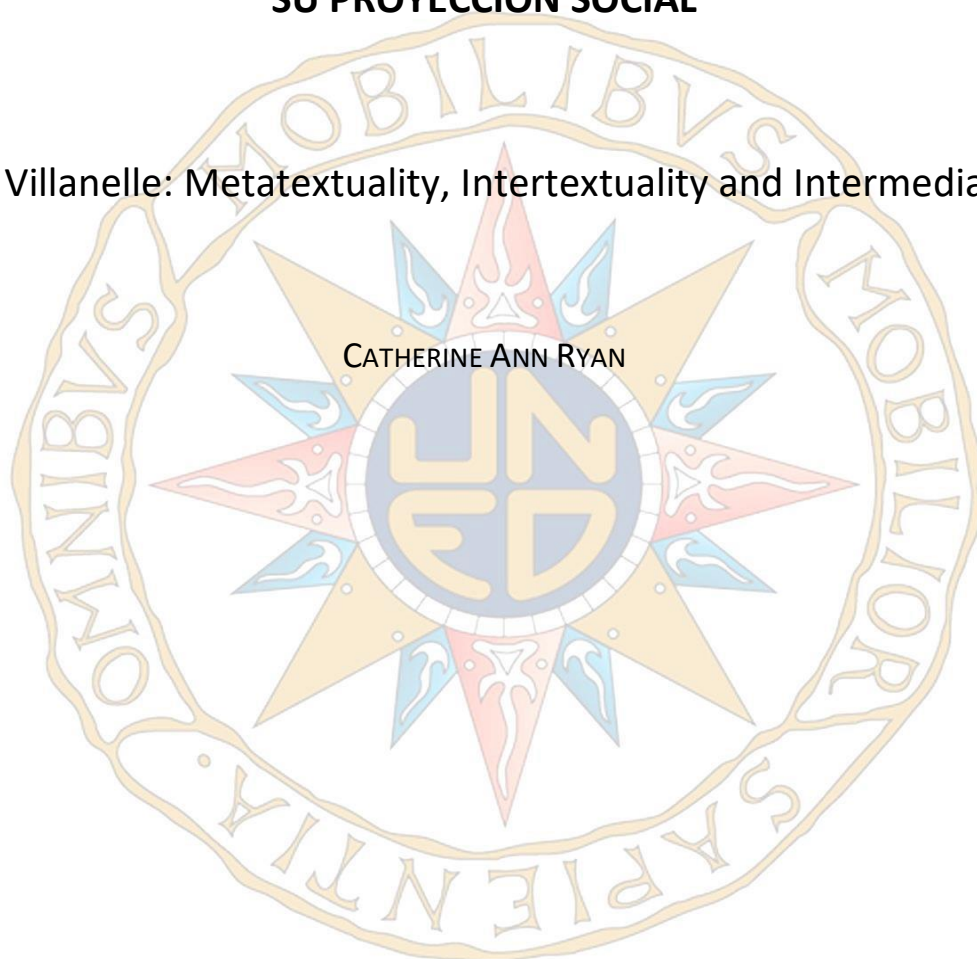




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The Villanelle: Metatextuality, Intertextuality and Intermediality



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The Villanelle: Metatextuality, Intertextuality and Intermediality

1. Introduction

In 2018, the BBC aired a series called *Killing Eve*, in which the main character is a hired assassin whose codename is Villanelle. The series went on to win multiple awards, and received rave reviews, among them that of the *New Yorker* critic Jia Tolentino, who pointed out that the villanelle was a type of poetry. The objective of this paper is to examine the villanelle fixed-form poem and follow its evolution from the point when it entered English poetry in the late 19th century until the present, asking whether the villanelle reflects the changes that poetry itself has undergone during this nearly 140-year period. It also aims to deconstruct the poem's metatextuality, intertextuality and intermediality by examining key villanelles, in an attempt to give an overview of how this short poem encapsulates and reflects many theories which are current in modern literary studies.

The villanelle is a fixed-form poem of nineteen lines. It consists of five tercets and a quatrain, and two refrains alternate down the poem until they meet in the final lines as a couplet. The two rhymes can be schematised as follows:¹ A1bA2 abA1 abA2 abA1 abA2 abA1A2 (where capital letters represent refrain lines and small letters a rhyming line). Famous villanelles of the twentieth century include Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," Dylan Thomas' "Do not go gentle into that good night" and Theodore Roethke's "The Waking," and the number of published examples has snowballed in recent years as it has become more popular among modern poets and appeared as a fixture on creative writing courses.

After describing the three major periods of the villanelle since its introduction into English in the 1880s, I shall discuss the villanelle in the context of three theoretical frameworks: examples of metapoetical villanelles; the relationship between certain villanelles and other key texts; and the intermedial relationship of the villanelle with music, painting and cinema.

¹ This shorthand was invented by Jacob Schipper in his *Englischen Metrik*, in 1885, which was translated from German into English in 1910. Julie Kane blames him among others for distortions to the history of the villanelle, but credits him with creating this useful notation of the form (252).

2. History of the Villanelle

The history of the villanelle has been tracked in recent years by a small group of scholars. In the 1980s, Philip K. Jason, Manfred Pfister, and Ronald McFarland wrote articles on the form, and in 1999 the American poet Julie Kane wrote her doctoral thesis on “How the Villanelle’s Form Got Fixed,” which examined the history of the villanelle in Italian dance music and its later influence on the poetry of Philip Sidney. This was followed by a second PhD thesis on the poem in 2004 by the American Amanda French, titled “Refrain again: The Return of the Villanelle,” which developed the theme with a review of its history and an examination of twentieth century villanelles. Both of these theses uncovered misconceptions about the villanelle, confirming the “original” villanelle of 1606 as a nonce form, and tracing the way that the form came down in France to its 19th century appearance as a stanzaic form which could be adapted as the poet required, before it was taken up and consolidated as a fixed form in English. Kane and French have been recognised for their scholarship on the form, and contributed jointly to updating the entry on the villanelle in the 2012 edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, which clarifies the long hiatus between the first nonce example and its Parnassian flowering. In addition, in 2012, the Everyman’s Library Pocket Poets series published a small anthology of villanelles titled *Villanelles*, edited by Annie Finch and Marie-Elizabeth Mali, with an introductory explanation on the history of the form by Julie Kane. It has a carefully designed book cover, which displays a description of the poem’s form on the spine of the volume: “Villanelle: a 19-line poem with a pattern of repeated lines and two rhymes.”

The form of the fixed-form villanelle poem is agreed as originating with the villanelle “J’ay perdu ma Tourterelle” (“I have lost my turtledove”) by Jean Passerat, a humanist scholar in France at the end of the 16th century, and Amanda French describes the fact that he called his poem a “Villanelle,” as comparable with calling a song “Blues” (“Refrain, Again” 21). Kane examines in particular the history of the Italian *villanella*, which was ultimately the influence which caused Passerat to name his small poem “Villanelle.” After tracing the way that the *villanella* came into French culture through songs brought from Italy she describes how “the villanelle in sixteenth-century France was still considered a musical, and not a poetic genre,” (“How the Villanelle’s”

91), as a monophonic equivalent of the polyphonic madrigal. *Villanella* songs were being sung in educated households or in courtly situations, although gradually the musical aspect disappeared and the lyrics were read only. However, the villanelle poem that was later held up as the archetype by later French poets looking for the history of this form (Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma tourterelle" of 1606) turns out to have been the only poem with these characteristics. According to Amanda French, "There had been no other poems on Passerat's nineteen-line scheme between 1606 and 1845: not a single one, so far as Kane (a very thorough researcher) had been able to discover" ("Horse and Buggy" 4). Although various stanzaic versions that bore some resemblance to Passerat's poem existed, the villanelle as we know it in its 19-line form with two rhymes in five tercets and a quatrain, standing alone, did not exist until the 19th century.

In 1845, the form was picked up by the young poet Theodore de Banville, who wrote humorous a poem on the loss of a journalist in the Paris literary magazine world, "Villanelle du Buloz" ("J'ai perdu mon Limayrac"), pastiching Passerat's first line and the using his repeating refrains but extending the number of stanzas by two. French was able to discover that Banville was connected to the fixed form through an 1844 book *Prosodie de l'école moderne* by Wilhelm Ténint, which cited the Passerat poem, and claimed that it was "An old form, of a charming grace and naïveté, which many modern poets have tried to make fashionable" (French's translation "Refrain, Again" 70). Ténint prescriptively asserted that it was "une sorte de terza rima" ("a sort of terza rima") and outlined how to write it. Moreover, French asserts that Banville "collaborated with Ténint in revising, perhaps even in writing, the *Prosodie*," on the evidence that marginal corrections in Banville's handwriting have been found on the first edition which were then incorporated into the second edition of Ténint's work ("Refrain, Again" 69).

Banville's discovery of the poem and his subsequent attempts, along with his friend and collaborator Philoxène Boyer, were to begin the fashion for the poem, although between them they only wrote four (French "Refrain, Again" 63). What was to fix the form was the fact that Banville wrote it into his 1872 poetic treatise *Petit traité de poésie française*, which was then noticed and repeated by the English; poets Edmund Gosse and Austin Dobson published articles on the forms in 1877 and 1878 respectively. Gosse and Dobson's articles in London magazines "promoted the villanelle to the Anglophone poetic establishment" ("Refrain, Again" 63). The interest

in French fixed forms was to result in its inclusion in a volume of poems edited by the art critic Joseph Gleeson White in 1887, *Ballades and rondeaus, chants royal, sestinas, villanelles, &c., selected by Gleeson White*. In this large collection of poems in these various forms, some truly dating back to the medieval period, the section on villanelles contains thirty-two poems in this form by male and female poets, both British and American.

2.1. 19th century Villanelles

Edmund Gosse and Austin Dobson met in April 1874 at a poetry reading, where Gosse recognised Dobson's use of the rondeau form described by Banville in his *Petit Traité de la Poésie Française*. This book of French rules of fixed form poems, which included his rules on the villanelle, was published in 1872 and reprinted in 1874, the 1872 edition being Gosse and Dobson's most probable source according to Amanda French ("Refrain, Again" 87). Banville's book is described by Gosse in a 1912 memorial essay on Dobson as "exercising a remarkable influence over several young English poets" (qtd. in French "Refrain, Again" 87).

Amanda French describes how Gosse published his discovery of the French forms in an 1877 essay in the *Cornhill Magazine* titled "A Plea for Certain Exotic Forms of Verse" and Dobson contributed to raising the profile of these forms in England with his 1878 essay "A Note on Some Foreign Forms of Verse," published at the end of the anthology *Latter-Day Lyrics*. Although Gosse was partly responsible for perpetuating the false idea that the villanelle was a traditional form by stating that it "dates back at least to the fifteenth century" in the same way as the *rondel, rondeau, triolet, ballade* and *chant royal*, French comments that he was also responsible for creating a Victorian poetic form ("Stubborn Blunder" 245). From this point onwards, the villanelle was launched, and Gosse and Dobson led the way, with their villanelles mixed in with other poems of French fixed forms. Dobson's first attempt predates the essay that he wrote on the form, and Amanda French identifies Dobson's "When I first saw your eyes" as the earliest known English villanelle ("Refrain, Again" 91). It was printed in *The Examiner* in October 1874, and was followed by Gosse's own first example in his *Cornhill* essay of 1877, "Wouldst thou not be content to die".

Dobson's poem, at 15 lines, lacks one of the tercets to comply with the 19-line rule which was eventually to define the form in English; French poets were looking on

the form as stanzaic and writing it as a longer or shorter poem as they wanted. The theme of a child/woman feeds into a late Victorian anxiety about women, and a change from purity to maturity in which the adult has “learned to despise.” The quatrain runs,

You are cold, you are wise;
Yet you were but a child
When I first saw your eyes.
Time changes, Time tries!

It also paints a picture of a heteronormative society which would be satirised by Oscar Wilde in his plays, in particular *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with its ironic critique of over-sentimentalised feelings.

Gosse’s first villanelle, however, is Keatsian in tone, and seems to pick up on themes from Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” and “To Autumn”:

Wouldst thou not be content to die
When low-hung fruit is hardly clinging,
And golden Autumn passes by?
If we could vanish, thou and I,
While the last woodland bird is singing,
Wouldst thou not be content to die? (lines 1-6)

Keats had remained in the literary imagination throughout the 19th century, despite his early death in 1821, with his poetry undergoing a significant revival as the result of the publication by Monckton Milnes in 1848 of *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats*. The Pre-Raphaelite artists took his poems as inspiration for many of their paintings, and his “Eve of St Agnes” and “Isabella, or The Pot of Basil” provided the themes for many works of visual art in the second half of the century following Millais and Holman Hunt’s early works. This first villanelle of Gosse’s then can be seen as fitting in with a wider echo of Keats’ works, opening with an echo of the theme of “Ode to a Nightingale” combined with that of “To Autumn.” However, what in Keats is a complex and lexically rich meditation on death addressed to the bird, “Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain, / While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad,” in Gosse is reduced to a more platitudinous contentment of dying while the bird sings. (It is possible to argue that the 19-line form is necessarily reductive, but later expressions of it, and even villanelles written by Gosse’s contemporaries, show otherwise). He combines the idea of dying

with images that recall Keats' "To Autumn," with the "low-hung fruit" and the personification of "golden Autumn" later giving way to the harsh reality of Winter "His cruel icy bondage bringing." However, Gosse was already playing with the form of the villanelle, as he used a repetend ("As distinct from a refrain, a repetend is repeated only partially or only at irregular intervals," Baldick) in the penultimate line to conclude the quatrain, "And thou .../Shalt pray in vain for leave to die/When golden Autumn has passed by." Ronald McFarland judges also that the feminine rhyme of the b lines with '-inging' leaves the poem with an incongruous effect; "Such a lively element of sound in a poem devoted to the sober thoughts of passing autumn and approaching death seems inconsistent with the intended tone" (127). The enthusiasm of Gosse and his contemporaries are sometimes at odds with the melancholy themes they depict.

As the interest in villanelles gathered pace, writers began to produce them in Britain and in the U.S. British artists and writers had begun moving towards France in sympathy since the 1860s, as the "founders of the Aesthetic movement, like Walter Pater and Algernon Swinburne, saw in French art and literature an alternative to the Victorian ethos which insisted on a moral purpose for all artistic production" (Harris 37). The French Parnassians, with Banville, Mallarmé and Verlaine among them, were named after the magazine *Le Parnasse contemporain*, but the name "English Parnassian" seems to have been coined by Gosse himself, no earlier than 1904 according to Harris (44). Marion Thain identifies in this poetic movement both a "very deliberate anachronism" and also transnationalism (483). The anachronism is a clear call for renewal of poetic energy in Lang, Dobson and Wilde's poems about the classical past. Oscar Wilde's villanelle on Pan ends "Ah, leave the hills of Arcady! / The modern world hath need of thee!" and themes of Ancient Greece were common. Thain identifies poets within this group such as Dobson, who had close family ties with France through his father, and Gosse, who had a strong critical interest in French literature. Moreover, she identifies the French forms with their pattern of repetitions and rhetorical forms as "a deliberate turn away from jingoistic nationalism" towards the "baroque, subversive, and cosmopolitan," and sees these aspects as attractive to the Decadent poets of the 1890s, among them Oscar Wilde and Ernest Dowson (467). Wilde and Dowson both wrote villanelles. Dowson's "Villanelle of his Lady's Treasures" is one of many metatextual villanelles which refer to the form itself, and may be one of the first of many to use the rhyme "bell" with "villanelle"; "I took her

voice, a silver bell.../ And so I made a Villanelle.” This was later to become an almost talismanic rhyme option in villanelles on villanelles.

