

Robert B. Shaw

On the Death of Wilmer Mills

This bruise discoloring my upper arm
came, as most of them do, quite by surprise,
bumping into a post or someone's elbow.
The run-in shows itself beneath the skin,
the busy lymph collected in a pond
of beige and gray, paling to feathered edges.
It pays witness to the world's buffetings,
and at a touch recalls its birth in pain.

Just so with this imponderable event.
Decades too soon, disheartening to grasp,
your death has put its mark upon the mind,
a thought that lingers, waking to itself
with each recurrent impact of your absence,
a pain unfinished now that yours is finished.

Two Villanelles

(Plus a Couple More)

I

For poets writing in English, certain imported verse forms are tantalizing challenges that more often than not become pretexts for embarrassment. Except for the thoroughly domesticated sonnet, forms deriving from Italian and French have gained only a tentative foothold in our poetry. Triolets and rondeaus are scarce enough to be viewed as stunts. The vogue for the sestina, noticeable in the late twentieth century, has somewhat subsided, retreating into the MFA workshops that gave it much of its impetus. The villanelle is in a somewhat similar condition. As with the sestina, the ratio of successful to unsuccessful examples is dispiriting.

For those averse to symmetry and impatient with predetermined structures, the villanelle must be a nightmare; even those favorably disposed toward such things may find reading an uninspired example irritating in the extreme. And there is more than one way for these poems to be irritating. They may do it by wandering too wide of the rules of the form, and they may do it by sticking to the rules too closely. An academically correct villanelle may be dexterous in fielding its rhymes and refrains, but that does not guarantee it to be a poem anyone would read twice. A blatantly incorrect one may lead readers to wonder why the form was chosen in the first place, if it was to be so notably disregarded. Rhyme no doubt poses a problem for such pieces in English: a nineteen-line poem is long for the two rhyme-sounds required. But the two refrain lines—spawned in stanza ¹ and alternated stanza by stanza until they join at the close—are more

severely challenging. If they are repeated exactly, and as frequently as the form dictates, they comprise 42 percent of the poem, and it is easy to see in this fact a difficulty for forward movement. It is no accident that the movement of thought in most villanelles is distinctly circular, persistent in returning to an initial premise. The repetitions have been described as hypnotic, but less susceptible readers may find them deadening. Making the repetitions meaningful, not merely perfunctory, is the goal in a strict use of the form. In freer adaptations, the task is to make deviations from the form justify themselves as something more than self-indulgent corner-cutting.

Before coming to the two poems with which this essay is chiefly concerned, I am going to digress briefly, to give a nod to two modern examples that neatly illustrate this dilemma. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" is probably the most often anthologized villanelle of the twentieth century. If you want a villanelle that exactly follows the rules, this one does it. It does it, though, by spinning out verbiage that is at best flimsily supported by thought and feeling.

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.¹

The more I revisit this poem, the more distasteful I find it. Even more offputting than the juiced-up rhetoric of the piece is the spectacle it presents, of the poet presuming to stage-manage his father's deathbed scene when the old man almost certainly would prefer to do it his own way. The perfect, ritualized repetitions suit the windiness of the piece, and to this reader they bespeak an attitude that is emotionally exploitative and morally obtuse.

Many modern and contemporary poets take liberties with the form, as I have noted. Theodore Roethke's late poem "The Right Thing" can serve as a handy example of what I would call a diluted, or half-hearted villanelle.

Let others probe the mystery if they can.
Time-harried prisoners of *Shall* and *Will*—
The right thing happens to the happy man.

The bird flies out, the bird flies back again;
The hill becomes the valley, and is still;
Let others delve that mystery if they can.

God bless the roots!—Body and soul are one!
The small becomes the great, the great the small;
The right thing happens to the happy man.

Child of the dark, he can out leap the sun,
His being single and that being all;
The right thing happens to the happy man.

Or he sits still, a solid figure when
The self-destructive shake the common wall;
Takes to himself what mystery he can,

And, praising change as the slow night comes on,
Wills what he would, surrendering his will
Till mystery is no more: No more he can.
The right thing happens to the happy man.²

The form here is discernible, but Roethke's deviations are both plentiful and haphazard; and one is not persuaded that there was much purpose in his engaging the verse form at all, given that the patterns of refrain and rhyme on which it depends are so negligently treated. The vaporous nature-mysticism of the piece seems to have relaxed the poet's grasp of design to the point of laziness.

It is against extremes like this—on the one hand a rigidly carpentered framework hollow at the core, on the other a spongy, meandering approximation of the formal paradigm—that I wish to exhibit the two villanelles that I will now turn to.

