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Self-Imposed Fetters in Four Golden Age Villanelles*

FRANK J. KEARFUL

The villanelle enjoyed what the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* calls a golden age during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, when leading poets from Dylan Thomas to Elizabeth Bishop "ensured the villanelle's survival and status in English poetry" (Kane and French 1522) Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night," published in the literary magazine *Botteghe Oscure* in 1951 and a year later in his *Country Sleep and Other Poems*, will serve here as a reference point for a comparative study of three golden age villanelles by American poets: Theodore Roethke's "The Waking," from *The Waking: Poems 1933-1953* (1953); James Merrill's "The World and the Child," from *Water Street* (1962); and Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," from *Geography III* (1976).[1] My commentary on them stems from a paper I gave at the 2017 *Connotations* symposium on "Self-imposed Fetters" in literary texts and highlights how the four villanelles use the constraints of their form to address fears. Antithesis, paradox, prosody, syntax, and a pivotal turn in the terminal quatrain are all brought into play under the aegis of the villanelle's demanding form. Together they put the lie to what Milton once called "the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming," which "forces poets much to their own vexation, hindrance and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse than else they would have expressed them." [2] W. H. Auden argues just the opposite: "Blessed be all metrical rules that forbid automatic responses, / force us to have second thoughts, free from the fetters of Self" (856). Perhaps not coincidentally, Auden was the first

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major English-language poet to write an iambic pentameter villanelle, "If I could tell you so" (314), written in October 1940.

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"Do not go gentle into that good night" remains the gold standard for staunch adherence to the chain rhyming dictates of a villanelle, six stanzas rhyming A^1bA^2, abA^1, abA^2, abA^1, abA^2, abA^1A^2.[3] John Goodby surmises that Thomas chose the fetters of a villanelle "[t]o constrain the emotion of impending bereavement and pity for his father's suffering" (Thomas, *Collected Poems* 417), but that his villanelle was also "rooted in his own fear of death" (Goodby, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas* 395). Brett C. Millier makes a related observation about Bishop's "One Art": "each version of the poem [in the drafts] distanced the pain a little more, depersonalized it, moved it away from the tawdry self-pity and confession that Bishop disliked in many of her contemporaries" (241). Jonathan Ellis maintains that Bishop mastered "disaster" in her villanelle "not by ignoring feeling, but by placing formal controls on it," (23) and Lorrie Goldensohn argues along the same lines that in Bishop's published work "the more volcanic emotions required containment within the vessel of form; overtly autobiographical feeling is poured into sestinas or villanelles, cooled into rhyme" (59).

"Containment," with its associations of constraint, restraint, and control, has become a catchword for a period in American culture coterminous with the villanelle's golden age, thanks in the first instance to Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture*: *American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (1995), which evokes George F. Kennan's Cold War advocacy of a "containment" foreign policy toward the Soviet Union.[4] Golden age villanelles have their own "containment" policy and also ally themselves with the New Criticism's approach to a poem as a well-wrought urn, thereby shunning the prominence that confessionalism gave to the poet's ill-wrought psyche. This restraint does not rule out guarded access to childhood trauma, a

frequent concern of confessional poetry, which Merrill's villanelle centers on, Bishop's indirectly alludes to, and Roethke's transcends, while Thomas's keeps at bay a troubled emotional relationship with his father dating from childhood. His "Do not go gentle into that good night" generates much of its incantatory power by holding fast to its self-imposed fetters. All the rhymes are perfect rhymes; the refrain lines are repeated in their entirety word for word; and apart from some allowable substitutions in initial position and a pyrrhic foot, the iambic pentameter grid is religiously adhered to:

Do not go gentle into that good night,	A^1
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;	*b*
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	A^2
Though wise men at their end know dark is right,	*a*
Because their words had forked no lightning they	*b*
Do not go gentle into that good night.	A^1
Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright	*a*
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,	*b*
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	A^2
Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,	*a*
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,	*b*
Do not go gentle into that good night.	A^1
Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight	*a*
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,	*b*
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	A^2
And you, my father, there on the sad height,	*a*
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.	*b*
Do not go gentle into that good night.	A^1
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.	A^2

Thomas heightens the rhetorical impact of his villanelle by grafting onto its form the rhetorical structure of a priamel, which Race and Doak outline as consisting "of two basic parts: the foil and the climax. The function of the foil is to introduce and highlight the climatic term by enumerating or summarizing a number of other instances that then yield (with varying degrees of contrast or analogy) to the particular

point of interest or importance" (1107).[5] In Thomas's villanelle the tercets deliver instances of kinds of men who "do not go gentle into that good night" – wise men, good men, wild men, and grave men – which leads in the quatrain to the poem's real subject and occasion, "And you, my father" and *his* dying.[6] A villanelle's division into five tercets and a quatrain makes it an ideal vehicle for a priamel, as Bishop's "One Art" also demonstrates.

But to begin at the beginning, the A^1 and A^2 refrains of Thomas's opening tercet construct an antithesis, "night" coming on and "light" going out, with "day" lodged between them, which recapitulates in reverse order Genesis 1:3 (KJV): "God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night." The *a* rhymes work variations on the refrains in the succeeding tercets, while the *b* rhymes forge a rhyming chain of their own devising. Triadic abA^2 teamwork eventuates in the final tercet's felicitous lyric trio, "sight, gay, light." Thomas thus joins countless poets who have worked variations on the divine maker's primal creative act by reconfiguring the Genesis triad of "light," "day," and "night."[7]

