10 Let's hear it for the villanelle! (March)

Nothing surely could be odder than for poets to subject themselves willingly to a poetic discipline as excruciating as this one: a nineteen-line poem of five three-line stanzas followed by a four-line stanza! The first and third lines of the first stanza alternate as final lines of the succeeding stanzas and then become the rhyming couplet that ends the final stanza. The middle line of the first stanza, meanwhile, lends its rhyme to the second lines of all the succeeding stanzas. The rhyme scheme, thus goes:

(a1 b **a2)** (a b **a1)** **(**a b **a2)** **(**a b **a1)** **(**a b **a2)** (a b **a1a2)**
where the bold '**a1/a2**'s are the two repeated lines

More surprising is that hardly anyone knows of or pays attention to the very first example of the villanelle, simply called "Villanelle". And the strangest thing of all, I find, is that the most memorable examples of this fiendish verse form, in English, were written in the 20th century, at a time when modernism was rife and 'free verse' or *vers libre* was favoured and verse disciplines generally were being seen as so *passé* – stuffy, formal, outmoded..

The fashion for them in the XVI century came from Italy – the form was ideal for a pastoral poem, set to music for a countrified dance – *villanus* in Latin means 'peasant' and we get our serfs and *villeins* from that. So, here, just for the record books is the very first villanelle by Jean Passerat.

La Tourterelle Envolée, de Jean Passérat :

J'ai perdu ma tourterelle ;
Est-ce point elle que j'oy ?
Je veux aller après elle.

Tu regrettes ta femelle ;
Hélas! aussi fais-je, moi,
J'ai perdu ma tourterelle.

Si ton amour est fidèle,
Aussi est ferme ma foi :
Je veux aller après elle.

Mort que tant de fois j'appelle,
Prends ce qui se donne à toi !
J'a perdu ma tourterelle,
Je veux aller après elle.

Although this is fine for a pretty troubadour song, it hardly makes for very interesting poetry. He's lost his cherished turtle-dove and wants her back – end of story; the repetitions only go to show that he is not going to give up! But this poem also highlights a problem in the form: how are you going to handle these constant repetitions so that they say something a little more meaningful - so that you actually take advantage of the form?

You probably already know the most famous example of the villanelle – “Do not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas. It’s deservedly famous, a beautiful and very moving meditation on his father who was dying of cancer.

Do not go gentle into that good night (1951)

Dylan Thomas

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.

Not all of the poem makes good sense and Dylan Thomas’ rather wild way with words sometimes gets the better of him, I feel, but you will agree, surely, that this is a poem of striking force, expressing the anger, sorrow and frustration we may feel, faced with the death of those nearest to us.

The repeated lines “Do not go gentle into that good night” and “Rage, rage against the dying of the light” set up a sort of litany that matches positives of “gentle”, “good” and “light” – against the negatives of “night”, “rage” and “dying”. This juxtaposition of positives and negatives continues throughout the poem (sometimes in rather extreme ways: “Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay” ??). In a sense, the discipline of the form controls and limits the utterance, at the same time as building up, like waves, a verbal force which gathers increasing momentum, until the two controlling lines converge again at the end. There is a particular tension here between the *limited* use of words and their developing emotional power as a direct result.

Sylvia Plath’s villanelle is no less powerful in a different way, though it is not so well known.

Mad Girl's Love Song (published 1953)

"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,
And arbitrary blackness gallops in:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I fancied you'd return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
At least when spring comes they roar back again.
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)"

Written in 1951, when Plath was still a student at Smith College, this highly solipsistic poem might seem, like Thomas' above, rather wild (of course, it is supposed to be!) but in a sort of rebellious, youthful perplexity. Her ideas of love seem all to be sensual fantasies or assertions of desire and loss. Mixed up, however, with these frantic declarations to a 'lover' are ideas that are startling and extreme.

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:

Sylvia Plath, within the tight discipline she has chosen, reveals paradoxically the raging antitheses of her terrible impulses of depression which, in her life, lived side by side with her happier, even ecstatic states. The poem, *and the form of the poem*, unfortunately, suggest no way out of this state of loneliness, loss or bereavement. The form's shackles (strait-jacket?) indicate constraint. Shutting her eyes to the world, retreating into her head, seems to bring no relief. The world barely exists outside her wild conceptions. It's a disturbing picture that seems to foreshadow all the love troubles that lie ahead of her with Ted Hughes later on.

