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Conference -- *Art Both Ways: Translation, Restoration, and Re-creation*  
American Literary Translators Association  
Panel -- Making it Auld: Translation and Philology  
Saturday, October 30, 2004

The Othering of Poetic Form Through Translation:

Jean Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" (1574)

As the first villanelle, Jean Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" (1574) is historically important for a number of reasons, among them the fact that contemporary Anglophone poems from Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" to Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" and beyond have adopted and explored its form. I have found seven English verse translations of the poem, the first in 1906, all of which indicate a vested interest in keeping the poem historically "othered" through the use of archaic language. Archaic language for archaic works was de rigueur in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, but since the modern fashion of translation is to render a work that seemed fresh and colloquial in its own day in language that seems fresh and colloquial to us, it is therefore interesting that translators of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" resisted the trend of translation theory, continuing to render the poem in archaic language. I would argue that Passerat's poem has been othered in English translation so as to keep the idea of fixed poetic form strictly marginal in contemporary Anglophone poetry.

Most of those involved with contemporary American poetry are aware that there has been a recent surge of interest in the villanelle. The timing of this revival suggests that it is partly due to Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle "One Art," which was first published

in the *New Yorker* in 1976 and also appeared that same year in her influential collection *Geography III*. The recent spate of villanelles in English dates from the early eighties and coincides, as well, with the rise of New Formalism.

The current general perception of the early history of the villanelle can be represented by Mark Strand and Eavan Boland's *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (2000). This work is not specifically associated with New Formalism, and the account of the villanelle to be found in it is longer than those commonly found in poetry handbooks and dictionaries. We might therefore expect *The Making of a Poem* to be both authoritative and mainstream, even though (or especially since) its intended audience is clearly of the undergraduate persuasion. It is therefore worth quoting Strand and Boland's "History of the Form" at some length, almost in full.

It hardly seems likely that a form so sparkling and complicated as the villanelle could have had its origin in an Italian harvest field. In fact it came from an Italian rustic song, the term itself *villanella* thought to derive from *villano*, an Italian word for "peasant," or even *villa* the Latin word for "country house" or "farm."

If it was a round song--something sung with repetitive words and refrains--it may have taken its first, long-lost shape as an accompaniment to the different stages of an agricultural task. Binding sheaves, perhaps, or even scything. No actual trace of this early origin remains. By the time the villanelle emerges into poetic history, it does so as a French poem with pastoral themes.

The form we know today began with the work of a French poet called Jean Passerat. He was a popular, politically engaged writer in sixteenth-century France. When he died in 1602, he left behind him several poems that had entered popular affection and memory.

One of these was his villanelle about a lost turtledove: a disguised love song. Even through a fraction of Passerat's poems [sic] on his lost turtledove, the twentieth-century villanelle can be seen clearly:

*J'ai perdu my [sic] tourterelle:  
Est-ce point celle que j'oy?  
Je veux aller après elle.  
Tu regretes ta femelle?  
Helas! aussi fais-je moy:  
J'ai perdu ma tourterelle.*

With the publication of this villanelle 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.

This poem established the pattern for all future villanelles, both in French and English. The actual structure is as follows. [...] In the 1870s in England, French poetry became an an object of interest and admiration. Swinburne, for instance, wrote an elegy for Baudelaire. This was followed by an interest in the forms of French verse and several poets of the time, including Henley and Oscar Wilde, took it up. (6-7)

This account 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 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).

A second and more important point to make is that the influential nineteen-line scheme of Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" has in any case almost 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. The second book-length treatise on the villanelle, Julie Ellen Kane's unpublished dissertation of 1999, "How the Villanelle's Form Got Fixed," dramatically revises McFarland's work. Kane, a Renaissance scholar, reports that she can find only eighteen examples of poems designated as "*Villanelle*" or "*Villanesque*" written in France between 1553 and 1627 and that

no two of the eighteen are identical in rhyme scheme, length, and syllable count. They do not resemble each other but, in most cases, each resembles an actual musical *villanella* or *villancico*. It cannot possibly be said that there was anything resembling a poetic "form," let alone a fixed poetic form, for the villanelle in the sixteenth century (155).