Women poets on both sides of the Atlantic were also to incorporate the villanelle into their repertoire. Emily Pfeiffer was the first female villanelle writer in English, with her poems published in 1878 in *Latter Day Lyrics*, although Julie Kane is scathing about them; “There has been no rush to claim Pfeiffer as the first modern, and first English, female villanelle writer, with good reason” she sneers, quoting two tercets from “O summer-time, so passing sweet.” It is surprising that Kane, a poet herself, sees Pfeiffer’s villanelles as laughable when they are in fact very similar to many poems of the time written by men, with archaisms like –eth for the third person singular, descriptions of roses and seasons or personifications of Death and Love. As McFarland comments, the Victorian Aesthetic villanelle, “involved some form of nostalgia for the Golden Age (often pastoral), for past love, or for passing time (fin de siècle, as often as not)” (“Victorian Villanelle” 128), and Pfeiffer was certainly following the fashion. In Virginia Blain’s anthology *Victorian Women Poets*, British poet Pfeiffer, listed by birth order between Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, is described as having written feminist poems and articles about suffrage and the need for higher education for women, as well as a book called *Women and Work*. In Blain, moreover, it can be seen that Pfeiffer’s critical neglect is not unique; in the five or ten years prior to 2014, increasing numbers of women poets from the Victorian period had been rediscovered, and “it is now being recognised that Victorian readers and critics paid much more attention to the work of these women than was previously thought” (85). British poet May Probyn’s presence in Gleeson White’s anthology also testifies to another forgotten voice; her first villanelle (“In every sound I think I hear her feet,” Gleeson White 263) has a cross-gendered narrative of expectation, as does her second villanelle,

Come out, sweetheart! the signs agree,
The marriage tokens March has spun—
The daffodils are on the lea;
The birds are glad—and so are we! (264)

As the British were beginning to incorporate the French fixed forms into their poetic repertoire, the forms had also begun to create interest across the Atlantic. According to McFarland in his essay “Victorian Villanelle,” “The first villanelle by a

'known' American poet, though his claim is not generally acknowledged, is James Whitcomb Riley's 'The Best is Good Enough,' originally published in 1883" (138). In Gleeson White's anthology (which also contains ballades and sestinas by women poets such as A. Mary F. Robinson), among the examples by men, the two villanelles by May Probyn and the two by Pfeiffer, there are also two by Edith M. Thomas from her 1885 debut book of poems. Thomas was an American poet whose prolific poetry between 1890 and her death led to her verse being hailed as "the best American achievement of the last thirty years" by Robert Underwood Johnson in his 1925 obituary article on her in the *New York Times*. According to the *Biographical Dictionary of Notable American Women, 1607-1950*, she was "a classic poet in her prosodic regularity and in her continuing attention to Greek subjects," a description which situates her exactly with the Aesthetic poets in England, writing on classical themes in the newly discovered French forms. Moreover, she situates herself within the poetic tradition not only through form but with theme, with her villanelle "Where are the springs," with its refrain lines "Come near, O sun—O south wind, blow!/ Where are the springs of long ago?". This "ubi sunt" trope has been used in English poetry since Anglo-Saxon times in poems such as "The Wanderer," "The Seafarer" and even "Beowulf," and it fits in with the Parnassian theme of nostalgia.

Other trans-Atlantic voices producing villanelles include the American Edward Arlington Robinson, whose gothic "House on the Hill" villanelle ("They are all gone away, / There is nothing more to say") was written in 1896. Back in Britain, even Thomas Hardy wrote a villanelle in 1899. This was inspired, according to Dennis Taylor, by reading Gleeson White's anthology (44), and has a theme that resonates today. The refrain "Men know but little more than we/How happy days are made to be" is sung by a caged thrush "Freed and Home Again," commenting on how humans cannot control the environment; "They cannot change the Frost's decree" is a warning that humans are no more knowledgeable or valuable than birds as part of the planetary ecosystem. This villanelle could be neatly paired with Ursula le Guin's 2007 villanelle "Extinction," written in succinct two-stress metre, with spare, frightening images of a world without animals; "above the dark/the sunken ark." Le Guin's short metre harks back to the first generation of villanelles, moreover, which were mainly written in trimeter or tetrameter, and she reduces it further in a visual metaphor (and warning) about the shrinking ecotope towards which we seem to be heading. French notes that

Ernest Dowson was the first to write a villanelle in iambic pentameter in 1894 (“Villanelle of Marguerites”), foreshadowing the 20th century poets’ use of the more traditional English metre (278n68).

What characterises the 19th century fixed form poetry of the 1880s and 90s in English, therefore, and the villanelle within this grouping, is the use of archaic language and a rhetoric of elegy and apostrophe, often jumping over medievalism right back to classical Greece in theme. McFarland identifies a distinct nostalgia and *carpe diem* theme in the villanelles of Gosse and Dobson; “‘When I Saw You’ and ‘On a Nankin Plate’ are nostalgic poems on passing time and lost love, ‘When This Old World Was New’ is a nostalgic paeon to the Golden Age” (“Victorian Villanelle” 130). In some of Dobson’s more serious poems, the style is reminiscent of the *carpe diem* poems of the Cavalier poet Robert Herrick. Dobson’s 1878 “Tu Ne Quaesieris” ends:

Time is flying;
Seek not, O maid, to know
When thou and I must go.

This is a theme that would be taken up by Ernest Dowson too, with his 1899 villanelle “Villanelle of the Poet’s Road” and its almost direct allusion to Herrick’s “To The Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” with its lines “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, / Old Time is still a-flying,” as well as his poems to drinking, both of which are echoed in Dowson’s lines:

Lest we do our youth wrong,
Gather them while we may:
Wine and woman and song.

Dowson, who died young at 32 in 1900, wrote “Vitae Summa Brevis Spem Nos Vetat Incohare Longam” (which contained the phrase “days of wine and roses,” which was later a line in a popular 1962 song) and “Cynara,” with its refrain “I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion” (which contains the phrase “gone with the wind,” later the title of a 1936 novel by Margaret Mitchell and subsequently a classic 1939 film). His poetry is now widely anthologised while Austin Dobson, with his enthusiasm for the new poetic forms, has almost completely disappeared from critical view.

However, this use of anachronistic language, nostalgia and aesthetic descriptions generally excluding any social realism almost immediately gave rise to a sub-genre to satirise it, sometimes by the poets who were themselves producing it. *Vers de société*

was the term used for this type of light verse, its name perhaps reflecting the imported French forms. Both Dobson and the English poet W.E. Henley, best known now for his poem “Invictus,” wrote light and even comic verse in this genre, and in the villanelle form. The influence of the comic operas of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan was particularly strong at the end of the century, and there was obviously a market for this type of poetry. Dobson’s “The Street Singer (Villanelle from my window)” narrates in elaborate tones how much he hates the street singer who refuses to move from the corner outside and “mangles” the songs he sings; “He stands at the kerb and sings.” The poet wishes in exaggerated archaic language that he could escape “Ah me, if I had but wings,” and is comically rueful that “There is nothing at hand to throw!” Finally, the conjunction of the two refrains brings the singer into view again, with the poet’s wish to escape. The very repetition of the form is perfect for the comic timing of this poem. Despite his influence on the form, Dobson’s absence is conspicuous from the “Villanelle Tradition” section at the start of the 2012 Everyman anthology of villanelles, although Gosse, Dowson and W.E. Henley are included. Even now, light verse is often disregarded as a lesser form despite, or possibly even because of, its association with the subversion and anarchy of humour.

2.2. Modernist and Mid-century Villanelles

As pre-war politics and the final outbreak of the First World War brought disruption and change, the villanelle became less visible but did not disappear. Amanda French argues that between 1900 and 1945, the villanelle “became the property of amateur poets” (“Refrain, Again” 109) and examples appeared in magazines rather than poetry reviews. She assesses the claims by McFarland and Manfred Pfister that the villanelle followed some sort of continuity in this period and concludes that “it is a mistake to trace a coherent narrative of any kind regarding the villanelle” in the first half of the 20th century (110). She argues that the 1915 modernist villanelle by Ezra Pound “Villanelle: The Psychological Hour” subverts the villanelle’s poetic scheme in order to assert the predominance of the modernist project, and that James Joyce’s “Villanelle of the Temptress” in *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916) “does essentially satirize Stephen’s hackneyed conception of art,” but that neither are part of a serious or shared effort to work on the villanelle (111). Indeed, she asserts that “the

mimetic experimental prose style of *Portrait*, *Dubliners*, and *Ulysses* comes to replace outdated forms like the villanelle, and indeed lyric more generally” (117).

In 1919, the Canadian poet Charles D.G. Roberts wrote “Going Over,” on the theme of war, and Amanda French comments that “it serves as a most interesting coda to the history of the French forms in the period split between high modernism and patriotic provincialism.” She describes it as being

clearly influenced by the modernist goal of attempting to represent consciousness mimetically rather than diegetically with such technical tools such as unrhymed verse, clashing registers of diction, and fragmentary, unmediated image. (144)

Moreover, French argues that “he breaks villanelle rules that other poets would not break for decades by abandoning rhyme and meter and by varying the refrains” (“Refrain, Again” 145)

This modernist turn away from fixed forms of metre and rhyme meant that the villanelle was effectively pushed out of sight. French comments, however, that this was a boon for the generation of poets who would attempt it in the middle of the century as,

The villanelle was presumed dead. That very death, that very loss, however, led to the erasure of its history, and that in turn led to a rejuvenation: Empson, Auden, and finally Thomas approached the villanelle as an almost purely abstract entity without the burden of a contentious history. (113)

Despite French’s dates for the period of the “amateur poets,” she allows that there were professional examples of the villanelle during the first half of the 20th century; she lists William Empson’s three villanelles of 1928, 1937, and 1940; and W. H. Auden’s three villanelles of 1940 and 1944 as making up “almost the entirety of the catalogue”, before Dylan Thomas’ critically acclaimed “Do not go gentle into that good night” of 1951 (“Refrain, Again” 109-110). Empson, “influenced by I. A. Richards’s brand of practical criticism, founded a ‘scientific method’ for the study of literature that held sway in the form of New Criticism for decades” (“Refrain, Again” 151), and also approached his own poetry with an interest in the abstract influenced by the fact that he studied mathematics before switching to literature under Richards (“Refrain, Again”

154). Moreover, he seems also to reflect the interest in Buddhism seen in T.S. Eliot's work, especially *The Waste Land*, and his 1937 villanelle "Missing Dates" draws on a lexical field which echoes Eliot,² with "waste," "fire," "death," as the main images; the refrain lines meet at the end as the couplet "Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills. / The waste remains, the waste remains and kills." This medical analysis of the way the body filters waste in the blood through the kidneys combines with a reference to the Eastern purification rites of fire to echo "The Fire Sermon" in *The Waste Land*. However, Empson's style varied, and his 1940 "Reflections from Anita Loos," a reference to the 1925 comic novel by Loos, "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" (itself later adapted into a comic strip, a silent comedy, a Broadway musical and a film adaptation), is a move closer to the *vers de société* of the 1890s, perfected by Dobson and W.E. Henley. Its refrain lines imitate and subvert the hedonism and brittle cynicism of the 20s and 30s; "No man is sure he does not need to climb, / A girl can't go on laughing all the time." In terms of poetic innovation, moreover, French identifies Empson's "Villanelle" ("It is the pain, it is the pain endures") of 1928 as the second villanelle to be written in iambic pentameter, and suggests that the use of pentameter "undoubtedly shows both that English models were in general separating from French models and that Empson in particular was trying to make the villanelle more respectable." ("Refrain, Again" 278n69).

The first of Auden's two villanelles from 1940 "Are You There?" works its way through the dichotomy of being together/being alone, with its first tercet

Each lover has some theory of his own
 About the difference between the ache
 Of being with his love, and being alone:

In the final quatrain, the refrain lines meet in a conclusion that is typical of Auden in its contemplation of the loneliness of the individual:

Whatever view we hold, it must be shown
 Why every lover has a wish to make
 Some kind of otherness his own:
 Perhaps, in fact, we never are alone.

² Eliot himself is not known to have written any villanelles, although his poem "La Figlia che Piange" may have influenced Dylan Thomas' spondaic refrain "Rage, rage, against the dying of the light" with its repeated line "Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair". With thanks to Teresa Gibert for this connection.

His second villanelle, the much anthologised “If I Could Tell You,” was also published as an individual poem, but the third comes as part of his long poem commentary on *The Tempest*, “The Sea and the Mirror,” which is commented on below as an intertextual villanelle. Auden and Empson’s regard for the fixed forms, however, were to influence both Dylan Thomas and Sylvia Plath, bringing the villanelle to attention as part of the canon.

In 1951, Thomas’ “Do not go gentle into that good night” has been hailed as one of his greatest poems although, when published, it was not widely known to be a villanelle, so far underground had the fixed forms become with the influence of free verse and the modernist turn away from structure. Its influence in the world of music and film will be discussed in a later section. Sylvia Plath’s 1953 villanelle “Mad Girl’s Love Song” reflects the constant motive of mental health in her poetry with its refrain “I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead/ (I think I made you up inside my head).” A destigmatisation of depression and mental illness is still very relevant to modern interests, and the poem is widely anthologised and seen in collections on the internet. Also in 1953 came the American poet Theodore Roethke’s “The Waking,” which won the Pulitzer Prize for the collection of poems in which it formed the last entry, which was analysed in depth by Frank J. Kearful in 2019 along with the villanelle of Dylan Thomas, James Merrill’s “The World and the Child,” from his collection *Water Street* (1962) and the iconic villanelle of American poet Elizabeth Bishop (173-9).

As poetry moved through the modernist period and into the mid-century ambivalence between structure and lack of it, Bishop began experimenting with the villanelle, and at her second attempt in 1976, after only a couple of months and sixteen drafts (Kearful, Millier) produced what many consider to be her masterpiece, “One Art.” This villanelle, on loving and losing, set the bar for the villanelle with its apparently loose conversational style combined with the tight form of the poem. French comments that Bishop was “highly influenced by Auden and the experimental formalism of the mid-century poets” (159). A detailed discussion of this poem is considered in a later section.

2.3. Post-modern Villanelles

The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard defined postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv). The doors that were opened by the

questioning of the seemingly unassailable master narratives have meant that in poetry as elsewhere it is possible to offer an alternative discourse on many fronts, including gender and racial identity, while a fragmentation of experience is often explored through irony and humour. Moreover, Lyotard claims that “Postmodern knowledge...refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” (xxv), and this tolerance and sensitivity can surely be seen in the range of interests and ideas at stake in villanelles from the end of the 20th century onwards. In addition to reflecting the postmodern turn, villanelles have been part of a circling back towards structure seen in New Formalism, which arose in the eighties, as well as the spread of creative writing courses in higher education, producing more writers and poets, among whom are those who see the villanelle as the perfect fit.

Kearful suggests that “silver age villanelles,” i.e. those written after Bishop’s iconic 1976 poem, “can be classified for the most part as entertaining comic light verse,” recalling the *vers de société* at the beginning of the poem’s existence in English (184). However, this is neither entirely true nor fair, since one of the many features of postmodernism is an ironic detachment from the text, and there are serious villanelles worth considering among the many that are now written. In particular, the wide range of themes that the villanelle now covers attests to its power as a form for expressing an infinite variety of worries and joys about the human condition. Finch and Mali’s 2012 anthology of villanelles includes just over 200 villanelles, of which only 21 are from the pre-modern period. The rest are contemporary poems, representative of the kinds of villanelles that are being written, although slanted towards American poets. The New Formalist movement in America had ushered in a wave of interest in fixed forms, with the villanelle sharing page space in reviews and volumes of poetry with forms such as the sestina and the pantoum, last given high visibility in the same period of the late 19th century.

