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

Contemporary villanelles—and there are a surprising number of them—take as their model a nineteen-line scheme with alternating rhymed refrains, a scheme that 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. Perhaps the most famous of all 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 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." The villanelle has recently enjoyed a decided resurgence among poets of standing (many of whom are doubtless moved by admiration of "One Art"), and 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.

The first poem ever written on the nineteen-line villanelle scheme can be identified with precision: it is Jean Passerat's "Villanelle" ("J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle"),

which was first published in Paris in 1606 and was most probably written in 1574.<sup>1</sup> The many young poets who write villanelles today, however, are scarcely (if at all) aware of this poem, and there has never been any major English verse translation. The obscurity of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" is the more peculiar when we consider that virtually all poetry handbooks and textbooks claim that the nineteen-line villanelle is a French form that dates back to the Renaissance, a claim that rests on the sole example of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle." Mark Strand and Eavan Boland's *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, for instance, asserts that "With the publication of ["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."<sup>2</sup>

Recent scholarship has conclusively shown, on the contrary, that Passerat's poem (which was unpublished and unmentioned during the poet's lifetime) existed in near-total obscurity for two and a half centuries after Passerat's death until it was revived in the nineteenth century to become the model for the contemporary villanelle. Moreover, the schematic villanelle did not "define itself," and it was certainly not defined in the Renaissance by the approval of a general audience; rather, it was defined in the nineteenth century by certain specific poets of the Romantic movement in France and the Aesthetic movement in England.<sup>3</sup>

In 1844, an up-and-coming young admirer of Victor Hugo called Wilhelm Ténint published a book designed to explicate and defend the poetic principles of the new movement now called French Romanticism: *Prosodie de l'école moderne* ("Prosody of

the Modern School"). Ténint (possibly on the basis of an ambiguity in a revised and expanded edition of Pierre Richelet's *Dictionnaire de rimes*) mistakenly associated "the villanelle" with medieval fixed forms such as the triolet and the rondel. Ténint reprinted "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle"—with several errors in the text—and called it "le chef-d'oeuvre des villanelles" ("the masterpiece of villanelles"). In fact, prosodic treatises and poetry handbooks of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries had defined the villanelle simply as an Italian pastoral song (the French word *villanelle* was an adaptation of the Italian word *villanella*, which referred to a simple song), and this was the sense in which Passerat had used the term.<sup>4</sup> The poetic scheme of Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" was in the Renaissance entirely a nonce form.

There can be found only three French works published between 1574 and 1844 that even mention "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," and the poem was not translated into English until 1906 (exactly 300 years after its first publication in French), well after it had been revived by Ténint and other poets.<sup>5</sup> The short lyric was part of a longer memorial sequence, *Le tombeau de Fleurie pour Niré* ("The Tombstone of Fleurie for Niré"), which was first printed four years after Passerat's death, in the 1606 *Recueil des oeuvres poétiques de Ian Passerat augmenté de plus de la moitié, outre les précédentes impressions* ("Collection of the Poetic Works of Jean Passerat, Augmented by More than Half, from Previous Editions"). An initial volume of Passerat's work, *Le premier liure des poemes de Iean Passerat* ("The First Book of the Poems of Jean Passerat") had been published in 1602, the year of the scholar's death—the poems had been collected and edited by the scholar's nephew, Jean de Rougevalet—but this volume had not included *Le*

*tombeau de Fleurie pour Niré*, further suggesting that the sequence was not among the most popular of Passerat's works. *Le tombeau de Fleurie pour Niré* is thought to have been composed in 1574 and presented to the brand-new king Henri III upon the death of his mistress Marie de Clèves.<sup>6</sup> Henri III 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.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from its formal scheme, the most striking characteristic of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle"—even to modern eyes and ears—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 was one of the most reputable classical scholars of the sixteenth century. Passerat was in fact out of step with the French poets of his time in this regard. 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 high diction and tone, the coining of new French words, and the frequent use of classical imitation and allusion.<sup>8</sup>

To Passerat's more famous poetic contemporaries, then, 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.<sup>9</sup> Yet in his vernacular poetry Passerat was surely following his own prescriptions for the best Latin style; Patterson writes that Passerat 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."<sup>10</sup> Passerat's French poetry, then, like his Latin composition, intentionally adopts a plain style.

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, however. I have found six 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), and one by Phillip K. Jason (1980).<sup>11</sup> 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, I believe that it is closer to the original than any of the previous translations.

Another important characteristic of the original 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; and Wyndham employs both eye-rhyme and off-rhyme. None of these solutions quite suits the original with its insistently perfect line-endings.

There is even reason to believe that Passerat (or possibly his nephew, or another 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." This phenomenon occurs elsewhere in the *Tombeau* as well; the word spelled "trouve" in one poem is spelled "treuve" in another when it occurs as a line-ending rhymed with "fleuve."<sup>12</sup> 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 or mimic 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 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.

I append here the text of the first published version of Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle." 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 never possessed. It therefore seems time for a serious English translation of the villanelle that initiated the scheme—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.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Passerat, *Recueil des oeuvres poétiques de Jan Passerat augmenté de plus de la moitié, outre les précédentes impressions* (Paris: Morel, 1606) 344-5.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000) 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Kane 88-155.

<sup>5</sup> These three sources are the following: François Barbin, et al., *Recueil des plus belles pieces des poètes françois, tant anciens que modernes, depuis Villon jusqu' à M. de Benserade* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1692; reprinted 1752); A. Phérotée de La Croix, *L'art de la poésie françoise et latine, avec une idée de la musique sous une nouvelle methode, Omnia in pondere, numero & mensura. En trois parties* (Lyon: Thomas Amaulry, 1694); and Pierre Richelet, Pierre Charles Berthelin, and Louis Barthelemy, *Dictionnaire de rimes* (Lyon: A. Leroy, 1751; new editions or printings in 1760, 1762, 1778, 1781, 1799, 1810, 1817, and 1973). See Kane 211-27 for a full discussion of these three works; note that the second source by Phérotée de la Croix is considered to be only a bastardized version of the Barbin *Recueil*.

<sup>6</sup> Kane 132-3.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Augustus Tilley, *The Literature of the French Renaissance* (Cambridge: University Press, 1904) I.295, II.123; Frederic J. Baumgartner, *France in the Sixteenth Century* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995) 217-26.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Bideaux, André Tournon, and Hélène Moreau, *Histoire de la littérature française du XVIe siècle, Études linguistiques et littéraires*, ed. Henri Mitterrand (Paris: Nathan, 1991) 188-99.

<sup>9</sup> Tilley II.57; Kane 128; and Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Tableau historique et critique de la poésie française et du théâtre français au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Charpentier, 1843) 121.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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. There is also an admirably simple prose translation in Geoffrey Brereton, ed., *The Penguin Book of French Verse* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958) 91-2.

<sup>12</sup> Passerat 344, 342, 330, 326.