while Elizabeth Bishop's equally famous "One Art" introduced the intoxicating possibility of fundamentally deranging the villanelle's strict rhythms and requirements to an extent that neither Thomas nor Roethke would have dared to attempt, although they began it. Bishop interpreted the idea of "refrain" very loosely, introduced dramatic slant rhymes and strong enjambments, and, most importantly, for the first time depicted the poet herself as fundamentally at odds with her poem. The villanelle in contemporary practice always stages this dialogue between the rebellious unique identity of the poet and the structures and strictures of what she is expected to say. Carolyn Whitlow enacts the unexpected congruence of black speech and traditional form; Steve Kowitz shows how arbitrary are the abstractions of grammar; and Jennifer Grotz (perhaps less successfully) attempts to depict the impossibility of beautifully describing an

unbeautiful world, figuring the impossibility of ever succeeding in the set task of "trying to love the world" in the impossibility of fulfilling the villanelle's poetic demands. All this differs markedly from Stephen's attempt to insert himself into a poetic tradition through imitation. At the same time, The prominent role "Villanelle of the Temptress" plays in *Portrait* was probably a significant factor in the survival of the villanelle in the twentieth-century poetic crucible. The publicity that Joyce's *Portrait* gave to the villanelle form probably constitutes the entirety of the effect "Villanelle of the Temptress" has had upon poets--but this is not insignificant, given the immensity of Joyce's reputation and the difficulty of judging the author's attitude toward the villanelle. That Joyce included "Villanelle of the Temptress" in *Portrait*, even as an example of immature art, is highly likely to have contributed to the reputation of the villanelle as a legitimate genre.