In his essay “What Was New Formalism?”, which appears early in the handbook *A Companion to Poetic Genre* (2011), David Caplan identifies a wave of American poets and publishers in the 1980s and 90s who “promoted the use of metrical verse technique and rhyme,” followed by a “second ‘new formalism’” of the literary scholars who “displayed an increased interest in form,” citing the year 2000 as “the year that form came out of the closet” (17). He suggests that “the poets’ interest in form did encourage the scholars” and he soon mentions the fact that “new formalism helped to

popularize many verse forms that remain unusual within the larger sweep of English-language literary history, such as villanelles, pantoums, ghazals, and sestinas” (19) However, even here there may be some misapprehension of when these forms arrived in English, as Caplan goes on to comment that “To use a poetic form after a period of neglect is to contend with new linguistic, aesthetic, and formal challenges. To adopt a form from another language necessitates even more transformations” (19). Unless he is referring only to the ghazal, he ignores the fact that all these forms that had been collected in Gleeson White’s anthology of 1887, and become part of the Parnassian wave of aesthetic poetry in the 1880s and 90s. However, Caplan observes that the “contemporary poetic culture hungers for new yet pre-existing forms,” suggesting that this “nearly frantic cycling through different forms gives the impression that the poets seek to demonstrate a certain skill then quickly weary of it” (22). Moreover, of all the forms he focuses on, the villanelle has pride of place, as he makes an extensive analysis of the villanelle “July 2003” by the American poet H.L. Hix, which uses the words of George W. Bush to form a sort of cento-villanelle ³ with a political theme (26-27).

To view the range of villanelles being written in the modern period is to see world-renowned names as well as lesser known poets. Seamus Heaney, the Irish Nobel prize-winner, wrote a villanelle on the founding father of Harvard University for the 350th anniversary in 1986: “Villanelle for an Anniversary.” He imagines the ghost of John Harvard walking the university before key moments in American history:

A spirit moved. John Harvard walked the Yard,
The atom lay unsplit, the west unwon,
The books stood open and the gates unbarred. (1-3)

However, there is also another angle on American history from Sharmagne Leland St John, depicting how the people of the First Nations see their homeland in “For as Long as the Rivers Flow” (2004). A descendent of Native Americans, Leland St John uses anaphora to depict the “herds of buffalo” and the “vast prairie” where “the red man shall be free” for “as long as the rivers flow,” “as long as the grasses grow,” in a vindication of the rights of the nomad tribes of the American plains.

³ The cento is a collage poem made up of lines taken from well-known poems. In this case, the lines were taken from political speeches and stitched together in the villanelle form.

The African American experience is here in the villanelle too; the American poet Rita Dove writes villanelles, including “Black Billy Waters at His Pitch,” based on the life of Billy Water, a black man who busked in London in the 19th century. The refrain “though my only house is on my back. / All men are beggars, white or black” puts an aphorism in the mouth of the least empowered character.

Wendy Cope seems to be one of the most prolific writers of villanelles in Britain, and she is comfortable with its structure and limitations, with the narrative drive it can contain, and the subversion of narration it provides. Her poetry is low-key, domestic and often humorous, but among her villanelles we find that she also pays attention to how she fits into the canon, and how she points the way forwards in a tradition, looking back to other poets. Her villanelle “Lissadell” is gently lyrical about the house in Sligo that W.B. Yeats used to visit for holidays, and its elegiac tone is both for the house and for the poet. She also uses the double refrain to frame a double perspective: “Last year we went to Lissadell” is the A1 refrain, and contrasts with “This year the owners had to sell –.” She interleaves allusions to literature “It calls to mind a Chekhov play,” and also the specific poems of Yeats, “The light of evening. A gazelle” referring to the poem he wrote for Eva Gore-Booth and her sister Con Markiewicz, who had lived at Lissadell as children: “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz,” which begins:

The light of evening, Lissadell,
Great windows open to the south,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both
Beautiful, one a gazelle.

Interestingly, Cope had found a house name which rhymes with “villanelle,” although she resisted making it a metapoetic poem. However, it seems that in homage to the fixed form too, she inserts the almost obligatory rhyme “bell” as a secret code for the poem itself.

Cope’s other work includes humorous villanelles, such as “Reading Scheme,” which parodies the books that used to be used for teaching children to read. “Here is Peter. Here is Jane. They like fun” runs the A1 refrain. However, we see the children playing outside while their mother conducts an affair with the milkman. The children peep inside the house as the affair continues, “Here are the curtains. They shut out the sun. / Let us peep! On tiptoe Jane! You are small!” Then the children’s father arrives,

“Has he a gun?” and the milkman climbs a wall to get away quickly. The unreliable narrator is always a good comic trick, even in a poem as short as this.

However, Cope’s range is also broad enough to write a serious poem about love and sex; “Summer Villanelle.” The repetition in the refrains coos with “do” and “you,” and the details of the lover’s attentions “Your kiss, your fingers on my thigh” lead us to the intensely modern conclusion of “But is it love? And is it true?/Who cares?” where

Summer Villanelle, Wendy Cope
(1986)
You know exactly what to do--
Your kiss, your fingers on my thigh--
I think of little else but you.

It's bliss to have a lover who,
Touching one shoulder, makes me
sigh--
You know exactly what to do.

You make me happy through and
through,
The way the sun lights up the sky--
I think of little else but you.

I hardly sleep--an hour or two;
I can't eat much and this is why--
You know exactly what to do.

The movie in my mind is blue--
As June runs into warm July
I think of little else but you.

But is it love? And is it true?
Who cares? This much I can't deny:
You know exactly what to do;
I think of little else but you.

the physical side of love is shown as being as obsessive as the villanelle form.

Philip Jason suggests that the villanelle in general gives potential “for the two repeating lines to form a paradigm for schizophrenia,” (142) with its intertwining, obsessively repeating refrains. Stephen Fry calls it “a form that certainly seems to appeal to outsiders, or those who might have cause to consider themselves as such” and points out that there are many villanelles by lesbian and gay poets (228). The Jewish lesbian poet, Marilyn Hacker, with her “Villanelle for D.G.B.,” the African American lesbian poet Cheryl Clarke, with her “What Goes Around Comes Around, or The Proof Is in the Pudding,” and Robin Becker with her “Villanelle for a Lesbian Mom” all have a villanelle in the contemporary section of the 2012 *Everyman’s* anthology. Fry

himself, although not identifying as a poet, includes his own competent “Kitchen Villanelle” (221) in his pedagogical book on prosody.

To conclude this brief survey of the modern villanelle, one poet also stands out as an echo of the first period in which villanelles flourished. Derek Mahon, the Northern Irish poet who died in 2020, wrote his own *Yellow Book* (1997) in homage to poets such as Baudelaire and Wilde and the fin-de-siècle Decadent movement. The Decadents were

not exactly the same as the “English Parnassians,” but the emergence of the French fixed forms can be seen as an early, aesthetic feature which influenced the “Art for Art’s sake” movement. As David Williams notes,

...the Decadence of the 1890s and the precursor and overlapping Symbolist movement in France and England are important points of reference for Mahon in his criticisms of a modern world and a post-modern culture from which he is markedly alienated. (113)

Mahon’s contribution to the villanelle canon, however, is no return to any languid, sexualised poetry of the 1890s, although it is a meditation on death. His “Antarctica” is the image of Captain Lawrence Oates as he steps out from expedition leader Robert Falcon Scott’s tent on the doomed Antarctic expedition of 1912, never to return, with the understated words “I’m just going out and may be some time.” The words, reported in Captain Scott’s diary, have become a byword for self-sacrifice, as Oates chose not to burden his companions when he realised he was suffering from gangrene and bound to die. Mahon’s villanelle ends with the refrains acknowledging the absurdity of the understated phrase, and its sublime selflessness:

He takes leave of the earthly pantomime
Quietly, knowing it is time to go.
‘I am just going outside and may be some time.’
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

The turn of the 19th century, with the poetry and events that came before the First World War continued to influence poets such as Mahon at the turn of the 20th century.

3. Metatextuality in the Villanelle

G rard Genette, in *Palimpsests* (1982), lays out his theory of transtextuality as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (1). Within transtextuality, he places metatext, where the text makes critical commentary on itself. Here, I shall examine villanelles which evoke the villanelle explicitly within the poem, to entertain, inform and critique the form.

3.1. Metapoetical Villanelles

Jonathan Culler in his *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* suggests that poems “in their deployment of rhetorical operations, may be read as explorations in poetics” (81), and the French fixed-form poems that were taken up by British poets in the late 19th century were a self-conscious exercise in poetics in an attempt to renew poetry by resuscitating what they believed to be a deeply rooted tradition in France. In reality, that tradition never existed for the villanelle, unlike the sestina and other French forms, but it gave the Parnassians the excuse they needed, to turn towards both a Continental, exoticising form, and to the Greek and Latin themes that were well known to the classically educated in Britain.

In *Villanelles*, the 2012 volume of villanelle poems in the Everyman’s Library Pocket Poets series edited by Finch and Mali, the poems are divided into: famous villanelles from the nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century; contemporary villanelles from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century; variations on the villanelle form; and “Villanelles About Villanelles” (185). In this last section, some of the poems allude lexically or syntactically to famous villanelles such as “One Art,” “Do not go gentle into that good night,” “The Waking” or “Mad Girl’s Love Song,” intertextually connecting them together in this subgenre of the villanelle, while others reference the villanelle itself and how to write it. This self-referencing is no post-modern invention, however, as can be seen in the first wave of this fixed form in W.E. Henley’s 1887 “Villanelle” (A Dainty Thing’s A Villanelle”), which has as its subject the poem itself. Indeed, there seems to be something inviting about the very name of the villanelle, which fits neatly into an iambic scheme and often appears at the end of the lines as part of the two-rhyme rhyme scheme of these metatextual poems rhymed with “bell” and “hell.”

In 1960, T.S. Eliot made a speech to The Royal Society of Arts, in which he spoke about the ways in which poetry could be learned:

I hold that a young poet, before taking liberties with versification, should aim at some proficiency in more formal and traditional kinds of verse. Let him try his hand at blank verse, the rhyming couplet, the sonnet and the villanelle. Let him find out in this way how difficult they are, and find out whether what he has to say can be said in one of the stricter forms or not. (392)

This idea of ‘training’ was echoed by the poet James Fenton in 2002 in his “Introduction to English Poetry,” which was published as a special supplement for the *American Poetry Review* of November/December. In this article, he considered the fixed forms as a way of practising how to write poetry, and warned about the dangers of producing poems which were simply exercises. In a section on “The Training of the Poet,” he pointed out that every time the poet practices, unlike when a musician practices scales, it is the real thing, and insists that a poem must be above all sincere; “the thing you must write, when you do so, is a real sonnet, not a ‘practice sonnet.’” He uses the example of W.E. Henley’s 1887 “Villanelle” (“A Dainty Thing’s the Villanelle”) in comparison with Dylan Thomas’ 1951 “Do not go gentle into that good night” as an example of this idea. The former he dismisses as “flippant,” and “What the model teaches us is how to write meaninglessly. If the model is flippant, as they

Villanelle, W.E Henley (1887)

A DAINTY thing's the Villanelle,
Sly, musical, a jewel in rhyme,
It serves its purpose passing well.

A double-clappered silver bell
That must be made to clink in
chime,
A dainty thing's the Villanelle;

And if you wish to flute a spell,
Or ask a meeting 'neath the lime,
It serves its purpose passing well.

You must not ask of it the swell
Of organs grandiose and sublime--
A dainty thing's the Villanelle;

And, filled with sweetness, as a
shell
Is filled with sound, and launched
in time,
It serves its purpose passing well.

Still fair to see and good to smell
As in the quaintness of its prime,
A dainty thing's the Villanelle,
It serves its purpose passing well.

often are, it only teaches flippancy” (28). Fenton’s assertion on the importance of seriousness in poetry, however, must be considered in the context of light verse, or *vers de société*, which has a long and honourable history in particular in the areas of fixed form poetry, if we look at the limerick, clerihew and double dactyl, or indeed the volume of light verse by T.S. Eliot *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, which became the musical *Cats*, moving from the rarefied air of Faber & Faber to the West End theatres and beyond.

To return to the metatextual aspect of certain villanelles, it is useful to examine the relationship between metatext and irony, and to ask whether this is a technique which so dissolves the belief in a poet, that it destroys the pleasure of the reader. When presented with something evidently dissected, the reader of a poem may feel short-changed that

instead of some lines about a theme, we are reading lines about the lines themselves. Is this flippancy, or an attempt to educate the readers about this particular fixed form? However, as Henry James wrote, “the province of art is all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision,” (8) and that surely includes wrestling with a villanelle. Henley, famous now mainly for his poem “Invictus,” wrote many poems after Gosse and Dobson’s examples in the new fixed-forms imported from France; his villanelles and other poems appeared in the collection *Ballades and Rondeaux, Chants Royal, Sestinas, Villanelles, &c.* by Gleeson White in 1887. Among them was not only his metatextual villanelle but another metatextual poem, the triolet “Easy is the Triolet,” which although it humorously suggests that the form is simple to write “once a neat refrain you get,” then subverts this idea by the impatient interjections “As you see!” and “Deuce take it.”

His villanelle can be read as reflecting Parnassian concerns, that *vers de société* should be light and easy, entertaining and unthreatening (“Deuce” in the triolet is a mild swearword) yet informative; Henley’s message seems to be that poetry is accessible to all, and attractive (“filled with sweetness,” “fair to see”) as well as being a form which can be used to attract the opposite sex (“if you wish to flute a spell/ Or ask a meeting ’neath the lime”). This is an attitude that also seems anxious to use poetry as a means to make money, to sell to newspaper editors looking for an audience. However, a hermeneutics of suspicion might lead to other, less flattering ideas, in which Henley both identifies the villanelle form both as something to be used to seduce a woman and also as feminine in itself, and as a result, lacking in force. One might even read into it a Freudian distinction between the male/female genitals in its lack of force “You must not ask of it the swell/ Of organs grandiose and sublime,” and its form “filled with sweetness, as a shell.” Henley perhaps was tricked by the “feminine” ending of the form’s French name ending in “-elle” to equate it with some form of patriarchal binary. Later poets were to take the form and prove Henley wrong in his limiting assessment of the form.

In this early villanelle, the suggestion that the villanelle is “dainty” and “a jewel in rhyme” is accompanied both by an insistence that it has limitations, (“You must not ask of it the swell / Of organs grandiose and sublime”) and by the assertion that it is “Still fair to see and good to smell/As in the quaintness of its prime.” Henley moves

beyond the verbal to synaesthesia, which could be taken as flippant or impossible; what does a villanelle smell of; roses, paper, bells, shells? Moreover, in the event by imposing limits on the villanelle, he set a challenge to future poets to make it both grandiose and sublime, as Fenton notes when comparing it with Thomas' "Do not go gentle" (29). "Sly" and "musical" could also certainly be attributed to it, as it crept slyly into English and embedded itself more securely than the ballades, chants royal and rondeaus that the other Parnassian poets tried their hands at, with its musically repeating leitmotif of a refrain.

Another early villanelle to use this metapoetical gaze on the poem is by the playwright Eugene O'Neill, whose "Villanelle of Ye Young Poet's First Villanelle to

Villanelle of Ye Young Poet's First
Villanelle to his Ladye and Ye
Difficulties Thereof,
Eugene O'Neill (1912)

To sing the charms of Rosabelle,
To pour my soul out at her feet,
I try to write this villanelle.

Now I am caught within her spell,
It seems to me most wondrous sweet
To sing the charms of Rosabelle.

I seek in vain for words to tell
My love -- Alas, my muse is weak!
I try to write this villanelle.

Would I had power to compel
The English language incomplete
To sing the charms of Rosabelle.

The ardent thoughts that in me dwell
On paper I would fair repeat
I try to write this villanelle.

My effort fruitless is. O H--!
I'll tell her all when next we meet.
To sing the charms of Rosabelle,
I tried to write this villanelle.

his Ladye and Ye Difficulties Thereof" was published in the *New London Telegraph* newspaper in 1912. The very title suggests that the form was thought of as an archaic one ("Ye", "Ladye", "Thereof"), and difficult to write. The refrain lines "To sing the charms of Rosabelle" and "I try to write this villanelle" turn to frustration, and he gives up in the quatrain: "My effort fruitless is. O H--! [Hell]/ I'll tell her all when next we meet," so that the last refrain is a repetition, varying "try" to "tried": "I tried to write this villanelle." From the beginning of the villanelle form, *vers de société*, or light verse, had been a significant part of the villanelle, and publication in newspapers was part of that tradition and obviously well-received.

