

Commentary¹ on the poem “Villanelle: the psychological hour”

by Ezra Pound (1915)

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Abstract

The commentary presents a general portrayal of the modernist poem *Villanelle: The Psychological Hour*, an American literary masterpiece from the early twentieth century by Ezra Pound. This paper is an attempt to conceive a didactic frame on poetry analysis to facilitate the work of the students of English literature I under my supervision. In the first hand, I present an outline of the contextual aspects of the masterpiece to continue with the interpretive analysis of the main linguistic elements that characterizes the modernist approach in American literature. Consequently, I also comment aspects related to the semantics of the text by approaching Pound’s inner cultural and emotional dimensions connoted in the poem within the frame of modernist tenets. Finally, I present a psychological portrait of the poetic voice by demonstrating that Pound’s aim is to recreate

¹ Analysis based on the teaching experiences of the Literature in English I course at South Colombian University in 2013, and based on the autonomous work undertaken during the course “Études Américains” of the Master 1 Research in “Études Anglophones” at Université Lumière Lyon II.

the perfect situation: his readers are able to access the semantic universe of others in a *commun'entente* conversation when they reach the required level to understand pragmatic, discursive, reciprocal and cultural skills of modern American discourse.

Keywords: *Literary analysis, teaching of literature in English, poetry, American modernism, Ezra Pound.*

Résumé

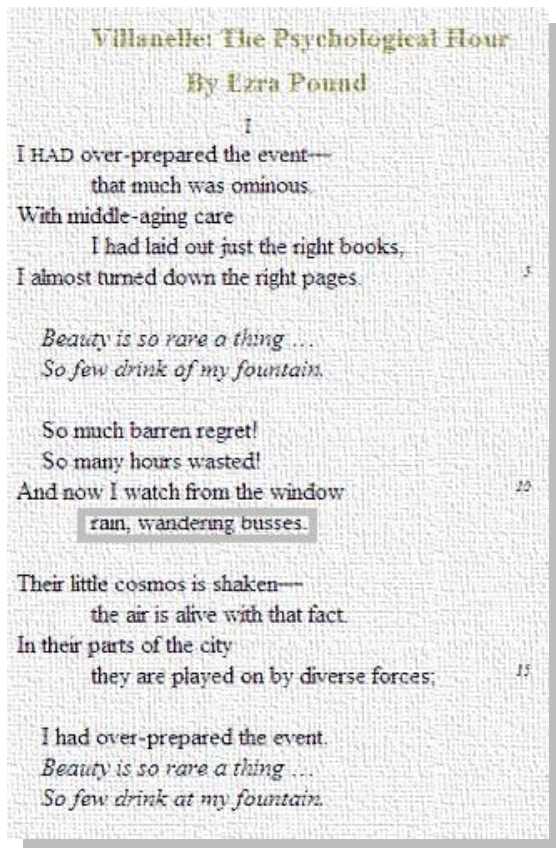
Le commentaire présente un portrait général du poème moderniste *Villanelle : The Psychological Hour*, un chef-d'œuvre de la littérature américaine du début du XXe siècle par Ezra Pound. Cet article est une tentative de concevoir un cadre didactique sur l'analyse de poésie pour faciliter le tâche aux étudiants de littérature en anglais I sous ma supervision. Premièrement, je vous présente un aperçu des aspects contextuels du chef-d'œuvre pour poursuivre avec l'analyse interprétative des principaux éléments linguistiques qui caractérisent l'approche moderniste de la littérature américaine. Immédiatement, je commente également les aspects liés à la sémantique du texte en abordant les dimensions culturelles et émotionnelles profondes de Pound que le poème connote mais qui se trouvent encadrés dans des principes modernistes. Enfin, je vous présente un portrait psychologique de de la voix poétique en démontrant que l'objectif de Pound est de recréer la situation parfaite : ses lecteurs sont en mesure d'accéder à l'univers sémantique des autres dans une



conversation du commun'entente lors qu'ils atteignent le niveau requis pour comprendre la pragmatique, les compétences discursives, réciproques et culturelles du discours américain moderne.

Mots-clés: *analyse littéraire, enseignement de littérature en anglais, poésie, modernisme américain, Ezra Pound.*





Introduction to the commentary

The great moments of the modernist movement in American poetry saw its glory with the emergence of Vorticism as the depiction of the highly-dynamic nature of language and writers' ability to create mental images of absolute, but emotionally-charged simplicity. It was Ezra Pound, one of the representatives of the Lost Generation in the second half of the 1910s, who flattered us with this new approach in contemporary poetry. The following text is a composed

commentary that outlines the contextual elements of one of the poems of this renowned author: ***The Psychological Hour***. This paper will mainly portray an interpretive analysis of semantic, linguistic and psychological aspects of this American literary masterpiece from the early twentieth century.

“The psychological hour” is a Modernist-period poem by Ezra Pound published in the December 1915 issue of the modernist journal of poetry: a Magazine Verse. This Vorticist poem is a memorial to one of his best friends, the sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska². The thematics of the poem alludes to a possible visit of some friends and their eventual departure.

The literal message of this piece of poetry is not the straining after intensity, but rather a *laissez-faire* listing of *commun'entente* (Tréguer-Felten, 2013: 1)³ and attitudes that endeavour to convey a moment of privacy in which the narrator wants to show a sort of human generosity to his fellows once they access the semantic universe of his written thoughts.