Thomas's variations on the A^1 and A^2 refrains generate perfect rhymes for ritualized use in a choric accompaniment for a dying man: "night," "light," "right," "bright," "flight," "sight," which culminate in the quatrain's "on a sad height."[8] This rhyming sequence evokes the opening lines of Henry Vaughan's "The World": "I saw Eternity the other night / Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light, / All calm, as it was bright" (1: 131), but Thomas relates no such vision. His father's "going" into "a good night" would be made good, it would seem, by the father's rage in going there. Vaughan's poem "They are all gone into the world of light," rhyming in line 3 with "Their very memory is fair and bright" (2: 567), is too much bright light for Thomas. His oxymoron "blinding sight" instead evokes near-death visionary experience and the mythic figure of the blind seer. On a humbler biographical level, Thomas's father "went blind and was very ill before he died. He was in his eighties and he grew soft and gentle at the last."[9] The villanelle would have him reassert his by no means

gentle natural self, now that dying looms. Hence also the poet's prayer "Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears," which sonically brings to mind Donne's praise of fetters in metrical verse: "Griefe brought to numbers cannot be so fierce / For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse" (12). For Thomas it was not solely grief over impending bereavement that required "fetters," it was also the emotional impact dating from childhood of his vexed relationship with his father. Andrew Lycett records that D. J. Thomas "had difficulty showing his affection for his own offspring, later reportedly declining even to acknowledge them if he met them on the street" (19). After his father's death, Thomas's pain, more than he had expected, "came from how little he had been able to communicate with a man who had exercised such great influence over his life" (398).

But what will happen to the "day" lodged between opposing "night" and "light" in the inaugural tercet of Thomas's villanelle? Will it perhaps turn "gray" in the *b* rhyming chain it inaugurates, as in stanza 14 of Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis": "night," "day, "light," "gray"? In Thomas's quatrain the "day" ends with a good night prayer, "I pray." Chain rhyming can make its own choric sense, amplified by intertextual echoing of innumerable other poems, but it is only half the story of what sonically happens to the villanelle's "day." As an *ars moriendi* Thomas's villanelle distinguishes between a wrong way and a right way to "go," summed up in the antithesis "gentle" | "rage." The assonantal surge "age," "rave," "day" of the opening tercet's line two leads to "Rage, rage" at the outset of line three. It resumes in tercet 2 with "they," then assonance peaks successively in "rage": *they, wave, frail, bay, Rage, rage; late, way, Grave, blaze, gay, Rage, rage; pray, Rage, rage.* The "day" becomes a *dies irae.*

* * *

Writing under the pseudonym Winterset Rothberg, Theodore Roethke reviewed *Country Sleep and Other Poems* in the December 1952 issue of *Poetry* under the heading "One Ring-Tailed Roarer to Another" (184-

85). He and Thomas had struck up a friendship and admired each other's work, which is also reflected in his contribution to "Dylan Thomas: Memories and Recollections" in the January 1954 number of *Encounter*, where he writes: "I had come to think of him as a younger brother: unsentimentally, perhaps, and not protective as so many felt inclined to be—for he could fend for himself against male and female; but rather someone to be proud of, to rejoice in, to be irritated with, or even jealous of" (11).[10] Thomas mentions Roethke by mangled name in his jocular "Verse letter to Loren McIver and Lloyd Frankenberg": "must I strain this mousetrap until damndom boom, until theodore reothke's seize" (190). Roethke may or may not have been jealous of Thomas for getting there first with his villanelle, but he seems pretty clearly to have used it as a foil for "The Waking," which loosens the fetters to which Thomas's held fast. It nonetheless outdoes "Do not go gentle into that good night" in bravura use of paradox. Rage it leaves to Thomas. Roethke had already denounced his own in the title poem that opened his first collection, *Open House* (1941): "Rage warps my clearest cry / To witless agony" (*The Collected Poems* 3).

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.	A^1
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.	*b*
I learn by going where I have to go.	A^2
We think by feeling. What is there to know?	*a*
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.	*b*
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.	A^1
Of those so close beside me, which are you?	a
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,	b
And learn by going where I have to go.	A^2
Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?	*a*
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;	b
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.	A^1
Great Nature has another thing to do	*a*
To you and me; so take the lively air,	*b*
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.	A^2
This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.	*a*

What falls away is always. And is near. *b*
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow. A^1
I learn by going where I have to go. A^2

Thomas's opening tercet prescribes an art of dying, Roethke's affirms an art of living. Each declaration hinges, however, on a negation, Thomas's "do not," Roethke's "cannot." Thomas exhorts his father to brave fear of dying; Roethke assimilates fear of his own fate and thus, by extension, of where he will ultimately go, but his focus is on living with fear as an indwelling condition of the self, one which afflicted Roethke from childhood on. Breaking fear's mind-forged manacles is a recurrent theme of his, notably in "The Lost Son," where "Fear was my father, Father Fear" (53) locked in a chiasmus. According to his biographer and friend Alan Seager, "Ted very early acquired the burden of fears that haunted him the rest of his life" (162) beginning with his fraught relationship with his father, whom he loved and feared, and whose death was "the most important thing that ever happened to him" (104). Roethke suffered from manic-depression, and in connection with a hospitalization in 1959 Seager notes that "fear had always possessed him that he might be thrown into some institution and forgotten" (259). "Frightened" is the single word on an entire page in one of Roethke's notebooks.[11]

Antithesis engenders paradox and ambiguity in "The Waking," beginning with "I wake to sleep." Shall one take "to sleep" as an infinitive expressing purpose, "in order to sleep," perchance to dream as in Hamlet's fearful soliloquy on suicide (III.i.68)? Or better as a prepositional phrase, as in the Beatles song "Let it be": "I wake up to the sound of music," in accord with the rest of the poem, whose music becomes a "lively air." But how shall we take "I cannot fear" in line two, as an indicative statement of fact, or else as I do, a performative resolution bolstered by internal rhyme ("wake," "take," "I," "my"), polyptoton ("wake," "waking, "go," "going"), alliteration ("sleep," "slow," "feel," "fate," "fear"), and assonance ("sleep," "feel," "fear").