It seems that poor Rosabelle is not the centre of the poet's gaze, which focuses instead on himself and his efforts, rather than looking out at the object of his supposed attention. It is a comic, egoistic

poem, but one in which an attempt to communicate with Rosabelle turns into a wry comment on what was happening to poetry and romantic distancing; O’Neill is known much less for his poetry than his plays, as it is clear that he gives primacy to the spoken word, “I’ll tell her,” rather than a written communication; it seems this villanelle evokes a cultural tussle or *paragone* between these two codes.

Both Henley and O’Neill seem also to have been making assumptions about the genre of poetry, that short verse should by definition be light verse. It would not be until the 20th century that the villanelle would prove itself the perfect vehicle for serious thought, and the end of that century before it was clear that the villanelle was a form

Villanelle, Gavin Ewart (1990)

Auden and Empson wrote it far too well –
we underlings can truly not compete;
we look up from our dark poetic Hell

to where they’re throned in Glory! What a smell
comes from our efforts; limping sock-shod feet!
Auden and Empson wrote it far too well,

the old farm-labourers’ song, the villanelle,
they made so modish, soignée, svelte, petite!
We look up from our dark poetic Hell

to their sophistication – Philomel
could not have sung more neatly, or more sweet.
Auden and Empson wrote it far too well!

We’re tongue-tied with frustration, or we yell.
Bright melody! And we can only bleat!
We look up from our dark poetic Hell,

up to the heights, from our dim, misty dell.
That form can be atrocious or a treat!
Auden and Empson wrote it far too well:
We look up from our dark poetic Hell.

fitted for any kind of emotion or idea. Thomas’ encapsulation of contained and focused emotion at the loss of his father, or Bishop’s loss of all that she holds dear are both exceptional examples of the villanelle fixed form.

Gavin Ewart’s “Villanelle” looks in brief at the 20th century history of the villanelle, and he chooses Auden and Empson as the prime producers of the form, but in a way in which modern poets cannot compete; “Auden and Empson write it far too well:/ We look up from our dark poetic Hell.” His despairing villanelle has “sock-shod feet,” a humorous touch which evokes

both smelly socks and the feet of poetic metre, but also evokes a “poetic Hell” from which modern poets look up to Auden and Empson. However, this is a poem in which the lack of confidence expressed in the words is subverted by the technical competence

of the form itself; his villanelle is perfect in form, with the 19 lines and alternating refrains reproduced without repetends, and masculine full rhymes (well / Hell / smell / villanelle/ Philomel / yell / dell and compete / feet / petite / sweet / bleat / treat). The effect of the poem as a whole is unsettling, both authoritative and uncertain, a modern anxiety about the place of the poet in society. Amanda French notes an anxiety in modern American poetry, and suggests that “the villanelle has become recently popular at least partly because it has connoted tradition without bearing the burden of one” (2).

The British poet Wendy Cope’s “A Villanelle for Hugo Williams” (2011), however, uses a more confident tone than Ewart, and while Ewart’s poetic anxiety is clear as he complains about how difficult the form is, Cope coolly tells her fellow poet Williams that his published attempt at the form is inept. She corrects him in a polished villanelle with refrains on “be polite” and “rhyme-scheme ... right,” but varies these with repetends; she goes from sardonically stating that she’d “like to be polite”

A Villanelle for Hugo Williams, Wendy Cope
(2011)

What can I say? I'd like to be polite
But have you ever seen a villanelle?
You ask me "Have I got the rhyme-scheme right?"

Is that a joke? You're not a neophyte
Or some green-inker who can barely spell.
What can I say? I like to be polite.

No, not exactly, Hugo. No, not quite.
I trust this news won't plunge you into hell:
Your rhyme-scheme is some miles from being right.

What's going on? I know you're very bright.
You've won awards. You write supremely well.
What can I say? I like to be polite

And this is true: your books are a delight,
In prose, free verse and letters you excel.
You want my help with getting rhyme-schemes
right.

You seem dead keen to master them, despite
Your puzzling inability to tell
Which bit goes where. These lines, if not polite,
Will be of use, I hope. The rhyme-scheme's right.

(suggesting that she is not going to be), to “What can I say? I like to be polite.” She then runs through a series of compliments which prove to be backhanded as she shows him how the form is done. The poem ends with the seemingly helpful “These lines, if not polite/ Will be of use, I hope. The rhyme-scheme’s right.” This is a piece of light verse in the vein of Henley at the start of the villanelle boom, but it reverses the patronising tone used in the 1888 poem and shows that the villanelle is now in the hands of specialists, many of them

women. Moreover, it establishes Cope as a capable poet with this fixed form, and more than able to best a man at mansplaining.

In Diana Forrest's 1997 "Villanelle Schmillanelle," the poet voices the despair of someone who struggles to make money from this art, and seems to dismiss the form in the title "Villanelle Schmillanelle," the Yiddish repetition formula for heaping scorn

Villanelle Schmillanelle, Diana Forrest
(1997)

So everybody's writing villanelles;
How nice that structure's coming back
again.
It may be beautiful, but will it sell?

This repetition, like a tolling bell,
Can show the drudgery of human pain,
So everybody's writing villanelles.

Creating atmosphere, it works so well,
Subtly repeating phrases in refrain.
It may be beautiful, but will it sell?

Do classic forms now toll blank verse's
knell?
Apparent freedom can become a bane.
So everybody's writing villanelles.

My last rejection slip, I'm glad to tell,
Said I could handle rhyming without strain,
It may be beautiful, but will it sell?

In measured lines the poet cries out, 'Hell!
No cash although I work with might and
main:
So everybody's writing villanelles.
It may be beautiful, but will it sell?'

on something. Ironically, the villanelle is here, and has obviously sold to the publication. It raises the question of whether the poem corresponds to "art for art's sake," or to the eternal struggle between art and commerce; how is the poet to stay alive if never paid properly for their work, and in the case of the villanelle, how is a finely crafted poem which is only ever going to be 19 lines long ever going to pay its way. However, it is also looking at the question of the struggle between free verse and fixed-form poetry, which seems to be resolving in post-modernism into having one's cake and eating it, since in the best of both worlds one has both fixed form poems and free verse. It is significant, moreover, to look back to what *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* calls the Golden

Age of the Villanelle (Kane and French 1522) in the mid-20th century, when Dylan Thomas, Theodore Roethke and Elizabeth Bishop wrote their masterful versions of the villanelle in the midst of the turn to free verse. What is also interesting about this villanelle is that it marks the way that "everybody's writing villanelles." This was in 1997, and reflected the New Formalist movement of the 1980s and 90s.

Villanelle, Campbell McGrath (2006)

Bouncing along like a punch-drunk bell,
its Provençal shoes too tight for English feet,
the villanelle is a form from hell.

Balletic as a tapir, strong as a gazelle,
strict rhyme and formal meter keep a beat
as tiresome as a punch-drunk bell-

hop talking hip hop at the IHOP – *no substitutions
on menu items, no fries with chimichanga,
no extra syrup* – what the hell

was that? Where did my rhyme go – uh, compel –
almost missed it again, damn, can you feel the heat
coming off this sucker? Red hot! *Ding!* (Sound of
the bell)

Hey, do I look like a bellhop to you, an el-
evator operator, like a trained monkey or a
parakeet
singing in my cage? Get the hell

out of Poetry Hotel!
defeat mesquite tis mete repeat
Bouncing along like a punch-drunk bell,
the villanelle is a form from – *Write it!* – hell.

Campbell McGrath's 2006 "Villanelle" parodies all of these attempts and references one of the most lauded villanelles of all, Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art." In a multi-voiced, culturally intermingled text, he plays with the refrain and weaves between the world of high poetry and low discourse. He also restricts himself carefully from the ultimate cliché of all villanelles, to end the 'el' rhyme with the word "villanelle" itself, which puts further limitations on the poem. However, he allows himself "bell" (the secret codeword of metapoetical villanelles, I suggest) albeit comically transformed into "bell-hop." He references

Provençal poetry, giving an inkling of the origins of the villanelle, although in fact Kane, French and McFarland have proven its pedigree from the Italian rustic dance-song tradition of the *villanella* rather than the troubadours. However, from there, he proceeds to malign the form pugnaciously, calling it "Balletic as a tapir" and "strong as a gazelle," i.e. not very graceful or strong at all, and with a tiresome way of bouncing along "like a punch-drunk bell." This bell becomes a bell-hop "talking hip hop at the IHOP," where the restaurant restrictions are reeled off a menu list in the same way as the villanelle fixed-form works; "no fries", "no extra syrup." Then the bell-hop turns into the porter in the "Poetry Hotel," adding another popular reference, with its allusion to *Hotel California* by the Eagles ("This could be Heaven or this could be Hell"). Finally, McGrath reaches the final couplet in the quatrain with "Bouncing along like a

punch-drunk bell, /the villanelle is a form from – Write it! – hell”, where we see his final poetic reference in the repetend, where he inserts the exclamation and instruction to himself “*Write it!*” just like Elizabeth Bishop’s famed “One Art.”

The Thing’s Impossible
Bruce Bennett (2011)

Don’t write a villanelle to tell a tale:
they’re not the form for narrative or plot.
It’s pretty obvious why you will fail.

For instance, there’s an island; you set sail.
The wind is perfect, and the day is hot.
Don’t write a villanelle to tell a tale,

Because, well, you will have to see a whale,
a wonder, but it can’t be caught, or shot.
You see? It’s obvious why you will fail.

Say, you’re with her, and you’re both at the
rail;
(I don’t think I have mentioned it’s a yacht –
don’t write a villanelle to tell a tale!)

A magic moment. You’ll embrace. The ale
your steward brought will just have hit the
spot.
But wait. It should be obvious you’ll fail

Since now her husband, who’s been sprung
from jail,
is in that sloop approaching, and he’s got –
Don’t write a villanelle to tell a tale.
The thing’s impossible. You’re bound to fail!

Finally, the American poet Bruce Bennett’s 2011 villanelle “The Thing’s Impossible” again makes poetry a site of resistance, in its refusal to let the villanelle be pigeonholed. He uses humour, like Henley, O’Neill and Cope, but again Culler’s idea can be seen here, that poetry is an exploration in poetics. Bennett subverts the insistence of previous poets on the form; his poem starts with an epigraph, a quotation from the anthology *The Making of a Poem*, edited by the Irish poet Eavan Boland and the Canadian-American poet Mark Strand. They assert that “Perhaps the single feature of the villanelle that twentieth-century poets made their own is the absence of narrative possibility...the form refuses to tell a story,” which Bennett then proceeds to rebut.

His villanelle instructs the reader “not to write a villanelle to tell a tale,” while the poem itself is evidently tells a story, and its tale echoes Wendy Cope’s villanelle “Reading Scheme,” with the affair and the jealous husband. Here, the scene is a yacht, out at sea, where “The wind is perfect, and the day is hot.” The scene-setting intertwines with the irony of the refusal to accept the instructions on the poetic form, with the action going on behind the narrator-poet’s head, as it builds to the humorous interruption of the husband’s approach. This post-modern trick of mixing content with poetics is one

which evidently pleases modern audiences, and Bennet won the 2012 Pushcart with it, an American prize for literature published by small presses. It could even be said that this bifocal approach is suited to an age in which there is preference for short-forms of art such as villanelles, but within which we expect multiple reference to keep our attention, with attractive themes to appeal to increasingly visually educated minds. The snapshot approach of the yacht, the sea, the husband's sloop are easily interpretable, and perhaps clichéd; we need the additional excitement of the struggle between the poetic factions who cannot agree on what a villanelle is or should do.

It can therefore be seen that metapoetics have been part of the villanelle from the start, and that the fascination of the form is closely linked with the interest poets have in trying to promote the form itself while gently laughing at what it can do. W.E. Henley's claim that "You must not ask of it the swell/Of organs grandiose and sublime" has turned out to be antiphrasis, as seen here in Bennett's villanelle, since this is precisely what we can and must ask of any piece of poetry, whether grandiose, sublime or narrative. The question must be asked whether Fenton is right that these poems are practice poems, or tiny works of art in their own right. They are not empty calories simply because they self-reference. Rather, they fulfil an essential role in drawing our attention to the word-play, the rhyme-play and the dance of words, poetry for poetry's sake, which in a modern MRI study by Zeman et al. has been shown to activate the same part in the brain as music does, taking the villanelle back to its dance-song roots (132).

If, as Genette suggests in *Palimpsests*, "the subject of poetics is *transtextuality* ... 'all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts'," then the metapoetical villanelle may be seen as explicit poetics in action, both mirroring its form, and reflecting other examples of itself and other literature (1). However, as French and Kane have shown, the misperceptions involved in the villanelle's history have distorted its textual background, and given it a false history. What is interesting, nevertheless, is how this compares to other fixed form poems in terms of self-regard, as the villanelle appears to outstrip sonnets, haikus, sestinas and other fixed forms in talking about itself. This self-consciousness could be a deliberate attempt to construct it as a modern form, or a code for poets to communicate with each other. Either way, the metapoetic villanelle seems to be both a poetic playground and a way of tapping into the architext.

4. Intertextuality in the Villanelle

Julie Sanders in *Adaptation and Appropriation* points to the various origins of the post-modern understanding of intertextuality and traces it back: to Barthes's 1981 comment that "all text is intertext"; Edward Said (1983), who suggested that writers think of rewriting more than writing; Derrida's idea (1985) about the desire to write as launching things that come back; and Julia Kristeva, who wrote in 1980 about "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality" (an interpretation of Bakhtin's *diaglossia*). Sanders indeed points out that Kristeva in particular in turn had based her ideas on the anthropological teachings of Claude Levi-Strauss, whose 1978 work was couched "in terms of identifying repeating structures across cultures and cultural forms." Moreover, Sanders also notes that intertextuality in the form of "adaptation and appropriation are fundamental to the practice and, indeed, to the enjoyment of literature and the arts more generally" (13).

Looking at villanelles, therefore, it is inevitable that allusions to previous texts should be present, and can be explicit or hidden, perhaps even from the author's conscious mind. Here, I examine the intertextual relationships latent in certain villanelles of Oscar Wilde, Elizabeth Bishop and W.H. Auden, to see how they are interrelated to previous works of literature.

4.1. Oscar Wilde and Theocritus

Northrop Frye in his 1957 *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* used the image of the poet as someone who "pretends to be talking to himself or someone else," and "turns his back on his listeners, though he may speak for them, and though they may repeat some of his words after him" (249), and here in the villanelle was a form that both allowed the poet to declaim, and the readers to repeat his words as the poem proceeds, repetition being a key part of the form. For the flamboyant Oscar Wilde, this must have held an irresistible attraction, and he was part of the villanelle craze practically from the start. His knowledge of and interest in French language and culture would have meant a keenness to try his hand at the form imported and championed by Gosse and Dobson, and his classical education meant that he was familiar with the classical world evoked by the Parnassians. Moreover, it also seems that Wilde also used the villanelle to send a coded message about himself.

In the early days of the English villanelle in the 1880s, and in the midst of a general reference to classical Greek literature, three of these fixed-form poems were dedicated to Theocritus, the Greek bucolic poet credited with originating pastoral poetry and literature in general; “Pastoral: For a Copy of Theocritus” by Austin Dobson,⁴ “Villanelle To Lucia” by Andrew Lang (“Theocritus of Syracuse,/ Apollo left the golden Muse!” first published in 1881, and “Theocritus: A Villanelle” by Oscar Wilde (published in *Poems*, 1881). McFarland has credited this spate of poems to the publication of a third edition of Herbert Snow’s translation of *Theocritus’s Idylls* in 1877 (130) and Lang himself was working on a prose translation of Theocritus’s poetry which was published in 1896, so there was interest in Theocritus at this time among the Parnassian poets.

