

Stepping Stones

An Exploration of the Terzanelle and Villanelle

By Zahhar



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Front Cover

The front cover art was originally a color drawing of an oak tree at an educational site, <http://www.gridclub.com/>. It was used in an illustration concerning the oak tree's natural resistance to insects. I have decolorized it, removed a religious symbol from the trunk, increased its resolution and used filters to render the image more impressionist in nature. It only vaguely resembles the original.

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Origins and Details

Information about the villanelle

Information about the villanelle is abundant. Two good sources are *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) and *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (2001). In the first, an article on the villanelle provides detailed information about the forms' development and mentions the most prominent European and American poets to publish villanelles since the 16th century. In the latter, a brief history of the form as relates to the first known author to publish the common 19 line variety of the villanelle, a French poet called Jean Passerat, is explored. 14 villanelles are also reproduced as anthologized examples. A simple search on the internet will also yield information about the form and lead scores of examples.

Since there is ample information available about the villanelle's history and origins, I will focus only on reiterating the form's technical points.

- 1) The villanelle is comprised of at least three tercets and a closing quatrain.
- 2) The first and third lines of the opening tercet begin the refrains and the a rhyme used by the villanelle body and closing quatrain. The second line of the opening tercet begins the b rhyme used by the villanelle body and closing quatrain.
- 3) The villanelle body is comprised of tercets appearing in pairs. The a rhyme is used by the first line of each tercet and the b rhyme by the second line. The first and third lines from the opening tercet are refrained as the third lines of the first and second tercets of each pair, respectively.
- 4) There must be a minimum of one tercet pair for the body, but there may be as many tercet pairs in the body as you think you can get away with.

Referencing the two sources mentioned above, you will find that Jean Passerat is likely responsible for the rigid 19 line model of the villanelle (only two tercet pairs). However, many poets have considered the villanelle a stanzaic form of poetry, using it as a form that may be expanded or contracted so long as the rhyme and refrain of the body are not compromised.

- 5) The closing quatrain uses the a rhyme in its first line, the b rhyme in its second line and refrains the first and third lines from the opening tercet as its third and fourth lines, respectively.
- 6) Lines may be in any length or meter within reason.
- 7) Villanelles may be written on any subject.

The above technical points may seem overly detailed, but they are illustrated in this form for the sake of clarity. A very pleasant shorthand notation for the first five points above is $A^1bA^2, abA^1, abA^2, \dots, abA^1A^2$, where like letters indicate the rhyme scheme, and uppercase letters followed by a superscript numeric notation indicate the refrains.

One of the main challenges with the villanelle is to find a way to make the refrains change meaning or contexts with each use in a way that keeps them from overwhelming the poem.

Information about the terzanelle

The terzanelle, invented by Lewis Turco in 1965, is a poetic form that combines the villanelle's refrain with the terza rima's end-line patterning. Turco's "Terzanelle", the original terzanelle poem titled for the name of the form, was first published in the summer edition of *The Michigan Quarterly Review* that same year. He has since written and published three more terzanelle poems, "Terzanelle in Thunderweather" (*The Book of Forms*: University Press of New England, 2000), "The Room" (*Poetry Miscellany*, 1978), and "Terzanelle of the Spider's Web" (*The Southern Review*, 1990).

Over the years, Turco's invention has become well known and popular. Hundreds of terzanelle poems may be found on the web by as many authors. Although Turco's "Terzanelle in Thunderweather" is often quoted as an example of the poem's structure, it is seldom—if ever—mentioned that Turco is in fact the inventor of this form.

Here are the rules by which a terzanelle may be written:

- 1) The terzanelle is comprised of at least two tercets and a closing quatrain.
- 2) The first and third lines of the opening tercet are refrained as the second and fourth lines of the closing quatrain.
- 3) The terzanelle body is comprised of tercets that each refrain the second line of the preceding tercet for its third line. The first line of each of these tercets is rhymed with its refrained line.
- 4) There must be a minimum of one tercet for the body, but there may be as many tercets in the body as you think you can get away with.

I'm taking a liberty here in defining the terzanelle body. While Turco created the terzanelle as a fixed form of 19 lines (four tercets in the body), it seems clear to me the terzanelle is stanzaic in nature. As such, I imagine the terzanelle may be expanded or contracted at will so long as the rhyme and refrain of the body are not compromised in the process.

- 5) The closing quatrain refrains the second line of the last tercet as its third line and rhymes its first line with that refrain.
- 6) Lines may be in any length or meter within reason.

7) Terzanelles may be written on any subject.

Again, there is a pleasant shorthand notation for the first five points above. For a 19 line terzanelle, this would be $A^1B^1A^2, bC^1B^1, cD^1C^1, dE^1D^1, eF^1E^1, fA^1F^1A^2$, where like letters indicate the rhyme scheme, and uppercase letters followed by a superscript numeric notation indicate the refrains.