"Fear" begins its sonic metamorphoses in the reiterated internal rhyming of tercet 2, "I *hear* my being dance from *ear* to *ear*," which

plays on the idiom to grin or smile from ear to ear. In tercet 3 "there" off-rhymingly undermines "fear" in the prayer "God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there," perhaps not to disturb the dead but also with due natural reverence for "the lowly worm" that in tercet 4 "climbs up a winding stair," off-rhymingly sloughing off "fear." Its dark ascent anticipates Roethke's climbing in "In a Dark Time": "A fallen man, I climb out of my fear" (231).[12] Rosemary Sullivan does not specifically cite "The Waking," but suggests that Paul Tillich's concept of existential anxiety "lies behind the brooding fear" of several of Roethke's poems. She also explores Tillich's impact on Roethke's nature mysticism, to which one might add Roethke's "God bless the Ground!" as an evocation of Tillich's notion of divinity as the "Ground of Being" (Sullivan 127).[13] At the same time Roethke set off his blessing from Thomas's plea to his father, "Curse, bless, bless me now with your fierce tears," and he sheds no fear's tears.

Roethke's "I take my waking slow" issued in walking softly, but is sped by enjambment when he addresses a potential walking companion: "Great Nature has another thing to do / To you and me; so take the lively air, / And, lovely, learn by going where to go." The poem itself becomes a lively air in tune with the musical origins of the villanelle, while "lively" morphs into a "lovely" beloved directly addressed.[14] She may also learn by going where to go, but she need not go alone. Roethke employs the "come with me" / "go with me" motif of love poetry from Elizabethan pastoral to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* when the Don sings to Zerlina "Andiam, andiam, mio bene, / a ristorar le pene / d'un innocente amor!" (Act I, scene 3): "Let us go, let us go, my beloved, / to soothe the pangs / of an innocent love." (Mozart)[15].

"The Waking" also allies itself with the prototypical aubade in which lovers who have slept one good night together awake at dawn to birds singing a lively air as the sun rises, or as Roethke puts it in tercet 4, when "Light takes the Tree." "Takes" has erotic overtones and capitalized "Tree" suggests personification, specifically Daphne, who on the point of being "taken" by pursuing Apollo, god of light

and the sun, was turned into a tree (Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 1. 490-567). Aubade lovers like Romeo and Juliet lament the dawning of the light and the male's "going" that it entails, but Roethke's "lovely" need not worry about his leaving her when the sun rises, any more than Donne's must in "The Sun Rising" or "The Good Morrow." Roethke as poet-lover bids his lovely go with him. In the end he and she, subject to Great Nature's final dictate, will sleep an eternal night, but "learning to go where I have to go" also means learning how to live unfettered by fear.

Roethke's villanelle is not overtly autobiographical, but as a proto-epithalamion it chimes with Roethke's having fallen in love with Beatrice O'Connell in December, 1952 and their marrying on January 3, 1953. He was forty-four, she twenty-six and a former student whom he encountered serendipitously in New York on the way to giving a poetry reading, where she unbeknownst to him was also headed. "Of those so close beside me, which are you?" connects in tercet 3 with an incident recorded by Alan Seager: "That night [December 4, 1952] on the way to the reading, Beatrice O'Connell saw Ted crossing the street beside her. She said, 'Remember me?' Ted said, 'Hi, Puss,' and started going through his pockets to find a piece of paper so that he could write down her address. At last he asked, 'Where can I get in touch with you?' To see if he remembered her name, she said, 'I'm in the book.' She did not wait around after the reading as did friends and former students and this puzzled Ted" (205). Never mind, where there's a will there's a way, and within a couple of days Roethke was taking Beatrice out.

If "The Waking" were not a villanelle with a quatrain in store, the happy ending of the tercets would suffice: *Amor vincit omnia*. Perhaps the lovely whom the poet bids go with him becomes his muse. "The Waking" concludes *The Waking and Other Poems 1933-1953* (1953) but also heralds the sixteen love poems Roethke wrote for his next collection, *Words for the Wind* (1958), chiefly exuberant love lyrics inspired by his Beatrice, who made Roethke into a love poet.

The quatrain begins with a paradox, “This shaking keeps me steady,” a paradoxical stabilizing effect that Donne also affirms in his Holy Sonnet 19: “Those are my best days, when I shake with feare” (351). Trembling and shaking recur in Roethke’s poetry but so does steadiness, as in section 3 of “Meditation at Oyster River”: “I shift on my rock, and I think: / Of the first trembling of a Michigan brook in April,” which culminates in “And the whole river begins to move forward, its bridges shaking” (185). Shaking yes, but remaining steadfast. The full twenty-one-line passage symbolically enacts a psychic rebirth of the self, of spirit working, as water flows, going where it has to go.

The quatrain’s opening sentence, “This shaking keeps me steady,” places the poet’s utterance in a here and now, which I construe as the fictive present time of his writing of the poem, hand perhaps shaking as he writes. Fear has not disappeared, but is becoming mastered in and through an act of writing, writing “this” villanelle. “I should know” completes the iambic pentameter line, its full-stop caesura throwing extra emphasis on “I,” in the sense of “If anybody, *I* should know” as opposed to “I ought to know but don’t.” One might take this as poetic bragging: only a poet harried by fear can know the satisfaction of assimilating fear in and through the act of writing.

Roethke’s splitting of a potential sentence by another full-stop period in the following line throws extra emphasis on the first “is” and posits a mutability/perpetuity paradox formulated in a chiasmus: “What falls *away is*. And *is near*.” Fear has “fallen away” by off-rhyming in the tercets, but off-rhyming is also near rhyming, and hence fear remains near. Writing may be a way of managing fear, but not annihilating it. How near the poet’s ultimate destination, “going where I have to go,” may be doesn’t trouble him, as opposed to Andrew Marvell in “To his Coy Mistress,” who uses the same “hear / near” rhyme for his *carpe diem* argument: “But at my back I always hear / Time’s winged chariot hurrying near” (82). Roethke is content to reiterate his opening refrain lines as an *ars vivendi* in the terminal couplet. Later in “The Far Field” he will himself approach death with

an echo of "The Waking": "I am renewed by death, thought of my death, / The dry scent of a dying garden in September, / The wind fanning the ash of a low fire. / What I love is near at hand, / Always, in earth and air" (195).[16]

* * *

James Merrill wrote only obliquely of his private life and childhood in his first two collections, *First Poems* (1951) and *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959), but they feature prominently in *Water Street* (1962), where, as J. D. McClatchy notes, "more than half the poems [...] are concerned with childhood, with family or domestic scenes" (250). In a volume whose tutelary genius is Proust, directly addressed in "For Proust," "The World and the Child" recreates what David Lehman calls "that most primal of Proustian scenes, 'the child awake and wearied of,' stoical in the dark bedroom while parents and others in the room below talk about him" (38). Stephen Yenser finds the villanelle indeed "too close to its inspiration" in its recreation of "the child's bedtime drama at having to separate from a parent" (81). His in effect making the child the agent of the separation rather than the father reflects his development in the villanelle from traumatized victim to self-assertive critic.