Dobson and Lang’s villanelles are admirations of Theocritus’ poetic achievement, allusions to his themes, characters and Sicilian landscapes. Dobson’s refrain runs “O Singer of the field and fold/ Thine was the happier Age of Gold!”, and his interest in Theocritus seems to focus on alluding to a famous classical writer to reflect his interest in establishing the fixed form poem; his investment in this theme is therefore as a professional poet, looking for cultural capital by engaging with a famous predecessor, and engaging with the question of poetic tradition in what for him was a new form with what he (erroneously, as it turns out) thought was a long pedigree, the villanelle. Lang’s villanelle, with its refrain of “Theocritus of Syracuse,/ Apollo left the golden Muse!”, shows an interest that seems to be more philological; he had translated a collection of “Old French” verse forms in 1872 (Kane “How the Villanelle’s” 240), and was perhaps already working on the translation of the works of Theocritus, Bion and Mochus which was to be published in 1880. The resulting verse in both poems is technically careful but unexciting, with their monosyllabic rhymes and endstopped verses. These two villanelles are written in iambic tetrameter, as is Wilde’s 1881 poem, but here they diverge. Wilde’s use of enjambment and polysyllabic rhymes in the refrains break up the monotony of the meter, and the refrain lines “O singer of Persephone!/ Dost thou remember Sicily?” combine apostrophe and question, rather than Dobson and Lang’s more direct apostrophes, substituting the overdramatic exclamation with a more suggestive query.

⁴ In “Victorian Villanelle,” McFarland notes that Dobson dates his villanelles from 1877 (129n2).

To approach the world of the pastoral idyll, Wilde's villanelle alludes to characters identifiable as themes from Theocritus; Persephone, the goddess kidnapped by Hades to be his queen; the nymph Amaryllis serenaded by the goatherd Daphnis; and Simaetha, neglected by her lover Delphis, who makes a spell to try to bring him back to her by saying an incantation here to Hecate, the goddess of magic, whose presence is intimated by the barking of dogs. These scenes would have been well-known to Wilde, a classical scholar with seven years of university studies under his

Theocritus: A Villanelle,
Oscar Wilde (1881)
O singer of Persephone!
In the dim meadows desolate
Dost thou remember Sicily?

Still through the ivy flits the bee
Where Amaryllis lies in state;
O Singer of Persephone!

Simaetha calls on Hecate
And hears the wild dogs at the gate;
Dost thou remember Sicily?

Still by the light and laughing sea
Poor Polypheme bemoans his fate;
O Singer of Persephone!

And still in boyish rivalry
Young Daphnis challenges his mate;
Dost thou remember Sicily?

Slim Lacon keeps a goat for thee,
For thee the jocund shepherds wait;
O Singer of Persephone!
Dost thou remember Sicily?

belt, first at Trinity College, Dublin and then at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he graduated with a Double First in Greats (the Classics degree, *Literae Humaniores*) in 1878. At the time that he wrote this villanelle, moreover, he had only been down from university for three years. Having evoked the expected images from the pastoral world, Wilde focuses in on the male figures, "Young Daphnis" and "his mate" (friend or partner is left ambiguous), as well as "Slim Lacon" and the "jocund shepherds." These are the figures who are not laying spells or bewailing their fate beside the "light and laughing sea" as Polyphemus the cyclops does; Lacon and the shepherds are waiting for Theocritus.

The *Idylls* of Theocritus deal with homosocial themes and paint a clear picture of the Greek institution of *paederastia*

described by the scholar Jennifer Grove as a "healthy, ethical pedagogic-erotic bonding between older and younger men" (34). According to the LGBT historian Will Kohler, "Seven of the thirty poems (idylls) completed by Theocritus are essentially homoerotic" (back2stonewall.com). The fifth idyll of Theocritus is a dialogue between Comatas the older goatherd and Lacon the young shepherd, and they compete in a singing contest to see who can win a goat or lamb from each other, with the woodsman

Morson acting as judge. Comatas wins, after they “good-naturedly accuse each other of pederasty (one accusing the other of anal rape in the bushes).” As Kohler also comments, Theocritus’ text uses “colloquial expressions that are “obscene” enough to be printed in Latin in some modern English translations,” a practice similar to the convenient bowdlerisation of the classics commented on in Byron’s “Don Juan.” In Kohler’s words, this practice “makes merely vulgar passages seem especially wicked – and easier to locate,” mirroring Byron’s explanation, that expurgated material was often collected in “an appendix, / Which saves, in fact, the trouble of an index” (“Don Juan” stanza 44). Lacon, in other words, is an *eromenos* or younger male in the pederastic relationship, but reference to this was bowdlerised or suppressed; Lang’s own euphemising translation of Theocritus conceals what he must have understood, and renders sex acts as acts of aggression or playfulness. Dobson seems completely unaware of any homoerotic associations whatsoever, rather than suppressing Hellenistic same-sex references. Oscar Wilde, however, would have read the original Greek text, and had good reason to understand it.

However, McFarland notes that Wilde made a mistake in having Lacon give a goat to the poet. “Slim Lacon keeps a goat for thee” is the first line of Wilde’s quatrain, and McFarland comments “why Wilde suggests Lacon awaiting Theocritus with a goat, unless he has misread the poem, is unclear” (31-32). One possible explanation would be that Wilde deliberately changed Lacon into a goatherd to point him up as a coded reference to fifth idyll. Moreover, in the original *Idyll*, Lacon is a singer or poet in addition to being a goatherd, competing with Comatas in a singing competition; Lacon loses to Comatas, and has to forfeit a lamb. If one reverses the roles, as Wilde has reversed the animal, Lacon is triumphant as a poet, as Wilde wanted to be. The villanelle forms part of his first publication of poetry, his “Poems” of 1881 (138), published when he was twenty-seven, and were his first steps in asserting his poetic prowess and challenging the generation of poets who had gone before. In using the alter ego of Lacon, he both challenges and wins, as well as allying himself with one of the great classical voices, who (in an open secret) painted a naturalistic picture of homosocial relationships as part of classical society.

Moreover, the goat itself might have been a further veiled reference closely related to the god Pan, who appears in the only two other villanelles that Wilde wrote, his double villanelle “Pan – A Villanelle.” Like Dobson in his villanelle about

Theocritus, Wilde calls on the goat-footed god to return to help English poets, as “The modern world hath need of thee,” centring his three villanelles around the classical world of pastoral poetry and music. However, this also links his poems also to at least two pieces of famous explicit statuary known to the Victorians; one a statue of the God Pan beside a figure playing the pan pipes identified as Marsyas with Olympus but later thought to be Pan with Delphis, and the second a sexually explicit statue of the god Pan copulating with a she-goat. In her thesis on the collection and reception of sexual antiquities of 2013, Jennifer Grove explains that explicit statues and images unearthed in Pompeii and Herculaneum at the beginning of the 19th century had become infamous throughout Europe, to the extent that they were hidden away in a “Secret Cabinet” in the Museum of Naples (35). In particular, Grove describes how the Pan/goat statue caused the collection to be hurried away behind locked doors, where it would have remained unknown but for a Colonel Famin, who made a descriptive catalogue of it in French in 1816. This catalogue was later translated anonymously into English and published privately in London in 1871, giving access to sexually explicit works of Classical art for those with an interest in Hellenic discoveries. Grove bases her thesis on a substantial body of scholarly work “which has considered the modern homoerotic appreciation of Classical and neo-Classical sculpture,” and she mentions “the sexualised analysis of statuary by eighteenth-century German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) as well as the nineteenth-century reception of Winckelmann by Walter Pater and his disciples” (35). Walter Pater and Wilde formed part of the Oxford Hellenistic movement, which Grove describes as “a literary movement that, in its particular interest in Platonic dialogues on same-sex love, was influential on the modern reception of ancient homoerotics in the late nineteenth century” (35). Pater tutored Wilde in his final year at Oxford, and Wilde acknowledged his work “Studies in the History of the Renaissance” in *De Profundis* as having had “a strange influence over my life” (1076). Both Pater and Wilde may well have had knowledge of Famin’s description of the statues in the Secret Cabinet, sexualising any reference to Pan and goats, and charging it with meaning beyond the usual “goatish,” or over-sexed idea. Moreover, Grove describes the way that the establishment of the Secret Cabinet in Naples is identified as an originating construct for pornography:

Following Walter Kendrick’s 1987 work, the modern concept of ‘pornography’ itself is believed to have been invented in this act of

delineating off certain ancient material because of its sexual content and preventing certain people from seeing it. (53)

Whether Wilde intended his readers to catch a glimpse of the hidden possibilities of a sexually explicit image of a goat, or understand the homoerotic charge of the figure of “Slim Lacon” and the shepherds can never be clear; perhaps to those in the know, the imagery would have been obvious, and both references would have been conveyed at the same time. It seems a key moment in the period identified by Foucault as constructing the modern concept of homosexuality, when Wilde was feeling his way towards expressing his gender preferences in his art, as well as through his public persona and effeminacy. It was an experiment in the tolerance of Victorian heteronormative society that he was to test to the limits, and which would prove fatal for him, ending in his trial and imprisonment for sodomy, and subsequent early death. This is a period examined by scholars as a moment of change in attitudes towards homosexuals. In 1994, when examining Alan Sinfield’s book *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* reviewer Richard Dellamora points out that the subtitle “the Queer Moment” alludes to the discursive transformation produced in relation to the Wilde trials, when the acceptance of effeminacy in Victorian society suddenly hardened into heteronormative hostility towards gay behaviour (266). Oscar Wilde’s villanelle shows a moment when he was tempted to express his Hellenistic sexual ideals, and did so in a beautiful evocation of the classical pastoral tradition which seems to have hidden one or more coded messages.

4.2. Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Bridges

In 1976, the American poet Elizabeth Bishop wrote what is widely considered to be the jewel in the crown of the villanelle canon; “One Art.” This artful, artless poem both on losing and on love is a masterclass in post-modern poetry by the Pulitzer Prize winner. With its choice of rhyme on –ent (a masculine rhyme) and –aster (a feminine rhyme), it looks back to the Parnassian form, which paid close attention to the French stipulation that the rhyme should alternate between masculine and feminine rhymes. This rhyme scheme moreover points to a homage to Poet Laureate Robert Bridges, the mentor of her idol, the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, as well as subverting the theme seen in the Bridges poem she might have read before writing it.

Starting as a meditation on “the art of losing,” which “isn’t hard to master,” the villanelle becomes a manual on how to lose things small and large, from “door keys” to “some realms I owned.” The pace of the tercets is feverish as the losing accelerates, “losing farther, losing faster,” until the quatrain comes to “losing you,” when the ironic tone suggests both stoicism in the face of loss and a real “disaster.” The poem was conceived from the beginning as a villanelle, according to Brett Candlish Millier in his 1990 essay “Elusive Mastery: The Drafts of Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘One Art,’” and the references to two in the poem reflect the two rhymes of the villanelle; “two rivers, two cities, the lost lover means not being “two” any more” (123). There are also threes; “places, names and where it was you meant /to travel” and “my last, or /next-to-last, of three loved houses,” reflecting the tercets of the form.

One Art, Elizabeth Bishop (1976)

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother’s watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident
the art of losing’s not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

What makes “One Art” innovative is Bishop’s use of structure and variation; the basic villanelle form, with its tight limitations, is broken by enjambment and small caps at the start of lines, and of the 19 lines, 8 are run-ons. In addition, the use of masculine/feminine rhymes means an alternation between 10- and 11-syllable iambic pentameter, which gives variation to the lines and adds to the theme of entropy within structure; we love and lose, and life’s structure tends towards this loss, but this is also a skill we can “master” or learn and gain. The accumulation of lines at the end in the quatrain belies the loss of the lover. Millier states that “the crisis behind this poem was the apparent loss to

Elizabeth of Alice Methfessel, the companion, caretaker, secretary and great love of the last eight years of her life,” the next loss in her life after the suicide of her lover Lota Soares in 1967, and compounding the losses of her father when she was a baby and her mother when she was five (122).

What Millier calls “The formalized spontaneity” of the interjection in the last line, “(Write it!)” (embodied in a previous draft of the poem as “(Say it: disaster.)”) means the poem can “accommodate the overflow of emotion which had, to this point, disarrayed the final stanza and made the villanelle's ritual repetitions inadequate to manage the emotional content” (125). This technique of “self-interruption or self-revision” is something he claims Bishop learned from Gerard Manley Hopkins (125). Hopkins’ sonnets contain exclamations in much the same way and often in the last line; in “God’s Grandeur”, we see an interjection: “Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.” In Wesley Wehr’s “Conversations and Class Notes” of Elizabeth Bishop from 1981, we learn that she was deeply interested in the poetry of Hopkins and also read the letters between the poet and his friend Robert Bridges. In her 1966 poetry workshops at the University of Washington, she said, “Also, you should read Hopkins's letters to Robert Bridges. They contain some of the best statements I've ever read” (320). What we don’t know is whether she read the poetry of Robert Bridges himself, although it seems possible. Bridges was the Poet Laureate between 1913 and his death in 1930, and although his work fell into disregard in the later 20th century after failing to move with the modernist agenda, he was the literary executor for Hopkins, whose work he collected and published in 1918. Through Hopkins, it is possible that Bishop knew Bridges’ own poetry. Bridges was born in 1844, and became a doctor; by 1832, he had retired from medicine after contracting pneumonia and dedicated himself to writing for the rest of his life. His first poetry was published in 1882, precisely the moment when the wave of French fixed-form poems were appearing; in Gleeson White’s collection *Ballades and rondeaus, chants royal, sestinas, villanelles, &c*, three of Bridges’ poems were included; one rondeau and two triolets. The triolet is a stanza form which contains refrains, but is shorter than the villanelle at eight lines, and can be described using the scheme ABaAabAB.

The first of the anthologised triolets has the A refrain line “When first we met we did not guess,” but the B line is “That Love would prove so hard a master” and the

Triolet, Robert Bridges (1882)

When first we met we did not guess
That Love would prove so hard a master;
Of more than common friendliness
When first we met we did not guess.
Who could foretell this sore distress,
This irretrievable disaster
When first we met — We did not guess
That Love would prove so hard a master.

corresponding b line is “This irretrievable disaster,” giving both the refrain rhymes for Bishop’s “One Art”. However, it contains a very different sentiment to Bishop’s villanelle, as Bridges foretells a disaster as the lovers come together, rather than when they part. Moreover, if Bishop was influenced – however tangentially – by

this triolet, she made a syntactical alteration which again adds to the complexity of her work compared with the triolet. Where Bridges states that the lovers find that Love is “so hard a master,” personifying Love in both its name and in the metaphor used, as a controlling force and using “master” as a noun, Bishop uses the collocation “hard to master,” or difficult to learn, where “master” is a verb, and moreover a masculinisation of the concept of control, however unconscious. Her story with Lota was turned into the 2013 biographical film, *Reaching for the Moon*, in which “One Art” is quoted at the beginning (the first two tercets) and at the end (the whole villanelle) as a framework.

In his essay “Self-Imposed Fetters in Four Golden Age Villanelles,” Kearful examines this matter about the “master” / “disaster” rhyme, commenting that it is not

Bishop’s private property. Auden used it plus a mid-line “art” in “Letter to Lord Byron”... and in “Musée des Beaux Arts” he played off “Masters” and “disaster” in the first and second verse paragraphs... Critics generally highlight Gerard Manley Hopkins’s use of “faster” and “master” in the twenty-eighth stanza of his disaster poem “The Wreck of the Deutschland.” (180)

Here, in the triolet, may be yet another intertextual allusion in Bishop’s masterpiece that has previously gone unremarked by Bishop scholars.