The *villanella* and the *villancico* were at that time Italian and Spanish dance-song forms, musically simpler than the polyphonic madrigal. French poets adopting the title "*Villanelle*" or "*Villanesque*" thus probably meant to indicate that their poems, if set to music (as was commonly done), should have simple rather than complex settings; the simplicity of musical setting usually suggested a "simplicity" of character or theme, too,

best evoked by terms such as "pastoral" or "rustic." Structurally, the *villanella* had no rule other than that it usually had a refrain, which was--as in the popular song forms of any era--a single refrain, not an alternating one. The villanelle was simply not a set poetic form, as the sonnet was, and as the triolet and the rondeau were.

With this new knowledge, we can see that there is a clear nostalgia in Strand and Boland's entry, a longing for a golden age when poetry was truly popular (the word recurs four times in the brief passage), not marginalized and professionalized as everyone knows it is today. There are two senses of the word "popular" at work here: the sense of "much-loved" and the sense of "of the people." Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," written in 1574 and first published in 1606, was not popular in either sense in his own day. It was a rather obscure lyric written by a rather obscure poet who inhabited a professionalized and privileged literary culture that in some ways was very much like our own professionalized and privileged literary culture. "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" was written for a king, and may have been distributed in manuscript in courtly circles, but there is little if any reason to suppose that the poem was admired even by that august and limited company, let alone by the general populace.

Jean Passerat (1534-1602) was best known in his own time as a classicist and a humanist, and was a well-established professional public intellectual in 1574, when "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" was written. Passerat was born in the provincial city of Troyes, which is situated about a hundred miles east of Paris. He studied Latin and classical philology in Paris in his early twenties and was appointed to a lectureship at the Collège du Plessis in Paris in 1558, winning a series of increasingly prestigious positions at

Parisian colleges in the years that followed as his fame as an orator spread. The culmination of Passerat's career came when he was thirty-eight; in 1572, he was appointed to the Chair of Latin Eloquence at the Collège Royal in Paris. His predecessor, the famous Protestant scholar Peter Ramus, had been killed that year in the bloody St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, in which more than two thousand Protestants died. Passerat (a relatively moderate Catholic) held this prestigious academic position for the rest of his life. He never married, and his works were edited and published posthumously by his nephew, Jean de Rougevalet.

Probably three-quarters of the works by Passerat printed during his life or shortly thereafter are in Latin, and his primary identity was that of a Latin orator and philologist. Original compositions in Latin such as Passerat's paradoxical encomium *Nihil* ("Nothing")--a satirical piece that according to Roger Patterson "was at one time his most frequently printed work"--were far more characteristic of Passerat's whole body of work than the pastoral love lyric "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," and it was for that body of work that he was known in his own day (33). Passerat was also one of the anonymous contributors to another satirical piece: the 1593/4 *Satyre Ménippée de la vertu du Catholicon d'Espagne, et de la tenue des Estatz de Paris* ("Menippean Satire on the Properties of Spanish 'Catholicone,' 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*; it was a literarily and historically important work from the beginning. *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.

"J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" was part of a longer memorial sequence, *Le tombeau de Fleurie pour Niré* ("The Tombstone of Fleurie for Niré"), which was composed in 1574 and first printed four years after Passerat's death. 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, 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. The music publishers Ballard and Le Roy did include one piece by Passerat in their 1578 *Second livre d'airs, chansons, villanelles napolitaines et espagnolles mis en musique à quatre parties* ("Second Book of Airs, Songs, Neapolitan Villanelles and Spanish Songs Set to Four-Part Music"), but this was not "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," nor was it even a *villanelle napolitaine*; it was, like many of Passerat's lyrics, a sonnet.