As with the villanelle, one of the primary challenges with the terzanelle is finding a way to change the meaning or context of each refrain. In one way the terzanelle is a little easier than the villanelle in that there is a fresh refrain to work with for each tercet. In another way the terzanelle is much more difficult than the villanelle because the refrains from the opening tercet need to be woven in with a refrain from the final tercet in the quatrain. This alone has proven to be the most challenging aspect of the terzanelle for me.

My one liberty

I allow myself one liberty from the constraints of the villanelle and terzanelle rules in that I often use alternative end-line schemes in place of the established rhyme scheme. When I do this, I still adhere very strictly to the prosodic end-line pattern of each form, but using methods other than rhyme.

During the two and a half years I spent working with the ghazal, I wavered only two or three times from the rigid use of rhyme. This gave me the opportunity to really beat against the bounds of what can be accomplished using rhyme in English. Options in rhyme are very limited in English, unlike other languages where rhymes are abundantly available for extended rhyme schemes like those of the villanelle and the ghazal.

Alternative end-line schemes provide a fresh pool of words from which to draw. For instance, assonance and consonance are quite abundant in English. To give an example, there are only a few decent rhymes available for the word “void”, but there are at least three times as many words available that assonate both accentually and quantitatively, such as “noise” and “coin”, and there are probably three or four times as many words beyond this that assonate at least accentually, such as “choice” and “hoist”.

Consonance is often referred to as “slant-rhyme”, or “near-rhyme”. Clear examples of consonant words are “void”, “paid”, “cried” and “rude”. Consonant words seem to be even more readily available in English than assonant words. For me, they also come more naturally to the mind without having to mine through reference materials for options.

I try to use assonance, consonance and their various combinations (one of which is rhyme) to create, or at least affect, certain moods. Most of the time this ends up being a great deal more work than I ever would have expected, but sometimes I’m pleasantly surprised by a sudden ease of articulation using these methods. It has been the same with me in using just rhyme. At first it seemed overwhelmingly impossible, especially with the ghazal, but as I continued the practice it became more and more natural.

Terzanelles

The terzanelles here are presented in the order they were written. This should hopefully mean that the quality of the work improves as you read through them. A little information about the inspiration behind each terzanelle is provided below.

Fragments: The inspiration for this piece should be pretty clear by the epigraph. I originally heard the riddle of the sphinx in my early teens, probably between 11 and 13 years old. The idea to write a poem inspired by that riddle came to me probably by the time I was 14 years old. So, this idea stewed in my mind for close to 18 years. When I discovered the terzanelle in July of 2001, I instantly recognized the form as a perfect match for the original inspiration, where each part of a 5 to 7 part poem described the day's progression as a metaphor for the various periods, fragments, in a human life. I decided to write 7 parts because I wanted to try to capture some aspect of the trans migratory process, beginning before birth and ending after death.

Moonpines: I spent every full moon over a period of about six months quietly sitting or walking in the depths of the old growth Montgomery Redwood Grove in Mendocino County, California. What always filled me full of wonder was the site of a giant redwood fully lit by the moon deep within the quiet moon-shade of the forest. This has many metaphorical applications, not the least of which is that rare person who somehow shines from out the darkness in the gentle light of compassion, understanding, and beneficence.

Baby Grand: A piano belonging to of a friend of mine is nearly a century old. It's surface, scratched and scarred, hints at without revealing its long history. I've tried to capture my impression of this piano and its hidden history in a sort of pen-portrait. But, this is just the surface.

Aeolian Strains: A wind-harp in New Mexico called "Tempest Song" sits in the parking lot of a large Native American shopping center. I drove halfway across the continent to see it and to listen to it being played by the wind. It was drowned out, marginalized, by out-door music played on loud-speakers. A broken string betrayed its neglect. And, it seemed lonely, so lonely that I couldn't help but ache for it. So many unique, beautiful beings in our world, in our societies, have fallen to just such a fate.

Way Station: A series of dreams spanning the course of my life have taken me time and again to a sort of way station on the path of personal progress, spiritual progress. Nothing in this poem is what it is. All is impermanent. I have a feeling such way stations exist for all of us.

A Modern Troubadour's Lament: This is my response to those poets who have throughout the years tried to convince me to abandon verse forms and "just write what you feel, man". Such people have managed to instill a sort of inferiority complex in me by belittling my efforts in verse and even my fairly rounded goals with poetry. I have long felt that their poor attitude toward verse forms and writers is deeply mistaken. Frustrations built up over many years are released with some force in this poem. So, here's what I feel, man.

Fragments

*What walks on four legs in the morning,
Two legs in the afternoon,
And three legs in the evening?*

—Riddle of the Sphinx

Dawn

Faint light appears along horizon's edge;
With steady pace the still light brighter glows;
New promise comes with daybreak like a pledge.

Tide of gentle rising luminance flows;
Deep darkness slowly fades away from sight;
With steady pace the still light brighter glows.

Dim shapes concealed beneath the veil of night
Form into clarity with even stride;
Deep darkness slowly fades away from sight.