Parents in Merrill's villanelle are assimilated into impersonal "people" whose correlations with Merrill's actual parents are not spelled out. His father, Charles E. Merrill, was the co-founder of Wall Street's most prestigious brokerage, Merrill Lynch; he left his second wife, Merrill's mother, in order to marry a third. The divorce was finalized in 1939, when James turned thirteen. His biographer Langdon Hammer records that as a teenager he "was still freshly wounded from his parents' divorce, after which he'd sided with his injured mother. [. . .] His home was 'broken': it was lost. Poetry and love both seemed like ways to create a more beautiful and durable one" (ix-x). Homes and rooms became salient motifs in his work signaled by the title *Water*

Street, alluding to a new home at Water Street 107 in Stonington, Connecticut that Merrill shared with his partner David Jackson. In Merrill's next collection, *Nights and Days* (1966), he works seven variations on sonnet form in a sequence that looks back from an adult's distanced and often ironical perspective on "The Broken Home." His volume *The Inner Room* (1988) evokes the inner resonance that rooms poetically acquire. The opening of his 1982 essay "Acoustical Chambers" had intimated much the same: "Interior spaces, the shape and correlation of rooms in a house, always appealed to me," and then Merrill cites "a childhood bedroom" (*Collected Prose* 3). Twenty years earlier he summoned up another in "The World and the Child":

Letting his wisdom be the whole of love, A^1
The father tiptoes out, backwards. A gleam *b*
Falls on the child awake and wearied of, A^2

Then, as the door clicks shut, is snuffed. The glove- *a*
Gray afterglow appalls him. It would seem *b*
That letting wisdom be the whole of love A^1

Were pastime even for the bitter grove *a*
Outside, whose owl's white hoot of disesteem *b*
Falls on the child awake and wearied of. A^2

He lies awake in pain, he does not move, *a*
He will not scream. Any who heard him scream *b*
Would let their wisdom be the whole of love. A^1

People have filled the room he lies above. *a*
Their talk, mild variation, chilling theme, *b*
Falls on the child. Awake and wearied of A^2

Mere pain, mere wisdom also, he would have *a*
All the world waking from its winter dream, *b*
Letting its wisdom be. The whole of love A^1
Falls on the child awake and wearied of. A^2

The opening tercet upsets expectations of how a villanelle "ought" to begin based on Thomas's and Roethke's precedents, where stark

opposites (night/light, slow/go) form refrains. The perfect antithesis of "love" would be "hate," but Merrill chooses a mere function word whose frequent "weak" schwa pronunciation [*uv*] might serve as a rhyme, but love is not love when it thus dwindles into the flaccid iamb that ends line one, "of love." Letting anything be the "whole of love" is suspect enough, but even more so when subordinated to a self-proclaimed "wisdom." When "of" recurs later as the climactic word of the tercet, it acquires by position its "strong" [*awv*] vocalic pronunciation in concord with the *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary*: "The strong form is usually found only in final position (*e.g.* 'She's the one I'm fond of,' though it can occur initially in some forms such as 'Of the ten who set out, only three returned'" (347).[17] Metrically "of" is also in a now quite strongly stressed position. Indeed the entire participial phrase "wearied of" is emphatic, decisive, and where the whole tercet has been heading to as its thematic and rhetorical climax.

Making "love" and "of" his refrain rhymes left Merrill with few legitimate options for *a* rhymes to follow. He eschews potentially indelicate "shove," ignores "dove," perhaps ponders over "Pavlov," then first goes for "glove-," a hyphenated perfect rhyme with "love" that preserves the decasyllabic syllable count, as Marianne Moore might have in her syllabic verse. He follows up "glove-" with "grove" and "move" sight rhymes on "love," before winding up the tercets with the perfect rhyme "above." In the quatrain we will encounter "have," a mere consonantal echo of "love," and precisely what the child does not have, until the quatrain bestows it on him.

The tercets of the three other villanelles are self-contained syntactic units sealed off by a full-stop period, and the first tercet of "The World and the Child" seems to promise the same. All that it would need as we read the tercet is a period after "of," but instead a comma extends what might have been a complete sentence. So much depends upon a comma. The reader must visually press on across intervening white space before encountering a "Then," followed by another comma, followed by an adverbial subordinate clause, "as the door clicks

shut." But not the pentameter line, which still requires an iamb that perforce must begin a new sentence. That is where "The glove-" comes in. All this playing off of meter, stanza, and syntax creates a gracefully measured momentum, while "Then, as" imitates a storyteller's creation of narrative suspense in a children's bedtime story.

Initial trochaic substitution is par for the course in iambic pentameter verse, as in "Letting" and "Falls on." Not so trochaic substitution in the fourth foot of line two of tercet 2, made all the more contrary to metrical expectations by caesuras before and after it: "The father tiptoes out, backwards. A gleam." Merrill was a metrical virtuoso, and the father exits "backwards" in sync with a "backwards" iamb: "The *fa*ther *tip*toes *out*, *back*wards," backlit by a gleam emanating from a partially opened door until it "clicks shut," as a jail door might.[18] The gleam is like a candle "snuffed," but an "afterglow," a dying of the light, briefly remains as an eidetic image that "appalls" the child, leaving him dismayed and afraid less of the dark than of abandonment.[19]

The second tercet gives way via cross-stanza enjambment to the third, where no gentle goodnight is to be heard either from the "bitter grove / Outside," only an "owl's white hoot of disesteem," which is at least how the child interprets what he hears coming from a "bitter grove," sonically not far distant from a bitter grief. The owl in question may well be an *Athena noctua*, Athena's night owl and symbol of wisdom, whose proper abode is her pleasant and sacred grove. Here it becomes bitter as the owl seems in the child's ears to hoot the same "wisdom" that the father made the whole of love.