WH Auden had earlier tried his hand at a villanelle:

VILLANELLE by WH Auden (1940)

Time can say nothing but I told you so,
Time only knows the price we have to pay;
If I could tell you, I would let you know.

If we should weep when clowns put on their show,
If we should stumble when musicians play,
Time can say nothing but I told you so.

There are no fortunes to be told, although
Because I love you more than I can say,
If I could tell you, I would let you know.

The winds must come from somewhere when they blow,
There must be reasons why the leaves decay;
Time can say nothing but I told you so.

Perhaps the roses really want to grow,
The vision seriously intends to stay;
If I could tell you, I would let you know.

Suppose the lions all get up and go,
And all the brooks and soldiers run away?
Time can say nothing but I told you so.
If I could tell you, I would let you know.

I think Auden uses the form here to *disguise* his feelings. It's clear that this is really a love poem, but the sense is oblique, elusive, and nothing is said straightforwardly. The form here acts more *to close down* the overwhelming strength of his feelings. Time is seen as the enemy, the parent figure in the background, who is there to call a halt to any dreaming. Love exists but it will perish, just as "leaves decay", and "time" is therefore the great reality check. There is a lot of poignancy in the poem. Like "Stop all the clocks" Auden often has to try to keep his feelings of love and sadness , particularly homosexual love with its enforced secrecy, tightly in check. One feels, I think, that this is what is going on here. Parts of it are playful – the idea of "brooks and soldiers" running away is almost funny, except that soldiers represent a threat in a way that brooks do not. That mixture of fun, funny juxtapositions with real grief or seriousness, we see again in "Stop all the clocks". The form, then, seems to allow strong emotions to be played out, though in a very measured and masked sort of way.

One of my favourites is Elizabeth Bishop's laconic (and not *very* strict) villanelle, all about losing and loss. As Vicki and I constantly lose our specs, phones, keys etc., I feel this is for us, though the poem takes us, jokily, into deeper waters, of course.

One Art (1976)

BY ELIZABETH BISHOP

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.

I love this! In spite of the casual tone of the poem, which was written quite late in life, Bishop was no stranger to loss, having lost her parents at a very early age (her father when she was one and her mother, who was committed to an asylum, at the age of five). In 1967 her Brazilian lover Lota (Maria Carlota) de Macedo Soares, returning to patch up their relationship, committed suicide by overdosing on pills. Bishop then met Alice Methfessel around 1976, who became her lover and also a source of strength for the rest of her life. Here, in the poem, I don't know if there is a jokey play on father – farther, but the mother's watch has two meanings, surely. Her mother was no longer watching out for her.

I hesitate to put the following up in the company of such greats, but since we are all budding amateur poets inside our heads, and since trying to construct a villanelle is the best antidote I know to sleeplessness - here is my attempt at a villanelle (which over 2 or 3 nights sent me beautifully off to sleep). It is on the subject of my English grandmother.

She was called Bwenna, because my eldest cousin, Joanna, was born deaf, and 'Bwenna' was her best try at 'Granny'; the name stuck. We all loved Bwenna very much. Unlike our French grand'mère, who was clever, volatile, quite wilful, frugal (though quite wealthy) and always contradictory – we loved them both very much in different ways – Bwenna was gentle, non-judgemental, modest and extremely generous always, though she was not well-off.

I saw her for the last time in 1964 in a nursing home run by French nuns near Deal in England. My father took just me to see her - she was very sweet, humble and uncomplaining. Bwenna had been living on her own in a beautiful rural cottage in Leigh, Surrey, but her

daughters had decided to sell her cottage and move her into this nursing home nearer to where they lived. My father and I drove down from North Wales and I was very moved by the hopelessness of her existence, played out amongst kindly strangers she didn't know and with whom she found it difficult to talk. I found it hard to understand how my two aunts (my father's two elder sisters lived in the south of England, didn't work and they 'decided matters') could have thought this would be the best place for her last years, rather than taking her in to live with them, difficult though that might have been. Nowadays, probably, she could have had carers and been able to live longer in her own home. As far as I know, she was not ill and she was no trouble at all to anyone and she did not appear to be in need of nursing.

The Last Time I saw Bwenna

(For my English grandmother, Agnes Salmon, née Bowyer d.1965)

She now inhabited a simple room.
My father drove me down in '64
And never spoke about this final doom.

We passed a Breton sister in the gloom,
Who paused and pointed down the corridor -
For she inhabited a simple room.