The year 1574 was in fact the first year of Henri III's reign, and 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 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.

In the context of Passerat's career and posthumous reputation, it is clear that "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" was a decidedly minor work until its "rediscovery" (tantamount to a plain discovery) in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the French Parnassians Wilhelm Ténint and Théodore de Banville mistakenly promulgated the idea that Passerat's "Villanelle" was only one example of a common Renaissance form. English Art for Art's Sake poets such as Edmund Gosse, Austin Dobson, Oscar Wilde, and even James Joyce believed Banville's account and wrote poems on the Passerat model, and the form became fully entrenched in Anglophone poetry. And while the form is always called "French" in English-language poetry reference sources, there are only half a dozen or so French poets who have ever attempted the form. It is neither a Renaissance form nor a French form in terms of actual practice.

Apart from its now-familiar formal scheme, the most striking characteristic of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle"--even to modern eyes and ears--is its plain style. The syntax is generally straightforward, the sentences are brief and declarative, 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 generally 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. Passerat and Ronsard were acquainted--were even friends--and there has been some debate over whether Passerat can be considered a minor member of the Pléiade or not. It is at any rate clear that to Passerat's more famous poetic contemporaries in the Pléiade a poem such as "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" would have looked both slightly dated and excessively ordinary. Indeed, 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. Passerat admired simplicity.

There has been little recent commentary on "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle." Apart from its scheme the poem has been supremely unimportant in the twentieth century. Yet because of its influential form the poem has been on occasion been quoted, anthologized, and especially translated, and therefore I examine here some of the more important of these sporadic moments of critical attention. The English translations, in particular, reveal the character of the twentieth-century critical reception of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle."

English translations of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" have not chosen to or have not been able to convey the poem's colloquial simplicity, preferring instead to render it as archaic. I have found seven published translations of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" into

English verse: one by George Wyndham (1906), one by John Payne (1907), one by Wilfrid Charles Thorley (1920), one by William Frederic Giese (1946), one by Elizabeth Gerteiny (1973), one by Philip K. Jason (1980), and one by Anne Waldman (1987). These translations without exception, though to a greater or lesser degree, employ archaisms that Passerat himself would have disliked; Passerat's biographer Roger 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" (146-7). Of the modern translations, the one that best conveys the straightforward diction and tone of Passerat's original is probably Jason's; however, Jason does not attempt the rhyme, and what he calls his "rather free rendering" is in fact a purely functional convenience (145). It is appended in a footnote to his scholarly article on the inherent qualities of the villanelle scheme, which is titled "Modern Versions of the Villanelle." But since Jason generally retains Passerat's seven-syllable line, and since he lineates his translation as a poem, I have included it in the list of poetic translations.

Yet even Jason's uncomplicated and accurate piece translates "tu" as "thou," as do all the translations except Waldman's and Wyndham's. This translation, of course, is grammatically accurate, since there is no other English equivalent for the informal second-person pronoun distinction in French--but "thou" is inevitably archaic in English, while "tu" is not archaic in French. Gerteiny's 1973 translation, in fact, incorporates a grammatical error in the third tercet through using "thou": "Say ye thou hast lealty

shown? / Peer to thine, my constancy; / So go I or be undone" (70). The word "ye" can denote either the polite singular pronoun or the plural pronoun (just as the French word "vous" can denote either the polite singular or the plural), but neither of these senses of "ye" is possible when coupled with the informal singular "thou." Anne Waldman's 1987 translation gives the second line of the second tercet as "Alas! I really do," combining a highly archaic word with a highly colloquial phrase in an unfortunate irregularity of diction.