4.3. W.H. Auden and Shakespeare

In early 1939, W.H. Auden emigrated to the U.S. with the poet Christopher Isherwood, disillusioned with British society, and in the States he met his partner, the poet Chester Kallman. This was also a period when Auden was to return to

Anglicanism, and his attempt to express “the Christian conception of art” as he explained it to friends (Kirsch, vii) was the long poem “The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.” In what Kirsch calls a “pyrotechnic variety of verse forms,” Auden gives voice to the characters in Shakespeare’s last work, after the action in the play has finished. Opening with a Preface which is voiced by “The Stage Manager to the Critics,” it follows the reflections of each of the protagonists. Prospero speaks to Ariel while he packs to leave for Italy, where Miranda will marry Ferdinand and unite Prospero’s own dukedom of Milan with Alonso’s kingdom of Naples. We are expected to know that Antonio has been grudgingly pardoned for exiling his brother Prospero and niece Miranda, King Alonso has been forgiven for his participation, Miranda has become engaged to Ferdinand, Ariel has been freed and Caliban’s plot with Stephano and Trinculo has been thwarted. In a letter to Isherwood in April 1944, Auden explained that the characters are reflecting on their experiences,

They are again on the sea ...but they have looked in the mirror. This section consists of their reflections about their reflections Prospero has made each of them see, i.e. it tries to combine both what they are (as revealed by the artist) and how they riposte to this illumination (the effect of art on people). (82)

Each dramatic monologue or reflection is written in different verse forms, whether stanzaic like Antonio’s terza rima, or fixed-form, like Stephano’s ballade, Ferdinand’s sonnet, Sebastian’s sestina or Miranda’s villanelle. These monologues are interspersed with short verses by comments from Antonio, who here is seen asserting himself against his brother, unlike in the play where his silence is conspicuous at the end. The monologues are then followed by Caliban’s speech in prose, in the style of Henry James.

As in the play, Miranda here is an innocent; Auden’s world-weary Prospero wonders in his lines to Ariel whether “a Miranda who is / No longer a silly lovesick little goose” will “go into raptures about existing at all” when she has been married to Ferdinand for some time. However, she is also something that she is not in Shakespeare: a conduit for Christian imagery. *The Tempest* makes many allusions to the content of the isle where Prospero and Miranda live, with its “yellow sands” of Ariel’s song in Act I, the branches that Ferdinand must move, the jays, marmosets and

'Miranda' from *The Sea and the Mirror*
W. H. Auden (1944)

My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely,
As the poor and sad are real to the good king,
And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

Up jumped the Black Man behind the elder tree,
Turned a somersault and ran away waving;
My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely.

The Witch gave a squawk; her venomous body
Melted into light as water leaves a spring,
And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

At his crossroads, too, the Ancient prayed for
me,
Down his wasted cheeks tears of joy were
running:
My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely.

He kissed me awake, and no one was sorry;
The sun shone on sails, eyes, pebbles, anything,
And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

So to remember our changing garden, we
Are linked as children in a circle dancing:
My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely,
And the high, green hill sits always by the sea

crabs that Caliban promises to fetch for Stephano and the “brooks, standing lakes and groves” where the elves that Prospero conjures up in Act V live.⁵ However, we see little of the topography of the island, and beyond the coast and the inland space where Prospero has his cell, the island is conveniently undescribed, to fill the stage of any theatre. Auden’s Miranda adds a new scene, as she sees a “high green hill,” which “sits always by the sea.” As Kirsch suggests, the hill could be Calvary as in the 1848 English hymn “There is a green hill far away” in which the hill stands “without” (i.e. outside) the city wall of Jerusalem. The second tercet makes a further link with

the crucifixion of Christ, as the “Black Man” who jumps up from behind the elder tree and runs away can be linked to Judas, who Kirsch notes “was supposed to have hanged himself from an elder tree,” or maybe Othello (94). Whether treacherous or murderous, this figure’s threat is cancelled by Miranda’s child-like interpretation of his disappearance, as the lexis of the line when he “Turned a somersault and ran away waving” is that of a child’s playground.

Another danger is extinguished as Miranda remembers; “The Witch” is a figure that could represent Sycorax, melts away “into light as water leaves a spring,” removing her “venomous body” from the island. The “Ancient” could be Prospero, who in *The*

⁵ Just as Auden was adapting Shakespeare, Prospero’s speech was adapted by Shakespeare from Arthur Golding’s 1567 translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/ovids-metamorphoses>.

Tempest says that “Every third thought shall be my grave” when he retires to Milan (V,I, 369), although it could equally be Alonso, Prospero’s peer in age, who has shown himself throughout Shakespeare’s play to be truly attached to his son and eventually repentant of his part in Antonio’s usurpation of Prospero’s dukedom. Among all the “goodly creatures” that Miranda has now met (*The Tempest* V, i, 217), Alonso would be the most likely to have tears of joy running “Down his wasted cheeks,” and he is the one in *The Tempest* seen praying with Ferdinand on the storm-tossed ship. In “The Sea and the Mirror,” Alonso’s lines are advice to his son on how to reign humbly, to remember fallen kingdoms such as “Rome/Ecbatana, Babylon,” and “to remember that the fire and the ice/Are never more than one step away/From the temperate city.”

Running through the villanelle is Ferdinand, her “dear one,” who “kissed her awake,” according to Kirsch a possible reference to Siegfried’s aria in the third act of the *Götterdämmerung* by Richard Wagner (94), alluding to opera in the way T.S. Eliot does in *The Waste Land*. Throughout, the language is child-like and innocent, the lexical field that of playing, children, dancing and sunshine, as Miranda is kept in her virginal simplicity. However, if we follow the refrain lines, we find that Miranda is also assured, certain that Ferdinand is hers and that she is not lonely like the mirrors (art), and that these around her will not change.

This is a piece which suggests both intertextuality and intermediality, but the other media are never fully realised, perhaps in a Modernist attempt to assert the dominance of the poetic art form. The context of the long poem suggests drama by setting it in the theatre after *The Tempest* has finished; the first verses are a monologue by “The Stage Manager to the Critics,” but this is a “play” which will not be performed. Moreover, what is surprising about “The Sea and the Mirror,” is that it was never set to music. As Valentine Cunningham describes in his 2016 online article for the British Library, Auden’s poetic career was “one long effort to get his writing as close as could be to the condition of music”; he translated and wrote libretti for operas, and collaborated with composers such as Britten and Stravinsky, as well as incorporating the blues, cabaret and Broadway hits into the rhythms of his verse. Cunningham lists the “great waves of American sounds flooding over Europe” (jazz and blues) and “the sounds of Berlin cabaret, which Auden experienced first-hand in that city at the end of the 1920s.” This long poem shows an ear finely tuned to the textures of the different stanzaic and fixed forms available to the poet, and any potential music would surely

interpret some of the allusions and obscurities contained in it which arise from Auden's own time, rather than evoked from Shakespeare's play. What is clear, moreover, is that Auden chose one of the most "musical" of Shakespeare's plays to blend with his own work. In *Shakespeare and Music*, Julie Sanders (42) puts this down to the "perceived 'musicality' or lyricism" of *The Tempest*, which has been widely adapted by composers, and which perhaps formed part of the attraction for Auden. A musical setting for Miranda's villanelle might be a hymn or a children's nursery rhyme, but so far there has been no attempt at this adaptation.

In conclusion, however light the villanelle may seem as a form, poets have still been able to use it to express their intertextual connections with previous generations, building on the reputations and making their own connections, to reach the public with their verse.

5. Intermediality in the villanelle

The German scholar Aage A. Hansen-Löve's term *intermediality* was coined in 1983 to refer to the "transgression of boundaries between literature and the visual arts (and to some extent also music) in Russian symbolism" (Wolf 2005). The villanelle arose out of a tradition of the intermediality between music, dance and song as dance-related, homophonic choral music, and has since become associated again with other media. Here I shall show that the villanelle is interconnected with music of many different types, with the visual arts and painting through ekphrasis or the reflection of visual art in literature, and with the audiovisual media of film and television through allusion in both directions, from the poem to the screen and back again. Moreover, these are connections which have been present almost right from the start of the villanelle's presence in Anglophone literature.

5.1. The villanelle in music

*Dylan Thomas, Stravinsky and John Cale*⁶

The villanelle has much to appeal to composers, particularly with its use of refrain, which could be related to the *leitmotif* in music. The *leitmotif*, a technique

⁶ This section was previously submitted in a longer form as an end of course essay for the subject "Literature and Music" in the Master's course.

pioneered by Richard Wagner in the mid-19th century, uses a repeated theme or fragment of music to represent a character, and its systematic use in opera had appeared just before the villanelle arrived in English. Moreover, with the villanelle's roots in medieval dance-songs, it could be said to have a history which can be traced back to a form that was closely related to music. In the introduction to the Everyman's Library 2012 collection *Villanelles*, Julie Kane summarises the complicated history of a form which arose out of the Italian choral peasant dance-song the *villanella*, which combined verses sung or "semi-improvised" by a solo singer/dancer ("frequently a woman" 21) followed by a repeating refrain sung by a ring of dancers as they danced round her. Over time, Kane explains, the dance aspect fell away, and the *villanella* was composed to be sung, and subsequently, only to be read. By the sixteenth century, these poems were circulating around Europe in printed collections, "to be sung by three or more family members and friends for their private entertainment at home" (21). Kane points out that this type of song compares to the madrigal being sung and performed in the same domestic sphere in that "the madrigal was *polyphonic* ... while the *villanella* was *homophonic*, with the voices blending together in a simple harmony characteristic of musically-untrained singers" (20). Moreover, when the *villanella* reached France in the 1530s and 40s, poets began to write lyrics in this genre which were "frequently then set to music by contemporary composers – sometimes multiple times for a single poem ... In the fashion of the time, the writer would title them simply 'Villanelle'" (21-22). It was only at the end of the 16th century that Jean Passerat's first nonce villanelle would provide the format that would reemerge in the 1840s in France as a poetic fixed form. Here I will examine the adaptation to music of three villanelles: Dylan Thomas' "Do not go gentle into that good night," Edith M Thomas' "Across the World" and F.R. Scott's "Villanelle for Our Time," and show how the musicality of the form has been adapted to pieces in which the music itself both moulds to the poem and also moves beyond it.

Published in 1951, Dylan Thomas' "Do not go gentle into that good night" is widely known and quoted, and has been adapted to at least three musical compositions, two of which I shall examine here.⁷ The theme of the poem is death or blindness; it describes how different kinds of men resist "the dying of the light" and calls on the

⁷ A third adaptation, American composer Elliot del Borgo's "Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night," is a wind band piece which makes allusions to Stravinsky's work.

Do not go gentle into that good night, Dylan
Thomas (1951)

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green
bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding
sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I
pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

poet's father to rage against it, leaving it ambiguous as to whether the light refers to vision or life itself. It lists the way that "Wise men," "Good men," "Wild men," "Grave men" variously "Do not go gentle" to their deaths, and "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." It ends with the poet calling for a curse or blessing from his father, and urging his father not to go to his blindness/death without resistance.

As Stephen Fry points out in his 2005 book on prosody, *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within*, this villanelle is a "straight-down-the-line, solid-gold, one hundred per cent perfect, unadulterated villanelle" (223).

He is right; the refrains A1 and A2 are exact repetitions (i.e. they are refrains not repetitions), and the rhymes established on the first rhymes, "night" and "day" (using these binaries in a sonnet-like fashion to highlight the antithesis of death with the life-affirming anger of the theme), are full, masculine rhymes. It follows the 19-line form established since the villanelle's introduction into English, and (this has varied since its arrival in English), is written in iambic pentameter. There are, however, various possible variations to this metre which pull the reader up short, particularly the first line, repeated as A1 refrain, "Do not go gentle into that good night," which can be scanned as a straight iamb, "Do **not**," or trochaic substitution "**Do** not," giving the line an ambiguity and enabling the poet to use it both as part of a declarative sentence with the various men as its subject, and finally separating it from a subject as a phrase,

leaving the final line as an imperative towards his father. The reader has to work harder to follow the syntax of the refrain line, but this gives it flexibility, and although not a repetend since the words of the A1 are identical throughout, it calls attention to the line. French comments that at this time “Thomas was setting himself complicated formal challenges, and his adoption of the villanelle form for ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’ seems to be part of this drive” (174). However, he has had to turn to syntactical irregularities to meet the needs of the villanelle line; “Though wise men at their end know dark is right,...they/ Do not” is a marked syntactical form in English, which does not usually sanction a double subject, but as an acceptable or at least comprehensible form brings in the required rhyme “they” at the point needed.

The key characters in the poem, the wise/good/wild/grave men, give form to the middle four tercets, with a rebellious character in each, and the third, fourth and fifth tercets begin with a trochaic foot, as the men are introduced. Trochaic substitution in iambic lines alters the rhythm to produce an unexpectedly prominent word, but Thomas was following in a long tradition by varying the iambic beat. Kane explains that Sir Philip Sidney wrote six of his poems in his 1581 “Certain Sonnetes” “to tunes in the *villanella* family” (184), with what William A. Ringler, editor of the 1962 edition of Sidney’s poems, affirms to be “the first regularly sustained accentual trochaics in English” (qtd. in Kane “How the Villanelle’s” 186). Christopher Marlowe is also famed for regularly using trochaic (and spondaic) substitution in iambic pentameter to create an effect of grandiloquence or the “mighty line,” possibly under Sidney’s influence. What Kane sees as the link between the *villanella* music and the trochaic foot is its musicality; trochaic meter, she claims “like the triple ‘dance meter’ it is associated with in songs—is lilting in its rhythms” (189).

Igor Stravinsky’s Dirge-Canon “[In Memoriam Dylan Thomas](#)” was written the year after Dylan Thomas died. The Russian composer had failed to coincide with Thomas in America during 1953 where they were to work on an opera together, and this collaboration was truncated before it had even started with the poet’s premature death in November of that year (Routh 56-57). Stravinsky completed this “Dirge-Canon,” a piece for tenor and string quartet, in 1954, and according to Robert Cauldin and Warren Benson, it represents Stravinsky’s “initial endeavour in total pitch serialization”, which is why it has attracted much attention from musicologists (166). The Naxos website defines serialization as “the important 20th-century compositional

technique that uses, as a basis of unity, a series of the 12 semitones of the octave in a certain order,” and notes that “the technique, an extension of late-Romantic chromaticism, was formulated by Arnold Schoenberg in the 1920s.”

It is a scant 7 minutes long, with the string quartet of 2 violins, a viola and cello accompanied by two tenor trombones and one bass trombone. Its tone is majestically solemn, its opening bars a solemn pace by the trombones in a minor key, which sets the tone for the dirge, a song of mourning for a death. The strings join in tentatively and sadly, as the trombones continue their funeral march before the tenor begins to sing the first line, “Do not go gentle in that good night.” The tone is sorrowful and the pitch high; although not an ostinato it remains close to the same notes, giving the impression of being high and unvarying in grief. The tenor is joined by the violins as he stresses “Rage, rage” in an agony of minor tonalities, before dropping to a low, sorrowful “the dying of the light.” Throughout the tenor’s rendition of the villanelle, the music does not follow any sort of harmony, instead using Stravinsky’s serialization technique flowing up and down in pitch. Pizzicato effects from the violins enter again as the refrain “Rage, rage” returns. As the tenor finishes the poem, the trombones enter and disappear behind the strings, then reappear as the ethereal, enigmatic motifs of the violins fade away. It ends with sustained notes from the trombones. The music draws out the theme of death and anger arising from the lyrics as a memorial by the composer for the poet himself, and is closely linked to the theme of the villanelle, but it plays against rather than for the strengths of a villanelle, in a modernist move away from repetition of structures.

This piece represented a move towards serialization for Stravinsky, but interestingly the poem which inspired it was still not recognised for its technical virtuosity, nor even as a villanelle at all, as previously commented. In a review in *The Times* newspaper in June 1955 of the first performance of the Dirge-Canon in St James church in Piccadilly, London, the text was referred to simply as a “poem.”

In 1989, John Cale, a former member of the American rock band The Velvet Underground, wrote his “[Do not go gentle into that good night](#)” as part of his “Words For The Dying,” an album brought out as a protest against the Falklands War. Welsh himself, Cale was looking to the iconic Welsh poet in much the way he had mined other literary texts for songwriting such as “Hedda Gabler,” a song recorded in 1976 that was loosely based on the Ibsen play. Cale’s “Do No Go Gentle into That Good Night” sets

the words of the poem to orchestral music, with a children's choir adding to his vocals singing the villanelle in verses as if it were a pop song. It bears some resemblance to Stravinsky's piece, in particular in its use of ostinato effects both for the voices and for the string instruments, and its distinctive syncopated rhythm also seems to owe more to the classical tradition than to pop music, although the tempo is faster than the other work. In addition, at little over 5 minutes in length it certainly conforms more closely to the expectations and pressures of pop music, to which this short fixed-form poetic form is well suited.