II

Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" (1976), which aside from Thomas's poem is probably the most famous villanelle of our time, is an example of the freer sort. Like many twentieth-century villanelles, this one takes liberties by pairing rhyme with half-rhyme and by varying the phrasing of the refrains:

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.³

The formal deviations here are carefully judged: Bishop is visibly bending the form, but only a precisian would grumble that she is breaking it. Moreover, each particular departure from form is supported by its thematic function. "Fluster" calls attention to itself and thereby suggests a whole range of feelings of embarrassment, inadequacy, self-accusation. "Gesture," by representing only a tenuous sound-link with the other rhyme-words, suggests how fleeting, how easily lost this particular item is, as it strains to hold its place in the catalogue. In general, the feminine rhymes afford Bishop expressive opportunities. Together with frequent enjambment, they help to sustain the flow and the tone, which are kept casual and conversational.

The end word of the second refrain, "disaster," brilliantly reflects the emotional tension of the piece. It is a striking enough word to serve the function of a refrain even when the phrasing in the lines it appears in alters markedly

each time. And in thematic and tonal terms, it encapsulates the paradox of Bishop's presentation, in which an edgy, perhaps desperate humor contends with perceptions that are anything but humorous. A mosaic rhyme like "last, or" in line 10 would be at home in a piece of light verse. And "disaster" is a word whose usage in conversation is often trivializing: "My hair is a disaster," "This pie is a disaster," etc. Or its actual meaning is kept at a comforting distance: when we say, as Bishop does in line 3, that something is "no disaster," we are enjoying the assurance that real disasters happen in other places to other people. Only in Bishop's final use of the word, as the last word of the poem, does it disclose its true and dire meaning, and in doing so it epitomizes the darkening of the poet's outlook, and her faltering resistance to that.

In an appendix to her selection of Bishop's unfinished poems, Alice Quinn presented the sixteen drafts, manuscript and typescript, of "One Art" in facsimile. (Elsewhere in the book, interestingly, Quinn offers the opinion that the villanelle form was one that Bishop "apparently instinctively associated with catastrophe.")⁴ The drafts are revealing in a number of respects. Draft 1 is an unmetred, even sprawling *cri de coeur*, an unwieldy catalogue of the speaker's losses. The word "disaster" does not appear. At the bottom of the typewritten text Bishop has written by hand the rhyme-and-refrain scheme of a villanelle. In Draft 2 (as in all subsequent ones) the poem is a villanelle-in-progress, and the refrain words "master" and "disaster" are firmly in place. She knew, early on, what the last word of the poem would be.

Bishop's crimped and diffident handwriting is sometimes hard to make out, but it is clear that one thing she had to work at determinedly was mastery of her persona's tone—the gradually disintegrating nonchalance of it. The insistently casual title "One Art" first appears in the next-to-final draft. Tonal control was crucial, one imagines, for enabling the

startling effect of stifled emotion at the end. One remarkable thing about the poem is that, although it would appear to draw a good deal of dramatic power from its conclusion, it is not clear that anything has been concluded. While Bishop's catalogue of losses is arranged to give the piece forward momentum, the recurrent appearance of "disaster" works against this. The repeated word almost certainly stands out more in Bishop's ostensibly casual treatment than it would in a refrain line duly repeated word for word. In the punctual cropping up of this rhyme word the fundamental circularity of the villanelle form maintains its overriding force. The last stanza subverts the speaker's wishful thinking, making it obvious (to the reader, at least) that there is one kind of loss that is absolute and thus truly disastrous: the death of a loved one. And yet in the final line the speaker continues to fight against recognition of this bleak truth, as her startling parenthetical exhortation makes clear. The debate within the self is not ended—or is ended only in the sense that it reaches here a new plateau of pain, and of painful self-disclosure.

The poem is one of Bishop's more autobiographical ones, written after the death of her Brazilian lover and the end of her residence in Brazil after many years. It harks back as well to earlier losses that were by no means casual. "I lost my mother's watch" may simply state a fact, but it serves as a metonymy for the loss of the mother herself—institutionalized throughout most of Elizabeth's childhood and young adulthood, unable to "watch" over her daughter. One must acknowledge that some commentators, focusing on Bishop's curious manipulation of verb tenses in her last stanza, believe that at the end she is not dwelling on a loss already suffered but one fearfully anticipated. Yet the lines seem Janus-faced. Bishop's drifting from her earlier past tenses by means of a participle into the present and finally the future perfect defies any rigid sense of chronology. Her "Even losing you . . . I shan't have lied" might mean, "Even contemplating the fact of my loss of you, what I have been saying

remains true.” Or, in equally plausible paraphrase, it might mean, “Even contemplating the likelihood that I will lose you, what I have been saying remains true.” The important point here is that this loss, whether bygone or prospective, is felt as something *present*, and as so disturbing that the final line of the poem can hardly manage to complete itself.