Giese's translation of 1946 is somewhat less archaic than Gerteiny's, and it bravely addresses the difficulty of rhyming "turtledove," adopting the classic expedient of eye-rhyme. In Giese's translation, the fifth tercet becomes "Thy sad plaining fills the grove, / Mine re-echoes far and near: / I have lost my turtle-dove" (67). Thorley's 1920 translation, like those of Payne and Gerteiny, translates "tourterelle" as something other than "turtledove" for the sake of a more common rhyme sound. Thorley also deliberately generates an effect of antiquity by using archaic spellings even for common modern words such as "own" and "blown"; he renders the first tercet as "I have lost my turtle fleet: / Is that her owne voice blowne bye? / After her I fayne would beat" (90). Payne's translation of 1907 is emphatically committed to the practice of archaism, rendering the first tercet as "I have lost my turtle-doo. / Is't not she I hear hard by? / After her I'd fain ensue," a translation that also introduces either a neologism or an obscure term with the word "turtle-doo" for the sake of an easier rhyme (539).

The earliest translation, George Wyndham's of 1906, is perhaps the best of the rhymed verse translations; it eschews the archaic "thou" and renders "tourterelle" in the

simplest fashion as "turtle-dove." The first tercet becomes "I have lost my turtle-dove; / Is not that her call to me? / To be with her were enough." But even Wyndham's translation does not correspond as well as it might to Passerat's original; for instance, Wyndham introduces a strong enjambment in the fifth tercet: "Seeing no more in the grove / Her's, no beauty can I see; / To be with her were enough." Wyndham also makes greater use of syntactic inversion than does Passerat, and he includes an exclamation point in the final quatrain of both his English translation and the text of the French original, a variant that Edmund Gosse and George Saintsbury had both previously printed. This small punctuation change nevertheless significantly alters the calm, resigned tone of the concluding quatrain of the original.

While the tonal simplicity of the poem may be evident, another of its chief characteristics is not at all so. There is good reason to believe that Passerat (or an editor or a printer) deliberately ensured that all the line-endings within every poem were spelled alike, even when this entailed altering a more or less accepted spelling. The word "fidelle" in line seven, for instance (which rhymes with "Tourterelle," "femelle," and other double-"l" words in the poem), is spelled with only one "l" at the beginning of a line of another poem printed only two pages before "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle": "Fidele Amant qui planta ce Cyprés, / Digne tu fus de meillure adventure" (*Recueil* 342). This phenomenon occurs elsewhere in the *Tombeau* as well; the word spelled "trouve" ("find") in one poem is spelled "treuve" in another when it occurs as a line-ending rhymed with "fleuve": "S'il n'y trouve plus d'eau ny verdure ny fleurs"; "Autre remede à mon mal ne se treuve. / Revien Charon pour me passer le fleuve" (*Recueil* 330, 326). Variant spelling of

words was of course perfectly common in the sixteenth century, before spellings had been standardized--but the correct modern spellings are "fidèle" and "trouve," which suggests (though in hindsight) that the line-ending spellings of "fidelle" and "treuve" were then, as they are now, *less* correct. The line-ending spellings clearly do not vary at random. Even a quick look through Passerat's *Recueil* shows a very high incidence of homographia in the rhyme words. The unanimous *visual* recurrence of "-elle" and "-oy" as line-endings, then, is surely as deliberate a poetic device as their aural recurrence as rhymes. To modernize the spelling of the line-endings, as so many authors and editors do when quoting or reprinting "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle," is to destroy this visual rhyme.

While I have not attempted to reproduce this visual rhyme in my own translation, it does strike me as an interesting effect that ought to be represented. My solution was to adopt a thematically-appropriate reiteration, one that incidentally made the task of reproducing the rhyme scheme much easier. One of the chief difficulties of translating "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" into English verse is that by far the most natural translation for "tourterelle" is "turtledove," a word that in English has few exact 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 insistently perfect line-endings. I have therefore chosen to repeat, rather than rhyme, the words "love" and "dove." Surely no one has ever had more legitimate cause to use this familiar, even trite, rhyme.

## 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.

I hope that this history and new translation of "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" 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* fixed form in English of contemporary invention. 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.