Cale's clear syncopated vocals take the tercets like verses, with the choir singing along with him in the opening three lines, and the choir then singing the A2 refrain a second time. Between the tercets, we hear the orchestration as a regular accompaniment, as it is audibly divided. In the third tercet, he moves into a minor key and then back to a major key for the "Wild men." "Grave men" is accompanied by swirling violins and ostinatos by the brass section. Then finally, the syncopation returns for the final quatrain, as if the request to the father is something normal. A final crescendo for the final refrains in the ending couplet becomes tonal ostinato in the vocals, and the whole song ends on a final wistful oboe and a rushing crescendo of percussion and orchestra.

Reviews of the work were varied, with some viewing it as unsuccessful (Connolly), but in *Music, Poetry* in 2014, Colin Marshall not only points out the success of the album, (it was released in 1989, performed in 1992 at Brussels' Palais des Beaux Arts, re-released that year, and again in 2005), but refers to the poem that inspired the piece as being a villanelle, rather than just "a poem," suggesting that by 2014 the term for this type of fixed-form poem was in popular circulation once more. Recognition of the form replaces it within the context of the tradition of the villanelle and adds this piece of music to its history.

In musical terms, however, Cale moves Thomas' villanelle away from its seemingly inexorable connection with death by injecting it with syncopation. In the entry by Linda and Michael Hutcheon on opera in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Carolyn Abbate is mentioned as a recent theorist of "'moments of diegesis' that function as narration in that they are disruptive and charged with a sense of distance and difference." This distance, resulting from the audience hearing "a message 'across' or against the sensual matter of the voices we are listening to" can be

seen here in Cale's quirky evocation of the affirmative which paints a different picture from Thomas' impassioned words. The difference that Abbate sees in opera consists of "uncanny moments of non-congruence between the words and the music," (1) which are also here in Cale's piece, as the theme of dying or losing is converted into life-affirming musical energy, so that the incongruently up-beat effect of the rhythm has a narrative effect all of its own.

Edith M. Thomas and Amy Beach

The previous pieces of 20th-century music are both by men, and men whose reputation in the musical world are solid; their names are familiar to many, if not all in the case of Stravinsky. Less well known is the 19th century female composer who put a woman poet's villanelle to music right at the start of the form's incorporation into the poetic canon. Amy Beach was an American composer, whose reputation was great during her lifetime, although subsequently much neglected after her death in 1944, until in the 1990s feminist scholars such as Rita Beatie (1991) and Jeanell W. Brown (1994) returned to her work. In 1998, Adrienne Block wrote her biography. A gifted pianist who composed music as a child, Amy Cheney began performing piano concerts, but was then dissuaded by her family and surgeon husband, Dr Henry Beach, a widower 24 years her senior. As her biographer Block recounts, Beach taught herself composition, as her husband thought that taking musical theory classes would stifle her originality (41). From this point onwards, she composed prolifically and also became a founding member of the Society of American Women Composers (21).

In 1894, Beach set a villanelle to music; "[Across the World](#)" by Edith M. Thomas, whom the 19th century American critic and poet Richard Henry Stoddard called "an American Keats" and extolled as one of the finest talents of the era (Proquest biography). In an appraisal of up-and-coming American poets, the Canadian poet Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, (who would himself later write a villanelle, "Going Over" in 1918, and is judged by Amanda French to have anticipated "many of the experiments with the form that we might assume are the invention of post-modernism" (145)), wrote of Thomas in 1884 that her work recalled Shakespeare's sonnets and that "We are justified in expecting much from her genius" (328). Among the poems in her first-published book of poetry in 1885, "A New Year's Masque, and Other Poems" was her villanelle "Across the World," and it was included two years later in Gleeson White's

1887 anthology of fixed form poems (although beside its entry in the index there is a careless asterisk against this poem, suggesting that it was previously unpublished). Thomas went on to publish 17 more books of verse; her poetry was also published in magazines and journals and widely acclaimed.

Thomas's villanelle, "Across the World" is a romantic, yearning call to the lover across the world, but whether the lover is alive or travelling, male or female is unclear; its mystery and ambiguity lend it to many interpretations. Its archaic "thee," "thou" and "hath" are redolent of Keats, and it contains the dashes so typical of Emily Dickinson's work as well as building to the exclamations in the third, fifth and last verses. However,

Across the World,
Edith M. Thomas (1885)

Across the world I speak to thee;
Where'er thou art (I know not where),
Send thou a messenger to me.

I here remain who would be free,
To seek thee out through foul or fair,
Across the world I speak to thee.

Whether beneath the tropic tree,
The cooling night-wind fans thy hair,
—

Send thou a messenger to me!

Whether upon the rushing sea,
A foamy track thy keel doth wear, —
Across the world I speak to thee.

Whether in yonder star thou be,
A spirit loosed in purple air, —
Send thou a messenger to me!

Hath heaven not left thee memory
Of what was well in mortal's share?
Across the world I speak to thee;
Send thou a messenger to me!

this was an innovative form, as we have seen, and the villanelle itself had only been introduced into English by Gosse and Dobson in 1877-78. Edith Thomas was among the first poets to write in this form in English, and one of the first women to write in it. She, along with the British poets Emily Pfeiffer and May Probyn, is the first female proponent of this form in English. Pfeiffer's "When the Brow of June" was published in her "Songs and Sonnets" in 1880.

Block's assessment of Beach's setting of the Thomas villanelle highlights the intermediality of the music; "Beach's most impassioned songs are triplet-driven and orchestral in sound.... The vocal line pits eighth-notes against the piano's triplets to create further tension." These triplets on the piano seem to mimic or be inspired by the tercets in the poem, as a musical echo of the villanelle's structure. Moreover, the singer can be chosen in a play on the

ambiguity of the narrative voice; this is either a man or a woman, a contralto or baritone. Block even sees a narrative drive in the resolution of the key at the end; "At the end,

the change from minor to major may be a representation of the beloved moving from the realm of the living to that of the dead, from mortal to eternal life.” Beach was to set other poems to music after this, including settings for three poems by Robert Browning, and it was clear that the conversation between music and published poetry was very much alive in this period.

F.R.Scott and Leonard Cohen

The Canadian poet and professor of law F.R. Scott (1899–1985) was a “political catalyst” according to his biographer Sandra Djwa (52). Djwa claims that his views “helped to shape modern Canadian poetry and to mould, along socialist principles, Canadian political theory and practice” (53), influencing the late 20th century premier Pierre Trudeau in particular. Among other activities, he was involved in drawing up a blueprint for social planning in the 1940s which turned Canada into a welfare state following the British example. However, it was the ideals that Scott held about Canada’s participation in the conflict of the Second World War that can be seen in his villanelle published in 1944, “Villanelle for our Time.”

Canada had been a key participant in the First World War as a British Dominion, and had won the right to sign the treaty of Versailles as an independent signatory after its prime minister led a campaign for “recognition of the 60,000 war dead” (*The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Hillmer), and was to enter the Second World War as a vital ally to the Allied Forces from the start. C.P. Stacey assesses that the way the war transformed “a quiet country on the fringes of global affairs into a critical player in the 20th century's most important struggle” and estimates that “Between 1939 and 1945 more than one million Canadian men and women served full-time in the armed services. More than 43,000 were killed” (*The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Stacey). The public status of F.R. Scott on the side of the war effort can be seen in this villanelle, which is a call to Canadians to make the sacrifice of going to war. It appeals to the idea of “commonwealth”; Canada had been independent from Britain since 1867, but still formed part of the Commonwealth, under which the country still has the Queen as its monarch. Therefore, while not capitalised and indicating in this form the notion of the common good, it still carries political implications of forming part of the British worldview.

Scott's view of Canadian attitudes towards the conflict shows that he is scathing about current morals, noting the ways in which society has become lazy or complacent

Villanelle for our Time, F.R. Scott
(1944)

From bitter searching of the heart,
Quickened with passion and with
pain,
We rise to play a greater part.

This is the faith from which we start:
Men shall know commonwealth again
From bitter searching of the heart.

We loved the easy and the smart,
But now, with keener hand and brain,
We rise to play a greater part.

The lesser loyalties depart
And neither race nor creed remain
From bitter searching of the heart.

Not steering by the venal chart
That tricked the mass for private gain
We rise to play a greater part.

Reshaping narrow law and art
Whose symbols are the millions slain,
From bitter searching of the heart
We rise to play a greater part.

during the decade of the thirties ("We loved the easy and the smart"). The poet insists that the sacrifice is worthwhile and right. This clarion call to national pride and sense of duty uses monosyllable rhymes as if appealing to a jury, among which are the emotive "heart", "pain" and "slain," and he contrasts the sacrifice of the "millions slain" with the insistence of the refrain lines, "From bitter searching of the heart/We rise to play a greater part." He shows a hierarchy of loyalties, separating off the "lesser" ones "race and creed," and dismissing a reference to commercial profiteering as a "venal chart/That tricked the mass for private gain," to return to the need to for the country to carry out a "bitter searching of the heart" and rise to the call to war.

This poem can be compared with fellow-Canadian John McCrae's earlier, fêted "In Flanders Fields." This poem

followed the 15-line fixed-form of the rondeau, which was also popularised in English along with the villanelle and other French forms of poetry in the last decades of the 19th century. Written in the midst of the war in 1915 while McCrae was serving as a Medical Officer, it was later taken up as an emblem of the war dead with its images of poppies, and contributed to making the poppy the symbol of the war. Teresa Gibert has described how Canadian writers including Margaret Atwood have been influenced by it and used its theme to subvert the theme of unthinking support for war. Scott's own poem encapsulates in its nineteen lines what Gibert sees in the rondeau with its endorsement of "the conventional discourse of noble and glorious sacrifice" and also McCrae's

legacy in other writers, with their “exploration of the traumatic memory of warfare” (115).

In 2004, the Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen released the album *Dear Heather*, on which was his version of Scott’s “[Villanelle for Our Time](#).” Just over five minutes in length, it starts with Cohen reading the villanelle in an echoing sombre tone; he makes the most of the enjambments to make it sound casual and oral in form, as if commenting to a friend rather than calling a country to war. By the end of the second tercet, music begins to filter through in the background; a rhythm starts with the gentle brush strokes on a snare drum, and a piano plays a jazz phrases with a bass guitar adding notes. By the end of the first minute, he has read the poem in its entirety, but the recording continues, and Cohen begins his own improvisation, taking the motive of the tercets and changing their order, so that they are repeated as his own refrain of the whole poem. He alternates the tercets, so that after an instrumental pause following the whole poem initially read, he revisits the second tercet, then the fourth, then the final quatrain, while female backing singers chime in with the refrain theme “We rise to play a greater part” at the end of each tercet. Soft, sighing vocal improvisations follow from the female voices, before revisiting the second tercet again, then to the fifth tercet, and the final quatrain. This is a jazz improvisation of the poem, which plays with the words, and the addition of the second refrain “We rise to play a greater part” to the tercets means that the villanelle’s form becomes closer to a traditional chorus. However, the repeated return to “This is the faith from which we start” and the gentle rhythm and backing voices points to a spiritual focus, and a rejection of the discourse of war in the lyrics. It seems to fall into what Gibert suggests is a “revisionist context of contemporary Canadian literature,” in which “national military myths” are “critically reassessed and ironically debunked rather than perpetuated” (115).

Villanelle adaptation is not limited to the genres of classical music, jazz or pop, with other examples including Astrid Seriese and Erwin van Ligten’s 2018 version of Carolyn Beard Whitlow’s 1986 villanelle “[Rockin a Man Stone Blind](#),” which is a blues song that sets the Black African narrative to an acoustic guitar and snare drum. It uses the A2 refrain “Two-eyed woman rockin’ a man stone blind” as the chorus in a more traditional way, so that the A1 refrain “Cake in the oven, clothes out on the line” takes

less prominence. The effect is melodious and bitter at the same time, but draws the theme of the African American experience into the musical villanelle's embrace.

In conclusion, the musical adaptation of the villanelle seems an inevitable, natural collaboration of musicians with poets, considering the nature of the refrain in the poem as it runs down in an alternating pattern. Chorus in songs and ballads relies on repetition as an attractive element for musicians and listeners, just as in the poem a refrain acts as a brake on the speed of consumption of a piece of literature, and a moment of reflection enabled by review of the text. In prose, it is unusual to see repetition, except perhaps as motives or themes, but in fixed-form poetry the refrain acts as a return to the familiar, as the unfamiliar unfolds. Theme and variation are well known to composers of all genres and styles of music, and the play of central theme, with the varying first lines of the tercets enclosed by the refrain lines is a distinctly musical characteristic. It would be more surprising not to have musical adaptations of villanelles, once a dance-song form itself as the *villanella*.

5.2. The ekphrastic villanelle

Mark Strand's "Two de Chiricos"

At the start of the villanelle's journeys through English poetry, was an art critic, Joseph Gleeson White, whose anthology of ballades, rondeaus, villanelles and other French fixed forms put the interest of the late 19th century poets on display. He would perhaps have been proud that the villanelle canon contains at least one poem which makes use of the device of ekphrasis, the exploration of a piece of art, whether real or imagined, within a work of literature.

In her 2012 article on ekphrasis in Shakespeare's "Rape of Lucrece," Catherine Belsey notes that James Heffernan and W.J.T. Mitchell in their work on ekphrasis both acknowledge it as the site of a *paragone* or battle between art and literature in opposition to each other. Moreover, according to Mitchell, "the paragone or debate of poetry and painting is never just a contest between two kinds of signs, but a struggle between body and soul, world and mind, nature and culture" (qtd. in Belsey 188). However, Belsey notes that while the paragonal model between art and literature has been persistent,

Acknowledgment with Mitchell and Derrida that words and images are both modes of representation would permit due attention to the distinctions

between them, without cementing these as opposition, while releasing us to recognize the opportunities that arise from combining their respective strengths. (191)

Villanelle - Two de Chiricos, Mark Strand
(1998)

1. The Philosopher's Conquest

This melancholy moment will remain,
So, too, the oracle beyond the gate,
And always the tower, the boat, the distant
train.

Somewhere to the south a Duke is slain,
A war is won. Here, it is too late.
This melancholy moment will remain.

Here, an autumn evening without rain,
Two artichokes abandoned on a crate,
And always the tower, the boat, the distant
train.

Is this another scene of childhood pain?
Why do the clockhands say 1:28?
This melancholy moment will remain.

The green and yellow light of love's
domain
Falls upon the joylessness of fate,
And always the tower, the boat, the distant
train.

The things our vision wills us to contain,
The life of objects, their unbearable
weight.
This melancholy moment will remain,
And always the tower, the boat, the distant
train.

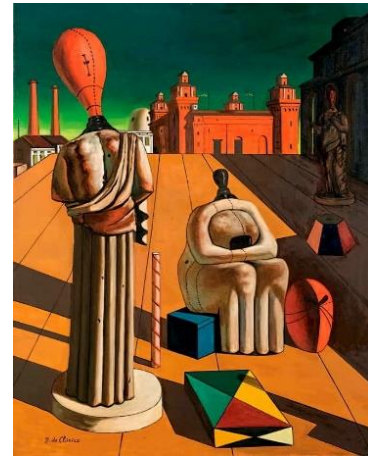


*The
Philosopher's
Conquest,
de Chirico*

Mark Strand's "Two de Chiricos" can be read as an attempt to explore the spaces between art and the verbal in terms of repetition and revisiting of images. According to Malcolm Woodland, the villanelles were written as the result of a call for ekphrastic poems based on works in the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Iowa Museum of Art (125). The paintings ekphrastically evoked are de Chirico's early Metaphysical oils on canvas, "The Philosopher's Conquest" (1914) and "The Disquieting Muses" (1916-18), each of which are given their own

villanelle by Strand. De Chirico was a Greek-Italian artist whose Metaphysical style included "dream-like views of eerie arcaded squares with unexpected juxtapositions of objects" (tate.org.uk) which were to influence the Surrealist artists that came after him,

and even the films of Alfred Hitchcock. De Chirico highlights incongruous objects, and lights them in harshly lit spaces, removing or distancing traces of humanity, and Strand attempts to represent the repetition of themes or icons within the paintings; “And always the tower, the boat, the distant train.” In “The Philosopher’s Conquest,” the final quatrain containing the A1 and A2 refrains speaks of containment, and the “life” and “weight” of the objects brought into being in the paintings,



The Disquieting Muses, de Chirico

2. The Disquieting Muses

Boredom sets in first, and then despair.
One tries to brush it off. It only grows.
Something about the silence of the square.