The French nuns were at hand to nurse and groom;
They carefully folded sadness in the drawer
And never spoke about a final doom.

Her daughters chose – where else to stay? with whom?
The home was warm and there was tea to pour
And she inhabited a simple room.

The flowers beyond the window were in bloom;
A robin came for bread, just as before:
She never spoke about this final doom.

It hurt to leave her in that genteel tomb;
Her smile was gentle, but she knew the score:
She now inhabited a simple room
But never spoke against this final doom.

I would like to finish with a strange poem by Wiliam Empson, which has puzzled me over the years. It is NOT a villanelle, but it uses some of the same techniques of repetition. At university, of course, I read "*Seven Types of Ambiguity*", for which he is perhaps most famous. At Cambridge, he was a brilliant student of I.A. Richards, who had been pioneering a new sort of 'Practical Criticism' with his students. I.A. Richards had been talking about ambiguity in a tutorial one day; Empson went away and in only about 3 weeks had knocked up a whole book which became "*Seven Types of Ambiguity*". It became a sort of defining work for shaping new ideas about literary criticism.

Empson's own poetry plays a lot with ambiguity. The poem is ostensibly about a love affair he was having with a Japanese girl, which was interrupted by an earthquake at dawn.

This is why it is called “Aubade”. But the poem is about far more than just an interrupted night of love – it covers difficulties with transcultural (and trans-linguistic) relationships, with the coming war between Japan and China at the time, about where one’s place should be when the world is being turned literally and metaphorically upside down. I found a very helpful blog which I’ve reprinted after the poem for anyone who wants to tackle this most demanding, but also fascinating, poem in a deeper way.

Aubade (1940)

William Empson

Hours before dawn we were woken by the quake.
My house was on a cliff. The thing could take
Bookloads off shelves, break bottles in a row.
Then the long pause and then the bigger shake.
It seemed the best thing to be up and go.

And far too large for my feet to step by.
I hoped that various buildings were brought low.
The heart of standing is you cannot fly.

It seemed quite safe till she got up and dressed.
The guardest tourist makes the guide the test.
Then I said The Garden? Laughing she said No.
Taxi for her and for me healthy rest.
It seemed the best thing to be up and go.

The language problem but you have to try.
Some solid ground for lying could she show?
The heart of standing is you cannot fly.

None of these deaths were her point at all.
The thing was that being woken he would bawl
And finding her not in earshot he would know.
I tried saying Half an Hour to pay this call.
It seemed the best thing to be up and go.

I slept, and blank as that I would yet lie.
Till you have seen what a threat holds below,
The heart of standing is you cannot fly.

Tell me again about Europe and her pains,
Who’s tortured by the drought, who by the rains.
Glut me with floods where only the swine can row
Who cuts his throat and let him count his gains.
It seemed the best thing to be up and go.

A bedshift flight to a Far Eastern sky.
Only the same war on a stronger toe.
The heart of standing is you cannot fly.

Tell me more quickly what I lost by this,
Or tell me with less drama what they miss
Who call no die a god for a good throw,
Who say after two aliens had one kiss
It seemed the best thing to be up and go.

But as to risings, I can tell you why.
It is on contradiction that they grow.
It seemed the best thing to be up and go.
Up was the heartening and strong reply.
The heart of standing is we cannot fly.

I found this very helpful guide to the poem on Brian Edgar's blog on the internet.

> 'Aubade' is a poem about Empson's early-1930s affair with a Japanese girl called Haru. (Empson taught in Japan between 1931 and 1934.) It touches on the difficulties of cross-cultural relationships ('the language problem, but you have to try') and the problems posed by the coming war in Asia, which already seemed unavoidable.
>
> Empson remains – and will almost certainly always remain – the greatest ever foreign teacher of English in China. Those of us who have done the job in unimaginably easier conditions should look back with admiration and sometimes astonishment at this great pioneer.
>
> Note. Those who want the best account of his time in Kunming should consult John Haffenden's excellent biography, *William Empson, Volume 1: Among the Mandarins*.
>
> **Some notes on 'Aubade'**
>
> This is probably Empson's best poem – it's not as difficult as some of his earlier work but is full of his famous 'ambiguity'. It was written in Tokyo in about 1933, published in a journal in 1937 and then printed in the slightly shorter version given here in his second book of verse The Gathering Storm (1940).
>
> My notes offer some interpretations that are controversial – critics disagree as to many details.
>
> The general sense is clear: Empson and his Japanese lover are woken by an earthquake, and she says she must go back to the house where she is employed as a nanny, as the child might also have been woken up. This raises for Empson the issue as to whether or not his

relationship can survive: the earthquake becomes a symbol of the coming war between Britain and Japan, a war that would make his marriage to a Japanese citizen difficult or even dangerous..