Bishop was no Confessionalist. Pleasures and sorrows are more often alluded to than directly invoked in her work; they subsist beneath the surface of her descriptions, whether these are realistic depictions or surrealistic fantasies. It is a common perception that an exacting poetic form may provide an appropriate channel for unruly emotions. Certainly the villanelle as Bishop uses it enacts a tug of war between a refined esthetic enterprise and a gratingly raw set of feelings. The astutely measured rule-bending of her poem keeps these tensions continuously on display.

III

Bishop’s is not the only villanelle to explore the theme of loss. Catherine Davis, a poet nearly as obscure as Bishop is famous, published “After a Time” in 1957, nineteen years before “One Art” appeared in print. Davis’s strategy for confronting the villanelle’s demands is different, but no less daring: rather than revising the rules, she follows them unflinchingly:

After a time, all losses are the same.
 One more thing lost is one thing less to lose;
 And we go stripped at last the way we came.

Though we shall probe, time and again, our shame,
 Who lack the wit to keep or to refuse,
 After a time, all losses are the same.

No wit, no luck can beat a losing game;

Good fortune is a reassuring ruse:
And we go stripped at last the way we came.

Rage as we will for what we think to claim,
Nothing so much as this bare thought subdues:
After a time, all losses are the same.

The sense of treachery—the want, the blame—
Goes in the end, whether or not we choose,
And we go stripped at last the way we came.

So we, who would go raging, will go tame
When what we have we can no longer use:
After a time, all losses are the same;
And we go stripped at last the way we came.⁵

While many recent poets have, like Bishop, found it in their interest to muffle the hammering-home effect of the refrains, here that insistence is of the essence. Each repetition drives another nail into the coffin as the poem pursues its inexorable course. Rather than struggle against the circularity of the form, Davis relies upon it as her chief source of rhetorical power.

Bishop's mode, as argued above, is dramatic: colloquy that stands revealed as interior debate at the end. Davis's mode is not dramatic but meditative. She does not spend any time cajoling or persuading, because the poem's assertions are disquietingly indisputable. The voice in the poem gives no suggestion of a particular *character*, with door keys or more vital things to lose. It is impersonal because what it says is not an individual's epiphany but a truth applicable to all. The speaker might be an oracle expounding the world view of Classical Stoicism. But the wisdom offered is compatible with other traditions. Reading "And we go stripped at last the way we came," we are likely to remember Job's acknowledgment: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb,

and naked shall I return thither.” The Burial Service in the Book of Common Prayer is in agreement: “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we carry nothing out.”

For contemporary Americans, living in the most acquisitive society in history, these are hard sayings. People’s knowledge at some level of consciousness that they can’t take it with them rarely affects their rates of accumulation and consumption. Inevitability is not something modern western civilization is happy to accept. This may explain the popularity of that other mid-twentieth-century villanelle, Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.” Thomas’s refrain line, in which he exhorts his dying father to “Rage, rage against the dying of the light,” offers the kind of heroic posturing that is bound to be appealing: sonorous, oratorical heat to ward off the chill of reality. Davis knows how futile such “rage” is. “Rage as we will,” she says, it will not change the outcome. “So we, who would go raging, will go tame / When what we have we can no longer use.” Reading her poem immediately after Thomas’s, moving from the orotund to the austere, is a distinctly sobering experience. Numerous readers, of course, have found Thomas’s poem uplifting, but a contrast with Davis’s “After a Time” prompts one to suspect that a lot of that uplift has been furnished by hot air.

When she wrote, “No wit, no luck, can beat a losing game,” Davis was sharing what her life had taught her.⁶ She was so plagued by misfortune that it is no surprise that she published relatively few poems; rather, it is surprising that she was able to complete as many as she did. In some respects her story uncannily parallels that of Elizabeth Bishop, but in a few crucial ones it differs. Both poets were bereft of parents, and both suffered from alcoholism, depression, and physical disabilities (Davis’s left side was partially crippled, and Bishop contended with life-threatening asthma). Both were lesbians at a time when there was much social hostility toward their preference. Both were in many

respects rootless and peripatetic. As poets, both were formalists, Davis in an exacting, Bishop in a more relaxed fashion. The differences, though, are striking. Davis's career was largely derailed by the time she reached middle age. Encouraged by Yvor Winters, with whom she studied, she published her poetry in some highly selective magazines and anthologies, but collections of her work were limited to a few small-press chapbooks, some of which she printed herself. Bishop, although she published far less than many of her contemporaries, had won great acclaim by the time of her sudden death in 1979, and her reputation has if anything increased in luster since then. Davis, younger than Bishop by thirteen years, died destitute and intestate in a nursing home in 2002, and her work has yet to emerge from obscurity. Publishers, fearing the claims of as yet unidentified heirs (who are probably non-existent) have so far declined to risk publishing a book of her poems. "Orphaned works," the term used by copyright lawyers, seems in this case wrenchingly apt.