Something is wrong; something about the air,
Its color; about the light, the way it glows.
Boredom sets in first, and then despair.

The muses in their fluted evening wear,
Their faces blank, might lead one to suppose
Something about the silence of the square,

Something about the buildings standing there.
But no, they have no purpose but to pose.
Boredom sets in first, and then despair.

What happens after that, one doesn't care.
What brought one here--the desire to compose
Something about the silence of the square,

Or something else, of which one's not aware,
Life itself, perhaps--who really knows?
Boredom sets in first, and then despair...
Something about the silence of the square.

The things our vision wills us to contain,
The life of objects, their unbearable weight.
This melancholy moment will remain,
And always the tower, the boat,
the distant train.

Woodland cites four de Chirico works of art with “Melancholy” in their title (125), and sees this as a theme that Strand follows in his poems. The poet himself also comments:

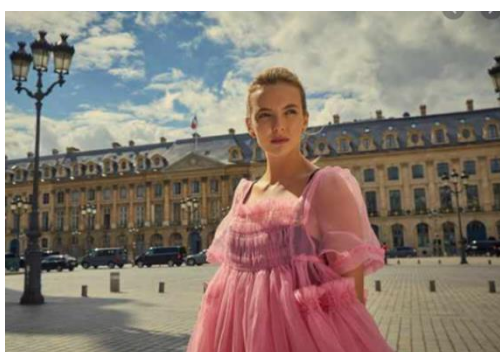
The lines keep coming back, and in de Chirico's paintings you have the same things coming back, the flags, the towers, the boats, the trains, the shadows, long shadows... There's something very static about de Chirico's paintings; ... there was something truly spooky, eerie, chilling about his paintings between 1911 and 1919. I don't think a villanelle would work for many painters. (qtd. in Woodland 125)

Woodland (125) examines the villanelle in the light of W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of "ekphrastic indifference" in which "all poets confront the radical gap between the visual and the verbal arts, the impossibility of 'translating' the visual into the verbal"; not only is the painting a depiction of the "unsayable," but the poem too attempts to describe a painting of the indescribable. Looking to Julia Kristeva's work on melancholy and the impossibility of naming the lost child/mother relationship which lies beyond speech, Woodland suggests that "refrain and other forms of verbal repetition, speak of an inability to concatenate that leaves the poem in a strange non-narrative temporality; those devices bear witness, to borrow Kristeva's words, to a psychic state where time 'does not pass by, the before/after notion does not rule it, does not direct it from a past toward a goal'" (126).

De Chirico's "The Disquieting Muses" had already served as inspiration for the 1957 ekphrastic poem of the same name by Sylvia Plath, in which the female figures threaten a child, with "heads like darning-eggs." Plath's poem explores the menace of the faceless female figures in a way that Strand's refuses to do. Instead of being sinister and actively unsettling, Strand's post-modern take on the figures in the painting is more distanced, with the more passive emotions of "boredom" and "despair". He even voices the most dangerous critical stance, that maybe "we don't care" what the meaning of the "Muses" could be.

5.3. The villanelle in film and television

In 2014, the British novelist Luke Jennings wrote the first of a series of four novellas that would be later published together as "Codename Villanelle." This first novella was subsequently adapted for television as the 2018 award-winning series *Killing Eve*. The protagonist is a female bisexual Russian assassin who uses the alias



Jodie Comer as Villanelle in "Killing Eve."

"Villanelle," and is pursued by the British secret service as she murders her way across Europe, focussing on the mutually obsessive relationship between the agent Eve Polastri and the killer she is hunting. The play on words "villain" and "elle" takes the name of the poem and uses it with no reference to the literary

form, although *New Yorker* TV critic Jia Tolentino identified the poem as the source of the character's alias, using it as a metaphor for her column; "'Killing Eve' corresponds, in a rough way, to the villanelle's basic framework: the show is about the iteration of a recognizable pattern, its pleasures emerging in the internal twists" (2018). Feminist scholars are already examining it as a site of discourse of interest; Kathleen J. Waites in "Killing Eve and the Necessity of the Female Villain du Jour" hails it as a production that "upsets the apple cart of the male-dominated spy genre, deconstructing the virgin/whore duality that has defined women for millennia, and exposing it as a ruse and product of a self-serving patriarchal discourse" (120). However, the poem has inadvertently been given a prominence it never had before, and it is perhaps ironic that the alias chosen by the original author Jennings for this fictional female villain should be that of a form of poetry which has long been undercover, ducking in and out of visibility in English, and bringing a touch of the foreign exotic, like the Russian polyglot killer in her to-die-for designer clothes. This transnational aspect of the villanelle mirrors the way it came into English in the 19th century from French. Transnationalism is also highlighted in film by the theme in Elizabeth Bishop's iconic "One Art" as it is recited in the framing first and last scenes of the biopic *Reaching for the Moon*, linking her with her Brazilian lover Lota and her American lover Alice.

In addition, *Killing Eve/Codename Villanelle* were not the only time that a pun on "villanelle" and "villain" had occurred to someone, as the British poet Brian Bilston in his 2019 novel "Diary of a Somebody" showed. The novel interleaves a plotline about a poet and his life after his divorce and loss of his job with poems; many use the everyday as inspiration and are comic on a domestic scale, but he is virtuoso in form, and his range includes sonnets, haikus, sestinas and other forms, in a way which is reminiscent of Auden's broad use of verse forms in "The Sea and the Mirror". Among the poems is his villanelle, "Villainelle," with its theme of the need for a good villain as a foil for the protagonist. The lines are end-stopped, and it is light in tone, but its references to culture are wide-ranging; its eight heroes come from the main cultural arenas of the modern world: cinema (Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*, Joker from *Batman*, also a reference to the graphic novels of the Marvel universe); literature, both foundational and recent classics, for children and adults (*Beowulf*, *Harry Potter*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* and Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories); and

Villanelle, Brian Bilston (2019)

A hero is fine but boring as hell.
Where is the fun if there isn't a foe?
A good story needs a villain as well.

Heroes win out and they then get the girl.
The end of the tale we already know.
A hero is fine but boring as hell.

Luke without Darth is a difficult sell.
The Lion and the Wardrobe's plot is too slow.
A good story needs a villain as well.

Sherlock's OK but Moriarty's a swell.
A Joker-less Batman, I'd gladly forgo.
A hero is fine but boring as hell.

Every Beowulf needs their Grendel.
Borg sans McEnroe? I'd have to say no.
A good story needs a villain as well.

Harry's less dull under Voldemort's spell
And Jekyll is best when Hyde's in full flow.
A hero is fine but boring as hell.
A good story needs a villain as well.

the world of sport with tennis players Björn Borg and John McEnroe. With post-modern eclecticism, the reader of this poem is just as likely to have seen films or series about the fictional characters as they are to have read the texts they come from, and the inclusion of the tennis stars is certainly a nod to the age of television, when the 1980 Wimbledon Men's Singles final was an iconic match between the two players, not just for the tennis but because of the confrontational style of the American. This, then, is the villanelle reflecting back the world of popular culture; everything is the subject for this form.

Bilston's ability with the fixed-form of the villanelle

moreover shows his sensitivity to the history of the poem itself; although this is not a metapoetical villanelle, he uses the now-classic rhyme of words ending in -el. Despite having to force this by including the monster Grendel, whose name is trochaic not an iambic, the choice of this rhyme for the refrain lines means that he uses "swell" and "spell", seen in 1888 by W.E. Henley in one of the earliest villanelles with its refrain "A Dainty Thing's the Villanelle." It seems that the code of the villanelle has been passed down to new generations of poets. Ironically, Jennings' use of the codeword in full view, hiding the poem behind the usurpation of its name, may be precisely what poets want, for it to remain a poet's poem, for the specialists to recognise and reward.

Dylan Thomas' villanelle "Do not go gentle into that good night" is also a leitmotif which appears four times in the 2014 Christopher Nolan film *Interstellar*, in which a group of astronauts travel through a wormhole in space in an attempt to identify habitable

planets and save the humans struggling to survive extreme weather conditions on Earth. The scientist attempting to solve the equations that will make it possible to reach these planets is Professor Brand (played by Michael Caine), whose daughter Amelia (Anne Hathaway) is one of the astronauts sent into space. Brand sends recorded messages from Earth to the group of astronauts which includes his daughter and the pilot Cooper (Matthew McConaughey), and in an early message at minute 50 of the film the professor signs off with the first two tercets of the villanelle,

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

A reaction or discussion of the meaning of the poem is not initiated by the characters, and it is left hanging in the air as an instruction to the astronauts. He then repeats the villanelle in another message to his daughter as he tells her that they must think “not as individuals but as a species” (min 1:25). At this point, we hear only the refrain, “Do not go gentle into that good night,” as the human race appears to come closer to extinction. At this point, he is encouraging her to continue her journey, which is a race against time to save humanity.

As the astronauts travel further into deep space, they need to travel down to a planet where time moves faster than on Earth, and they age faster than those they have left behind; Cooper’s children grow up and his daughter Murphy becomes a physicist with Professor Brand, who has not yet solved the key equation to get mankind off the planet by the time he dies. On his deathbed, with Murphy at his side, his last words are “Do not go gentle...” (min. 1:33) and it seems that the mission has failed. However, as a motive throughout the film, it also serves as an indication to the viewers that humankind’s survival instinct is strong, and we are reminded of his previous words to his daughter that it is a question of the species, not the individual. The survival instinct is so strong, indeed, that it provides a dramatic twist in the subsequent section of the film, when one of the advance group of explorers, Dr Mann (Matt Damon), tricks the astronauts into thinking his planet is inhabitable when it is not, and tries to maroon Cooper and Dr Brand and take

their spaceship. As he leaves Cooper fighting for breath on the frozen surface of this new world after he breaks his helmet, he asks “Did Professor Brand tell you that poem before you left?” (min. 1:56). He quotes the first tercet of the villanelle. We seem to be urged to understand that even a proto-villain is touched by the humanity of the poem, but that he is especially moved by the forces that move us to stay alive, a theme in the poem. Even if never identified as a villanelle, the eminently quotable nature of this form makes it the perfect poem for transmitting the message of resistance against death and extinction; only a few economic lines encapsulate the ferocity of love and tenacity of life.

To use poetry, or allusions to poetry, in film is a technique which can only benefit the filmmaker; the addition to tapping in to cultural capital of an established poet, the reference suggests a union of science and art. Here science is not depicted as being subverted by art or poetry but augmented by it; Amelia Brand argues that love is “the one thing we’re capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space” (min 1:27), or an extra dimension that we do not yet fully understand. Her father’s quotation runs through the mission as a reminder of this idea in a script which otherwise has passions under tight control. Thomas’s tightly controlled fury at losing his father is the perfect metaphor for the astronauts’ agonisingly close call with extinction.

6. Conclusion

The villanelle has come a long way since it joined the English canon, from an aesthetic tool for contemplating beauty or a longing for a forgotten past. The *carpe diem* and *ubi sunt* themes we see in the first villanelles, along with the rhymes that echoed popular comic opera gave way to the longer, more serious, fragmented few poems of the modernists, and then were lengthened into miniature masterpieces mid-century. Since then, the form has broadened into a form which can be used to voice any kind of emotion and idea, with its repetition either harnessed as a chorus or gently twisted as a repetend to give a new turn to the phrase.

In *Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler notes the resuscitation of the villanelle with surprise; “Who could have expected the villanelle and the sestina to resurface as they did in the twentieth century?” (4). Stephen Fry was inspired to write a whole book

on prosody to celebrate his admiration that this fixed form had made it to the 21st century (222). The villanelle has made its comeback in style, and been helped by its intermedial spread to reestablish itself.

Amanda French is critical of the continued position of the villanelle as an exotic form,

More than a hundred years later, the villanelle has not even yet been granted more than a temporary visa into the country of Anglophone poetry; handbooks such as Adams's *Poetic Designs* and still place it under the "French Forms" heading. This categorical term is probably both irreversible and harmless, but it is interesting that the villanelle and the sestina, both of which have been enthusiastically adopted by contemporary poets writing in English, are still treated as aliens to the English language. ("Refrain, Again" 189)

However, the visibility of the name villanelle, promoted by the intermedial novels and TV series and backed by the occasional foray into the worlds of art and music, may help people access this established poetic type in English, and its French-looking name may be less exoticising as it comes into more common currency through its contact with the other arts. Amanda French and Julie Kane's investigations have shown that it is the English form of the poem which has produced the most examples of the modern villanelle rather than the French form ("Hardly any Fr. Poets wrote villanelles after the 19th c.," (*Princeton* 1521) despite an apparent invisibility in text and reference books for most of its hundred and forty years in English. On the other hand, it may turn out to be a short-lived rebirth of this poem, and it may sink back into obscurity again, as it did at the start of the 20th century.

Nevertheless, it could be argued that one particular group has embraced the villanelle from the start. In the 2012 edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Kane and French explain that Theodore Banville described the interweaving of the a, b and refrain lines as "a plait woven from strands of silver and gold, through which winds a third strand the color of a rose!" but one might say that the number of LGBT poets represented by this form now merits saying that the third strand should be rainbow-coloured (1521). The reverberations of the villanelle onto the small screen in the character of a bi-sexual reflect the favour it has traditionally found

with poets who have turned their back on a heteronormative society, from Oscar Wilde and May Probyn with her cross-gendered villanelles, to Elizabeth Bishop or the drama of a female assassin dressed in designer clothes who stalks a female secret service agent, moving forward to contemporary lesbian poets.

Additionally, the villanelle with its double refrain getting ever nearer is a good metaphor for a communication, coming as it does from dance-songs, where people mix together and look at each other. This is a kind of poetry arising out of intertextuality, communication and the willingness to repeat. Annie Finch, in the introduction to the *Everyman* volume of villanelles, writes

a good villanelle is like a good romantic relationship. The two lines that structure it are dying to get together; there is a period of suspense ...and ... a changing context provides a series of new discoveries about the lines each time they appear. The form keeps the lines close but apart in six stanzas of mounting tension until they join in the last two lines of the poem. (17)

Julie Kane's thesis finishes too on the note of dancing, by quoting T.S. Eliot's "East Coker" from his *Four Quartets* as she wonders whether "the haunting round-dance scene" could be "evidence that Eliot recognized the reality of a lost oral-formulaic lyric tradition" (288). Finch also remarks that the villanelle, with its basis "in communal dance rather than individual song," perhaps "teaches us something about sharing and returning, integrating, and learning to let go: good lessons for our time."

Moreover, for the scholars, the villanelle's short history makes it like the ice cores that climate scientists take to measure oxygen and hydrogen isotopes and measure historical world temperatures. In the same way, the villanelle is a poetic isotope of the last hundred and forty years of Anglophone societies. We have become more tolerant, less depressed, more open to expressing our fears, hopes and desires, even dark ones (Tom Disch's "The Rapist's Villanelle" must surely fall into that category), and the villanelle is a slim, compact piece of "anecdotal evidence / About the human heart," to quote Wendy Cope's 2018 poem "Anecdotal Evidence." As Karen Jackson Ford concludes in her entry on the villanelle in *A Companion to Poetic Genre*, "In its historical and formal close turns and counterturns, the villanelle is an unexpectedly open genre" (187). In addition, it is evidence of our enduring love of building and subverting structure, and our love of rhythm, rhyme and words.

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