The fourth tercet, the only one self-contained, slows the pace, Merrill beginning it with curt asyndeton: "He lies awake in pain, he does not move, / He will not scream." The child's adamantly withheld "scream" is repeated at the end of line two, "Any who heard him scream," doubling its volume in the *b* chain rhyme: *gleam, seem, disesteem, scream, scream.* This mute screaming marks the beginning of a rebellion, a stoic self-assertion in the face of what the child and the

poet know: "Any that heard him scream / Would let their wisdom be the whole of love." The child has acquired his own bitter wisdom.

The final tercet's opening sentence localizes the uncaring "Any": "People have filled the room he lies above." Their muffled talk sounds to the child like a "mild variation" on the "chilling theme" of the white owl's dissing "disesteem," expressed now as mere disinterest in him, which may again be taken as an aural figment of a traumatized child's imagination. One might also begin at this point, if one has not before, to read "The World and the Child" in surrealist and musical terms of a chilling theme and variations along lines that J. D. McClatchy suggests: "it is one of the few villanelles to include a convincing dramatic narrative—and the gradual amplification of its thematic terms (wisdom, love, pain) give it a haunting nearly surreal quality, like certain songs by Mahler" (280).

What comes as a surprise in this fifth tercet is how the A^2 refrain line breaks off half way through, "Falls on the child." Merrill's interpolation of a mid-line period obliges the second half of the refrain to begin a new sentence requiring more cross-stanza enjambment:

> Falls on the child. *Awake and wearied of*
>
> Mere pain, mere wisdom also, he would have
> All the world waking from its winter dream,
> *Letting its wisdom be.*

Curiously enough the new sentence that began with the second half of the A^2 refrain ends with the beginning of the A^1 refrain (both italicized here for clarity's sake).[20] This fissuring and redistribution of the refrain halves makes the child no longer a grammatical object "wearied of," instead a grammatical subject who is wearied of both spondaic "*Mere pain*" and thrice heavily stressed "*mere wis*dom *al*so." The quatrain echoes the fourth tercet's "He lies awake in pain," now intensified as "Mere pain." For the child the pain experienced is "mere" in the older sense of "pure, unadulterated," from Latin *merus* = "pure." The child is no less wearied, however, of the father's "mere wisdom," which invites us to take "mere" as "paltry," "meager." Letting his

"mere" wisdom be the "whole" of love doesn't say much for the father's love. The Beatles song "Let it be" again comes to mind and its Mother Mary in an "hour of darkness. [...] Speaking words of wisdom, let it be / Let it be, let it be, let it be." There was no mother to speak words of wisdom to the villanelle's child in his hour of darkness. Perhaps she is among "People" in the room below along with the father, who has left one room for another.

The tercets' debunking of the father's "wisdom" broadens in the quatrain thanks to a pronoun change in the A^1 refrain from "his" to the world and "its" wisdom, which summons up biblical associations such as "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (1 Corinthians 3:19, KJV). Then there is that devious exemplar of the wisdom of this world, "Mr. Worldly Wiseman," whom Christian encounters in Bunyan 's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (17-19). Beginning with its title, "The World and the Child" has set the child at odds with the world, and he now sovereignly dismisses "the chilling theme" of tercet 5 as merely a "winter dream" from which he would have "All the world waking [...] / Letting its wisdom be."

The villanelle still awaits completion in the quatrain's terminal couplet, where we expect a simple repetition of the A^1 and A^2 refrain lines:

> Letting his wisdom be the whole of love,
> Falls on the child awake and wearied of.

Something has gone horribly wrong, or wonderfully right. The refrain lines could never have made semantic or syntactic sense in a terminal couplet if Merrill had not fractured and transposed the resultant half lines to begin new sentences. The only possible sentence which might end the villanelle is left to perform its task:

> The whole of love
> Falls on the child awake and wearied of.

The love withheld by the father and the world falls, as if from heaven, upon the child, but it is Merrill's technical wizardry that has arranged this miracle to occur before our eyes. From the outset he has been

using full stop caesuras and enjambment to distract us from what he has been doing by shuffling the fetters of this villanelle.

* * *

When asked in a 1978 interview whether she had ever written poems that were "gifts" which "seemed to write themselves," Elizabeth Bishop replied: "Oh yes. Once in a while it happens. I wanted to write a villanelle all my life but never could. I'd start them but for some reason never could finish them. And one day I couldn't believe it—it was like writing a letter" ("The Art of Poetry No. 27").[21] Horace wrote his *ars poetica* as a verse epistle, but did not claim the art of poetry was easy to master. Work on your drafts for nine years he advises. It could take Bishop more years to finish a poem, twenty-five for "The Moose" being her personal best, but "One Art" took only a couple of months for the sixteen drafts that Alice Quinn provides facsimiles of (225-40). From the second draft onward she chose the fetters of a villanelle to engage with her fear of losing a beloved, which gives a twist to Jean Passerat's "J'ay perdu ma Tourterelle" ("I have lost my turtledove"), a villanelle more about seeking a beloved already lost. Written in 1574 and published in 1606, Passerat's was the first villanelle composed in its modern nineteen-line rhyming form, albeit in heptasyllabics. William Empson's 1930s decasyllabic forays included "Missing Dates," which delineates an art of losing dishearteningly difficult to master: "It is the poems you have lost, the ills / From missing dates, at which the heart expires. / Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills" (79). Thomas wrote a parody of an Empson villanelle in 1942,[22] a year after Auden wrote "If I could tell you so."