The chief difference between the two poets, stated baldly, is that Bishop had something of a safety net while Davis had none. Bishop was, in the absence of parents, raised by caring relatives; an inheritance paid for her education at Vassar and for most of her life shielded her from having to work for a living. Davis was radically alone from an early age. Her father deserted the family when she was very young. When her mother discovered her lesbianism, she drove Catherine (then sixteen) to a railroad station and never saw or spoke to her again. Always living hand-to-mouth, Davis worked her way through college in sporadic bouts at a number of schools, finally receiving her B.A. from George Washington University at the age of thirty-seven. By all accounts, life did not improve much for her thereafter, and the present fiasco of the copyright dispute that keeps her poems in limbo seems a particularly depressing piece of posthumous bad luck.

There is not much point in comparing the misfortunes of poets (no point at all, if Davis's first refrain is accurate). Comparing the poems in which they responded to their adversities, though, is a matter of some interest. In this case, the similarity of subject matter in the two villanelles draws attention to the variance in technique and tone. Both poets exploit the circularity of the form, Bishop by ostensibly evading it, Davis by preemptively embracing it. Bishop's lines gather heat as they go along; by the end of Davis's poem, though, we may feel plunged in dry ice. In regard to tone and formal requirements, Bishop's expansive approach could be called Romantic; Davis's tenaciously observant performance could be called Classical. Davis's mentor, Yvor Winters, was often preoccupied with *ranking* poems, and it is easy enough to guess how he would have ranked these. For some readers, though, the choice may not be easy. Speaking for myself, I find that my preference between the two pieces shifts according to my disposition. Both poems are considerable technical achievements, but in each case, on certain days, in certain moods, the ability to feel in tune with the sensibility it expresses stays beyond reach. And in both cases the message, if fully absorbed, leaves an ache.

IV

Davis's use of the word "rage" makes it evident that she was in part responding to Dylan Thomas's villanelle as she wrote. Is it possible that Davis's villanelle is in some sense a source, or at least an impetus, for Bishop's later one? The 1957 anthology in which "After a Time" and a few other poems by Davis appeared, *New Poets of England and America*, edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson, was widely distributed and discussed at the time.⁷ It is exactly the sort of book to which Bishop, living in Brazil, might well have turned to keep up with current poetry in English. Robert Lowell mentioned the anthology to her

in a letter of October 25, 1957.⁸ No mention of this book or of Davis, however, appears in Bishop's published correspondence, and hence her familiarity with either remains a surmise. As surmises go, however, this one seems unusually plausible. The categories "loss" and "villanelle" could easily have linked and lingered in Bishop's mind after her conscious memory of Davis's poems receded; and years later, when her own contemplation of the nature of loss resulted in the writing of "One Art," such a phantom impression could well have steered her toward the villanelle form. Of one thing I am certain: had she had any active recall of Davis's poem, she would never have cast her own exploration of the subject in the form of a villanelle. Consciousness creates inhibitions, as we all know, and Bishop in writing "One Art" already had more than enough inhibitions to circumvent. If this is what happened, her loss of memory of a precursor may have enabled her to write her own fine villanelle on loss. The two poems need not be viewed as rivals. Twin peaks, perhaps, in the rocky range of formalist poetry in the twentieth century.

¹*The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New York: New Directions, 1957), 128.

²*The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 250.

³*Elizabeth Bishop, The Complete Poems 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 178.

⁴*Elizabeth Bishop, Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box*, ed. Alice Quinn (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 260. Bishop's drafts appear on 224-240.

⁵In Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson, eds., *New Poets of England and America* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 55-56.

⁶Details of Catherine Davis's life included here are drawn from an article by Cynthia Haven, posted on the news section of Stanford University's website ("Versed in school of hard knocks, poet to get posthumous homage on campus," <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2008/april23/davis-042308.html>). I am grateful to Kevin Durkin for directing me to this and other source material.

⁷The book was reprinted, including the same selections by Davis, several times into the 1960s.

⁸*The Letters of Robert Lowell*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 301.