Aubade {= dawn song. In this genre the poet laments the fact that the coming of dawn forces him and his lover to end their night of passion. The most famous example in English is in 'Romeo and Juliet'.}

Hours before dawn we were woken by the quake. {We = Empson and his lover, a young Japanese woman who worked as a nanny for the German Ambassador in Tokyo. She should have been looking after his child, but had left the house to spend the night with Empson. Behind this line is a hidden joke: lovers in the past are meant to have asked each other, 'Did the earth move for you, darling' – in other words, 'Was sex wonderful?' The phrase became a half-joking cliché, but in this poem sex is followed by a literal earthquake}
My house was on a cliff. The thing could take
Bookloads off shelves, break bottles in a row.
Then the long pause and then the bigger shake. {Symbolically we could say that the first quake was the Japanese attack on Manchuria, the 'bigger quake' that Empson fears is coming is all-out war in the Far East.}
It seemed the best thing to be up and go. {The first time we meet this refrain it has a simple and obvious meaning: as there's an earthquake it seems best to get out of the house.}

And far too large for my feet to step by. {The quake seems to large for him to avoid the dangers it creates.}
I hoped that various buildings were brought low. {He hopes that what is bad about the old order will have been destroyed by the quake – perhaps he means specifically the headquarters of Japanese militarism.}
The heart of standing is you cannot fly. {1) This is a sexual pun: it's hard to move fast when you have an erection! 2) It also means: maybe we should stand our ground and not try to flee the quake}

It seemed quite safe till she got up and dressed.
The guarded tourist makes the guide the test. {The cautious tourist notices what the guide does in a new situation. Here the guide is Haru, who is much more familiar with earthquakes than Empson.)
Then I said The Garden? Laughing she said No. {Empson believes that the Japanese advice is to go into the garden when there's a quake – Haru says it isn't. I've been told of an occasion on which Empson made fun of the idea that The Garden was a nightclub – but then why the capitals? Perhaps because it's a formal Japanese garden?}
Taxi for her and for me healthy rest.{Haru says no – she'll go back to the Ambassador's and he should go back to bed.}
It seemed the best thing to be up and go. (Haru thinks it's best she should leave.)

The language problem but you have to try. {Communication between people from different cultures and who speak different languages is

difficult, but you have to try to overcome these difficulties – in other words, he doesn't want her to go and he'll confront what he suspects is the real issue: that she wants to leave his bed.}
Some solid ground for lying could she show? {1) can she show him a safe place to lie down to get his 'healthy rest', given that the after-shocks of the earthquake will soon be shaking the ground? 2) what lie is she going to tell when she gets back if the Ambassador has discovered she's missing? 3) Empson suspects she is lying to him – so why? 4) 'can you show me a safe place for us to have sex' – Haffenden's preferred interpretation.}

The heart of standing is you cannot fly.

{She should stay.}

None of these deaths were her point at all. {People regularly died in Japanese earthquakes, but Haru wasn't worried about that possibility.}
The thing was that being woken he would bawl
And finding her not in earshot he would know. {She's worried that the child would also have been woken by the quake and when she didn't come in response to his tears he would know she had left the house and she'd get into trouble – this is Empson's own explanation, but some online sources wrongly claim 'he' is her husband or father.}
I tried saying Half an Hour to pay this call. {He asks her to come back in half an hour – or maybe to have sex with him quickly.}
It seemed the best thing to be up and go. {But she goes.}

I slept, and blank as that I would yet lie.
Till you have seen what a threat holds below,
The heart of standing is you cannot fly.