Eleanor Cook proposes that Bishop's villanelle "grows out of an echo from Emily Dickinson about forgetting: "Knows how to forget! / But could It teach it? / Easiest of Arts, they say, / When one learn how."[23] Dickinson's "they say" and qualification "When one learn"

suggest that her one art is not so easy after all. The same turns out to be true of Bishop's art of losing:

The art of losing isn't hard to master;	A^1
so many things seem filled with the intent	*b*
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.	A^2
Lose something every day. Accept the fluster	*a*
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.	*b*
The art of losing isn't hard to master.	A^1
Then practice losing farther, losing faster:	*a*
faces, and names, and where it was you meant	*b*
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.	A^2
I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or	*a*
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.	*b*
The art of losing isn't hard to master.	A^1
I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,	*a*
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.	*b*
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.	A^2
——Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture	*a*
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident	*b*
the art of losing's not too hard to master	A^1
though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.	A^2

Bishop's opening tercet positions "master" and "disaster" as A^1 and A^2 refrain rhymes with "intent" lodged betwixt them, intimating at least an intent to master disaster that at the end of the *b* rhyming chain will become "evident." Bishop does not use the word "master" elsewhere, but Bonnie Costello remarks that she "concerned herself, throughout her career, with questions of mastery—artistic, personal, and cultural. Her poems portray both the desire for mastery and the dangers and illusions to which such desire is prone" (*Elizabeth Bishop* 10). The "master" / "disaster" rhyme is not, however, Bishop's private property. Auden used it plus a mid-line "art" in "Letter to Lord Byron": "So long as he can style himself the master: / Unluckily for art, it's a

disaster" (101)[24] and in "Musée des Beaux Arts" he played off "Masters" and "disaster" in the first and second verse paragraphs (179). 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" (117).[25]

The opening tercet hinges, like Thomas's "do not" and Roethke's "I cannot," on a negation, in fact two, "isn't" and "no," which burgeon in the following tercets and the quatrain into *isn't, none, isn't, None, isn't, wasn't, shan't, not.* Repetition and variation are also at work in Bishop's uses of polyptoton and other grammatical shifts of the same word: "losing" is repeatedly a gerund except for one key transformation into a participle in the quatrain; "lost" is both an adjective and an indicative verb; and "lose" is an imperative verb. To these add *loved, lovely, love* in tercets four/five and *love* in the quatrain. Positioned at the head of the quatrain's line two, "I love" climaxes a sequence of line-openings that tells all: "I lost," "I lost," "I miss," "I love."

A catalogue in tercet 2 of things lost as if by their own intent starts with something relatively trivial, lost door keys, which precipitates an amusing feminine off rhyme, "fluster" / "master." As for the "hour badly spent," an hour isn't a life and "lost" door keys are found often enough. Tercet 3 sets off disyllabic trochaic words against the normative iambic grid as syncopated practical advice, "Then *prac*tice *los*ing *farther, los*ing *fast*er," like a steam engine chugging, picking up speed as in the children's didactic exemplum "The Little Engine that Could." The loss of "places, and names, and where it was you meant / to travel" is aggravating when memory falters, but truly "None of these will bring disaster." "Losing farther" in tercet 3, where "losing further" might be expected, is close enough to "losing father" without actually uttering it. Tercet 4 alters the brisk pace and playful tone thus far in a curt opening sentence that employs an "I" for the first time: "I lost my mother's watch." A greater loss for Bishop came at age five when her mother was committed permanently to a mental asylum, never having recovered from the loss of her husband, who died when

Bishop was eight months old. Citing circumstantial indications from other poems, Heather Treseler identifies "a pun on both a lost time-piece and the traumatic loss of maternal 'watch' or care" (90-91). As for Bishop's exclamation "And look! my last, or / next-to-last, of three loved houses went," Thomas Travisano observes, "given her life-long search for home, Bishop's loss of her White Street house in Key West, her dispossession of that beloved residence in Samambaia, and her renunciation of the meticulously renovated Casa Mariana are losses that she could at best only struggle to dismiss" (370). Her "last, or / next-to-last house" was a condominium at Lewis Wharf in Boston, where she died of a cerebral aneurysm on October 6, 1979.

In the chancy *b* rhyming chain "intent" was quickly "spent" in the second tercet, doggedly returned in the third as "meant," but "went" in the fourth, then expands into trisyllabic "continent" in the final tercet's ominous abA^2 triadic chorus: *continent*, *vaster*, *disaster*. The overall progression of losing in "One Art" has been toward expansion, lost door keys become two houses lost, an hour badly spent turns into a lost watch, and realms become a continent, in biographical contexts South America. Bishop lived in Brazil for some fifteen years with Lota de Macedo Soares, whom Bishop later lost forever when she committed suicide. The "two cities" might point to Rio de Janeiro and Ouro Preto, where Bishop and she had resided; the "two rivers" suggest the Amazon and the Tapajós, the "two great rivers" in her travel poem "Santarém"; while "some realms" brings to mind Keats's "Much have I traveled in the realms of gold," which inaugurates "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and its accompanying "Cortez" allusion.[26]

The A^1 refrain withstood verbally unchanged the tercets' mounting examples of losing but teeters in the quatrain, "The art of losing's not too hard to master." The final link in the *b* rhyming chain makes "evident" that the rhetorical "intent" of the villanelle has been from the outset the formation of a priamel. Like Thomas's "And you, my father," Bishop's employs a direct address to a *you*, "—Even losing you," which divulges the real subject and occasion of the villanelle, a harrowing fear of losing "you," identifiable biographically with Alice

Methfessel, Bishop's late love, whose surname derives from the German noun "Fessel" = "fetter."[27] Emotionally Bishop had become happily "fettered" to the much younger Methfessel. Using "parenthesis," a typographical formation of fetters, Bonnie Goldensohn gets to for Bishop the heart of matter: "After invoking loss incrementally through keys, then houses, then continents, and then simply, as 'you,' we arrive at the ultimate disaster with its portrait of the beloved protectively wrapped in parenthesis: 'losing you (the joking voice, a gesture / I love)'" (33).