New life, from stasis, forth emerges wide;
Fresh understandings of brave life to be
Form into clarity with even stride.

Illuminance continues rising free;
And vivid hope within the heart inspires
Fresh understandings of brave life to be.

To utter brilliance from the slightest fires,
Faint light appears along horizon's edge
And vivid hope within the heart inspires;
New promise comes with daybreak like a pledge.

Sunrise

Great new brilliant birthing springs resilient;
Erased is doubt from whence the light ensues;
Wondrous blooming sunlight climbs ebullient.

To resplendence from the first light's pastel hues
This shining marvel heart and soul entrance;
Erased is doubt from whence the light ensues.

Deep knowing brooded warm of life's advance
Until horizon's edge erupted fire;
This shining marvel heart and soul entrance.

From thence the sun shall rise in tranquil gyre,
As such it streamed beneath the realm of sight
Until horizon's edge erupted fire.

A glorious new day has taken flight;
Fresh living streams exultant into view,
As such it streamed beneath the realm of sight.

Hopes inmost and profound are realized true;
Great new brilliant birthing springs resilient;
Fresh living streams exultant into view;
Wondrous blooming sunlight climbs ebullient.

Morningtide

Exploring gently, day's new light grows strong;
Forth climbs the sun into sky's vast expanse;
Slow shrink the shadows as the day wears long.

Deep feeling forms with day's glowing advance,
The sense of vibrant strength that shines in youth;
Forth climbs the sun into sky's vast expanse.

Warmth deepens in the bold sun's rising sooth,
And warmth within the heart of life instills
The sense of vibrant strength that shines in youth.

Lambency wondrous tender hope distills;
In fervent luminance the land is bathed
And warmth within the heart of life instills.

Life's essence in all steadiness is lathed
As fullness of the day is slowly reached,
In fervent luminance the land is bathed.

Life's greatest depths of meaning are beseeched;
Exploring gently, day's new light grows strong
As fullness of the day is slowly reached,
Slow shrink the shadows as the day wears long.

Noontide

Day reaches utmost fullness of its run;
The land lie brightly blazoned neath the sky
Where at resplendent zenith burns the sun.

Shadows vanish before the fulgence high;
Great living light of day its prime has gained;
The land lie brightly blazoned neath the sky.

Deep feeling of life's richness is attained
In radiance magnificently made,
Great living light of day its prime has gained.

The airy land in stillness bright is staid,
And deepest gentle warmth all life imbues
In radiance magnificently made.

Full strength of living in the heart ensues
As brilliant glows the day from boundless height
And deepest gentle warmth all life imbues.

Grand sense of freedom wonderful takes flight;
Day reaches utmost fullness of its run
As brilliant glows the day from boundless height
Where at resplendent zenith burns the sun.

Eventide

Slow fades the greater power of the day;
Bright sun forth to horizon makes return;
Life's prime has gently passed in subtle sway.

Soft breezes whisper through day's paced adjourn;
Calm cools the land with fading strength of light;
Bright sun forth to horizon makes return.

Reflections vivid come of living's height
As nearer draws the daytide's closing end,
Calm cools the land with fading strength of light.

A calmness settles deep as shadows scend,
And peaceful reckoning rises within
As nearer draws the daytide's closing end.

Now mostly lived, life's fullness goes to thin
As placid grows the sky in day's advance,
And peaceful reckoning rises within.

Staid iridescence dims in far expanse;
Slow fades the greater power of the day
As placid grows the sky in day's advance,
Life's prime has gently passed in subtle sway.

Sunset

In paced decline withdraws the mighty sun;
All land and sky reflect the dying light,
Resplendent glory of the day is done.

Day's utmost beauties saved till now take flight
Like effulgent gates of heaven gleaming,
All land and sky reflect the dying light.

Life's swan song of light shines brightly dreaming,
Reflections stream of day's long cavalcade
Like effulgent gates of heaven gleaming.

Shadows begin to blur in overshade
As sun's last rays fall from horizon's rim
Reflections stream of day's long cavalcade.

Upon sky's faintest vapors colors swim
Emblazoning the firmament's expanse
As sun's last rays fall from horizon's rim.

Great culmination of day's long romance,
In paced decline withdraws the mighty sun
Emblazoning the firmament's expanse,
Resplendent glory of the day is done.

Dusk

Soft iridescence fades from heaven's height;
To darkness deep the sky gradates from day
When cross the sky folds purple edge of night.

In firmament's expanse the vapors gray
As silhouettes within the distance form;
To darkness deep the sky gradates from day.

Depthless tranquility broods deep and warm,
Day's essence long in memory remains
As silhouettes within the distance form.

Into a milky hue the daylight wanes
As clarity to vagueness makes return,
Day's essence long in memory remains.

In dimness issued forth from sun's inurn
New hopes pierce the dark in twilight's failing
As clarity to vagueness makes return.

Till horizon all alone lay paling
Soft iridescence fades from heaven's height;
New hopes pierce the dark in twilight's failing
When cross the sky folds purple edge of night.