{*Three difficult lines: John Haffenden in his fine edition of Empson's poems points out that the primary meaning of 'threat holds below' is 'gap created by the earthquake' (p.321), so the second line is something like 'until you have assessed the continuing threat from the earthquake', but he acknowledges the possibility of sexual meanings too: 'I slept without dreams and wish I could remain unconscious until you understand the nature of my sexuality which you now feel threatens you'*
I think it might also mean 'until you see if the future is really going to be as bad as you think' – and this might be the immediate future, as Empson's house is on a cliff the Ambassador's residence is presumably 'below' his, so the threat is of discovery and punishment for her right away, or it might mean the general future of Japan.
So *'below' might mean: 1) the future which is now hidden; 2) Empson's genitals 3) the unconscious mind 4) the part of the city below the cliff ; 5) the gap created by the quake*).}
Tell me again about Europe and her pains, {He now thinks back to Europe and why he left it.}
Who's tortured by the drought, who by the rains. {Everyone there suffers some time or another.}

Glut me with floods where only the swine can row {Tell me all about the Depression, in which only those with the worst characters are prospering.}
Who cuts his throat and let him count his gains. {'The swine' lose out in real terms even if they make money – they kill themselves spiritually in order to make money.}
It seemed the best thing to be up and go. {It seemed best to leave Europe.}

A bedshift flight to a Far Eastern sky. {So he came to Asia – a new way of life and new lovers.}
Only the same war on a stronger toe. {But found the war he knew was coming in Europe was already present there – the Japanese attack on Manchuria began in 1931 – and 'stronger' because fighting had actually started.}
The heart of standing is you cannot fly. {So it's a waste of time trying to flee war – you might as well stay where you are.}

Tell me more quickly what I lost by this, {What did I lose by leaving Europe?}
Or tell me with less drama what they miss {'more quickly…with less drama' – than in the previous rather rhetorical stanza.)
Who call no die a god for a good throw, {Die = dice; people who refuse to 'pray' to the dice to give them the numbers they want. This line either refers to Empson himself in which case it means 'I have nothing to lose by being honest and accepting that a relationship with a Japanese woman won't work' or it refers to the British ex-pats who told Empson and other new arrivals: 'Don't marry a Japanese woman as we'll be at war with Japan in ten years'. If the line refers to Empson, refusing to call the dice a god is positive – it means 'being honest'; if it refers to the ex-pats it's more ambiguous: 'they're realistic but maybe it's good to deceive yourself in questions of love' .

However, Haffenden likes the suggestion of another commentator that 'die' means sex – orgasm used to be called 'the little death' and 'a good throw' means a satisfactory sex act. The line would then mean something like 'what do we lose if we like sex but don't make a god out of it?
Who say after two aliens had one kiss {Empson and Haru – technically Haru was not an 'alien', but the line means 'we were always alien to each other even when kissing – perhaps because of 'the language problem' – the difficulty of cross-cultural relationships.}
It seemed the best thing to be up and go. {The refrain now means 'most people would advise me to leave Haru not to marry her and perhaps they're right'.)

But as to risings, I can tell you why.
It is on contradiction that they grow.

{Multiple ambiguity! 1) 'male sexual desire (risings = erections) is stimulated by contradiction = cultural difference'; 2 'male sexual desire

is stimulated by arguments' – e.g. Haru 'contradicting' him as to what they should do when woken by the quake; 3) 'In my case a sexual relationship has come out of 'contradiction' of the advice not to have an affair with a Japanese woman'. 4)'Marx was right – it is social contradictions that lead to revolutions'. The fourth meaning is a general comment on the world political situation that makes their love so precarious}
It seemed the best thing to be up and go.

{In addition to the previous meanings the line now also means: 'That's why I had or at least wanted sex with Haru – 'up' means 'erection' again and 'go' now also suggests 'begin sexual activity'.}
Up was the heartening and the strong reply.
The heart of standing is we cannot fly.

{Haffenden in his biography of Empson claims that this last line means that Empson decides he has to leave Haru. This is certainly what happened in real life, but it's hard to see how not 'flying' means ending the affair, so my own interpretation is different: 'Haru agrees to sex and that means she doesn't go home and they shouldn't abandon their relationship'. This would mean that the 'we' refers to Empson and Haru. 'Up' would mean something like 'have an erection because I'm ready for sex now' or 'her reply made me have an erection'} or even 'my reply to all this and to Haru was to have an erection').

Here is a much shorter poem of Empson's I also like very much. It sort of backs up what I was thinking about the villanelle : that sometimes feelings, even very strong feelings *need* to be constrained. The short poem enacts this constraint (somewhat like a villanelle) in the face here of what seems to be depression and a desperate inability control what is going on in the world around and in the poet's head. Perhaps ambiguities and *contradictions* have piled themselves up too high ?

Let It Go

It is this deep blankness is the real thing strange.
The more things happen to you the more you can't
Tell or remember even what they were.

The contradictions cover such a range.
The talk would talk and go so far aslant.
You don't want madhouse and the whole thing there.