Such fetters are in a sense preserved when "losing" in the participial phrase "—Even losing you" changes from a previously generalizing gerund into a participle grammatically attached to a subject "I" and its attendant direct object, "you," as if by a magnet: "—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture / I love) I." This fortuitous "you, I" dyad, enclosing the parenthesis and hence the beloved, insinuates a yearned for "we."[28]

Grammar also comes to the fore in that contracted, future perfect indicative rare bird "I shan't have lied," whose threatening futurity resides in the participial phrase taken as an agitated conditional ("if I were to lose you"). All depends on what the "you" will or will not do. Thus understood, the priamel's climax, with its strategically placed pathos, is a rhetorical performance whose end is persuasion of the "you" not to leave the speaker. The villanelle becomes an art of not losing.

What tests it at the end is the form of the villanelle itself, which gives disaster the last word. A cavalcade of six "I" utterances begun in tercet 3 reaches an assonantal climax, "like (*Write* it!) like," the personal pronoun "I" now sonically merging with the imperative verb "*Write*" urged on by assonantal "like," like." The second "like" resumes an effort, after the poet's mental aside to herself, to write the villanelle where it has to go metrically to complete its appointed task, formally and rhetorically.

Parenthesis, italics, and an exclamation mark underscore "(*Write* it!)" as an emphatic trochaic phrase lodged within the iambic metrical

grid, which I render in boldface for metrical accents: "though **it** may **look** like (***Write*** it!)." The mental aside over, the feminine iambic line is now ready to continue on: "though **it** may **look** like (***Write*** it!) dis**as**ter." But it doesn't. The poet's fictive act of writing the line to its appointed end prompts her to write "like" all over again, picking up and repeating where she left off, this time putting "like" in a metrically stressed position: "though **it** may **look** like (***Write*** it!) **like** dis**as**ter." The metrical line does not turn into a disaster, instead the second "like," now stressed, facilitates Bishop's metrically mastering what merely looks *like* looming disaster.[29]

* * *

A villanelle is inevitably a kind of game requiring a poet's witty mastery of its strict rules, but few villanelles are more than that. How many would one wish to come back to again and again over the years, becoming ever more fully responsive to them? For poet-critic Don Paterson there aren't any: the "villanelle is best passed over in silence. […] Indeed its best-known example is one of the silliest poems I know, Dylan Thomas's 'Do not go gentle into that good night'" (694). Poet-critic Robert Hass is more upbeat and grants that the villanelle form "has produced at least these four quite powerful poems" (194) the Thomas, Roethke, and Bishop villanelles that I discuss plus "The House on the Hill" by the American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson, written in iambic trimeter and published in 1903 (cf. Hass 194).[30] I would not disparage, however, the reading pleasures offered by the roughly 300 other villanelles in the well-conceived Finch and Mali anthology. Silver age villanelles, which take the lion's share of villanelles on offer, can be classified for the most part as entertaining comic light verse, topped by Anita Gallers' hilarious parody "One Fart" (Finch 190), which I do come back to when feeling flatulent:

The fart, amusing, isn't hard to master.
Let loose despite your efforts and intent
to stop or hide it, it is no disaster.

Just let one rip like a repeating blaster—
no need to make it into an event.
The fart, amusing, isn't hard to master.

No matter if the smell could take the plaster
off the ceiling, make the milk ferment,
bring tears and coughs. It's hardly a disaster.

In fact, give it a push. It'll go faster,
louder, funnier – more expedient. The fart,
amusing, isn't hard to master.

Make it resound, its echo ever vaster;
let freedom ring across the continent!
Repression, not release, is the disaster.

So feel no shame. Make no embarrassed gesture.
Be proud, and laugh. It's evident
The fart, amusing, isn't hard to master
though it may sound and smell like a disaster.

So much for self-imposed fetters.

Universität Bonn

NOTES

[1]My golden age villanelle quotations are from Thomas, *Collected Poems* 193; Roethke, *Collected Poems* 104; Merrill, *Collected Poems* 147; Bishop, *Poems*, *Prose*, *and Letters* 198. Other verse quotations are from the same editions.

[2]From Milton's note on "The Verse," procured by the printer for the fourth issue of the first edition of *Paradise Lost* to answer readers "troubled why the poem rhymes not" (51). Milton was not averse to rhyme elsewhere in his work, but in his epic "[t]he measure is English heroic verse without rhyme, as that of Homer in Greek, and of Virgil in Latin" (54).

[3]See the entry on "Chain Rhyme" by Brogan and Chang in *The Princeton Encyclopedia* which includes *terza rima,* the villanelle, and other schemes of interlocking stanzas or lines (220).

[4]See more specifically Axelrod, "Elizabeth Bishop and Containment Policy."

[5]See also Race, *Classical Genres* 35-55 and on Thomas's priamel specifically 93-94.

[6]Goodby notes that "[t]he four central tercets follow part five of Yeats's 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', which ironically mocks, in turn, the 'great', the 'wise', the 'good' and finally 'mockers' themselves" (*Discovering Dylan Thomas* 226).

[7]The Genesis triad of "light," "day, and "night" is reconfigured, for example, by Swinburne's "Sestina" from stanza to stanza, always with "delight," even as God found his creation "good." Byron uses "night," "bright," "light" accompanied by assonance in the opening *ababab* stanza of "She Walks in Beauty": "night" / "skies" / "bright" / "eyes"/ "light" / "denies." The opening and closing quatrains of Blake's "The Tyger" employ "bright" / "night" as dichotomous *aa* rhymes reinforced by assonantal "eyes." A decade before Thomas's villanelle Roethke rhymed "night," "sight," "bright," "light," "night" in his "Night Journey" (*The Collected Poems* 32), and later in "The Dying Man" he links "staring at perpetual night" with "until my dark is bright," and then "a dying light" with "the long night" (*The Collected Poems* 149, 150). Two silver age villanelles fiddle with Thomas's "night, light" refrains by adding a syllable. Jacqueline Osherow's "Villanelle for the Middle of the Night" uses "night" / "house" / "streetlight." What will rhymingly happen to or in the house, stationed between the night and a streetlight as if in an Edward Hopper painting? Suzanne Gardinier's villanelle "Tonight" (1987) plays off "light" and "tonight," making us wonder what will happen tonight.

[8]Goodby relates "on the sad height" to "the predicament of Lear and Gloucester in *King Lear* and of Christ on Calvary (reversing the trope of the early poems, by which God the Father is seen as having betrayed the Son into crucifixion)" (*Discovering Dylan Thomas* 227).

[9]Revealed by Thomas during a reading in America; qtd. in *The Collected Poems* 417.

[10]Alan Seager writes of the two poets' friendship and admiration of each other's work in *The Glass House* 192-93, 199-200, 203-05, 213-14.

[11]Recorded undated by Seager 162. From a 1944 notebook Seager quotes "For ten years I played roaring boy when I was really frightened boy" (165), and from 1945, "Afraid? Why, hell, I've been afraid all my life—dogs, thunder, my cousin ..." (165).

[12]Compare Robert Lowell's later "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts": "The meeting house remembered! / You stood on stilts in the air, / but you fell from your parish. / 'All rising is by a winding stair,'" (355). Lowell quotes from Sir Francis Bacon's essay "Of Great Place" (see Bacon 36) and in a preceding stanza records when Bacon "fell" (Lowell 353). Lowell draws on his central trope of falling, rising, standing, reversing it here. In "Jordan (I)" George Herbert asks critically with regard to poetry: "Is all good structure in a winding stair?" (200).

Roethke brings down to earth Yeats's high-flown "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*: "*My Soul.* I summon to the ancient winding stair; / Set all your mind upon the steep ascent" (Yeats 284). Ronald E. McFarland identifies the Bacon source, refers to "George Herbert's poetry" and "one of Yeats's several winding stairways" (91).

[13]For Tillich's influence on Roethke and his mysticism see 105, 117, 126, 140, 183. Seager attests to Roethke's being "specially interested in reading the works of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr" (202). In his classic *The Courage to Be,* Tillich adverts to fear (see 34-38, 72-73).

[14]Kane and French emphasize the villanelle's evolution as song (see 1521). See also Annie Finch's "Dancing with the Villanelle" preface to *Villanelles*, eds. Finch and Mali (18) for the villanelle's simultaneous origins in dance.

[15]Compare Elizabethan pastoral versions in Christopher Marlowe, "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love," Sir Walter Ralegh, "The Nymph's reply to the Shepherd," and John Donne, "The Bait." T. S. Eliot's Prufrock is no Don Juan or scheming Elizabethan shepherd, but he "sings" his own love-song invitation, "Let us go then, you and I," composed in heptasyllabic song meter (5).

[16]Compare another juxtaposition of this passage from "The Far Field" and "The Waking" in Bowers 166.

[17]My simplified phonetic transcriptions are intentionally very different from the arcane IPA symbols.

[18]Or as a dredge might: "Click. Click. Goes the dredge, / and brings up a dripping jawful of marl" (59) in Elizabeth Bishop's earlier "The Bight," with a play on "bite." Bishop rhymed "jawful" and "awful." Merrill was a friend of Bishop's and I expect awaited her chuckling at his sonic allusion. Angela Leighton keeps an ear out for "click" (albeit not in Bishop or Merrill) in *Hearing Things* 46.

[19]The gleam reappears as a simile in "The Broken Home," which begins "Crossing the street, / I saw the parents and the child / At their window, gleaming like fruit / With evening's mild gold leaf" (Merrill, *Collected Poems* 197). Lines 5-8 evoke "the room he lies above" in the villanelle: "In a room on the floor below, / Sunless. cooler—a brimming / Saucer of wax, marbly and dim— / I have lit what's left of my life." In lines 11-12 "The flame quickens. The word stirs" and becomes "a tongue of fire."

[20]It's perhaps worth noting on the wing that the new sentence harks back to Roethke's "The Waking," in which wisdom is acquired by "going where I have to go.

[21]Alice Quinn's collection of Bishop's drafts, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box,* includes a facsimile of one aborted villanelle, titled determinedly "Villanelle," consisting of eleven unrhymed lines followed by "etc., etc." (34).

[22]"Request to Leda (Homage to William Empson)," *Collected Poems* 129.

[23]Franklin ed. no. 391, qtd. Cook 240. Angela Leighton suggests it is "just possible that Bishop was recalling a passage from Robert Hitchens' racing send-up of Victorian aestheticism published in 1894: *The Green Carnation.* Mr. Amarinth,

recognizably Oscar Wilde, declares at one point: 'My temper and my heart are the only two things that I never lose! Everything else vanishes. I think the art of losing things is a very subtle art. So few people can lose anything really beautifully'" (*On Form* 248).

[24]Costello, "Auden's Influence" 38, notes Bishop's echo.

[25]Ravintihiran devotes a paragraph to interrelations of the Hopkins stanza and Bishop's writing of "One Art" (206).

[26]The Keats association is mine, the others Axelrod's in "Bishop, History, and Politics" 40. Axelrod examines how "One Art" "conflates Bishop's personal sense of 'losing' with a global history of master and disaster and with the fear of defeat that haunts every colonial and military project" (39-40).

[27]Marshall recounts biographical details (270-78). Methfessel considered marrying but gave up the idea. After Bishop's death in 1979 she became her literary executrix.

[28]I mean to invoke here interpretive perspectives of Bonnie Costello's *The Plural of Us*, which comments only incidentally on Bishop and cites only "The Moose" (7).

[29]McCabe emphasizes the gradual acquisition of mastery through the act of writing the drafts: "Bishop wrote at least seventeen drafts of 'One Art' before she considered it written. Not surprisingly the act of writing is a focal concern of the poem [...] It is only in the process of 'writing it' that Bishop can face the catastrophic losing of a love, though the drafts do not foresee surviving such an event" (33).

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