If we would like to place the poem into a *semantic framework*, it would be necessary to mention that it is likely to fit the experimental modern poetics of the Imagism Movement. That said, the author soon refused to be bound even by the dogmas of this movement and

² For more details see Ezra Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska; A Memoir (NY: John Lane, 1916)].

³ In terms of the ideal situation in which the interlocutors are able to understand - or at least consider - that mutual understanding is not only based on their pragmatic, discursive or even reciprocal cultural skills, but a common desire to access the semantic universe of others, in this particular case, the readers.

See: Tréguer-Felten, Geneviève. Commun'action ou commun'entente ? Un défi linguistique pour les entreprises. Volume N°9. Synergies Italie. Cediscor (Paris 3) & Gestion & Société (CNRS), France. 2013. pp. 47-58.



he repudiated it; instead, he invented the new school of Vorticism, which differed from Imagism chiefly in including non-literary forms of art, one of the traits of the emerging modernist approach in literature.

The "Psychological Hour" is an experiment in this Vorticist movement due to the presence of few aural effects and periodic lines repeated in their entirety which do not seem to have the manifest character of refrain, such as "*beauty*", "*their*", "*friends*", "*youth*", "*no word*" from (lines 17, 27, 38 and 41), "*I had over-prepared the event*" (lines 1 and 16) which are merely duplication, as are the couplets "*Beauty is so rare a thing*", and "*So few drink of my fountain*" (lines 6 to 18). This repeated couplet later merges into the single line "*Beauty would drink of my mind*" (line 24) in a particular, reminiscent manner in which a villanelle's two separated refrains finally merge into a couplet. There is a well constructed syllable boundary corresponding with a hyphen in the spelling such as "*over-prepared*", "*middle-ageing*", "*tea-time*" and the archaism "*to-morrow*" whose main function is to facilitate the natural rhythms of the ordinary speech the poetic voice uses in the poem. Some of these repetitions of a sound or group of sounds in the same word, line or stanza create a phonemic aural effect as evidenced in "*WIN-dow*" and "*WAN-dering*" (lines 10 and 11). It goes without saying that this effect is stronger when these textual units are smaller, the group of sounds larger and the repetition more frequent (something which seems not to be

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predominant or relevant in the poem). This is so, because Pound is more interested in recreating a single mental image in the readers' minds than several aural effects; something that predominates in many imagist masterpieces of the era.

It is important to highlight that the word “*but*” in line 34 (which functions as a conjunction here) introduces a subjective negation “*no*” as the answer to the question above. It is a clear and loud “*no*” that strikes in the end of the stanza, expressing the disappointment experienced by the narrator due to the absence of a reply from their friends, who, on the expected day, did not appear (as can be seen in the last stanza with the phrase “*dear Pound I am leaving England now*”). In such a way “*but*” is closely linked to the “*no*” in the last stanza, which does not reinforce a complaint; it is rather an innuendo that depicts the sorrow that the poetic voice suffers during this bitter episode of abandoning England and all her literary customs.

We could infer that the poem may only have one vivid but central image: “*rain, wandering buses*” since it wisely merges the raindrops, which represent one natural process, with the wandering buses that symbolizes the artificiality and great ingenuity of man. Thus, the image conveys the beauty of everyday life in urban spaces and this is one of the main

contributions bequeathed by modernism in terms of technological advancement and commodities to the world of literature.

Moreover, one might think that the current use of present and past perfective forms as in “*I had over-prepared the event*”, “*I had almost turned out*” and “*you have danced so stiffly*”, the same as the present progressive “*I am leaving England*” and the archaic perfective structure “*my youth is gone from me*” indicate a continuous action that was completed in the past, but which at the same time, remains alive and connected to the present. Hence, this grammatical context reinforces and sets the central mobile image in the poem. In this respect, through the adverb of time “*now*”, the narrator seems to bolster the conception of an action which lasts in time as a visual aspect; so the main function is to materialize not only the poem but the emotions felt by the author at the very moment in which he wrote it.

To a certain extent, *The Psychological Hour* obeys the poetic form known as villanelle⁴, which entered English-language poetry in the 1800's from the imitation of French models.

⁴ Villanelle comes from the Italian word *villanella*, which derives from the Latin *villa* (farm) and *villano* (farmhand); to any poet before the mid-nineteenth century, the word *villanelle* or *villanelle* would have simply meant "country song", with no particular form implied. It is difficult to know why Pound entitled the poem "Villanelle"; perhaps he wanted it to be a manifesto of grief, not as the ones expressed by poets in the nineteenth century, but as his own creation of an ironic complaint against his own loss. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villanelle>

A villanelle is usually nineteen lines long, consisting of five tercets (that is, five groups of three lines) and one concluding quatrain. The twentieth-century models differ from most nineteenth-century villanelles since they now have ten syllables per line while they had eight or six feet before. In this way, villanelles have no established meter and the essence of the fixed modern form is its distinctive pattern of rhyme and repetition. The rhyme-and-refrain pattern of the villanelle can be schematized as follows: A1bA2 - abA1 - abA2 - abA1 - abA2 - abA1A2 where letters "a" or "A" and "b" indicate the two rhyme sounds, upper case indicates a refrain ("A"), and superscript numerals "1" and "2" indicate Refrain 1 and Refrain 2⁵. As to our particular poem, the author's predominance is to maintain the old structure since the poem has between six and eight rhythmical units (14 feet of 6, 8 of 7 and 8 of 8 along the villanelle) which make it a hexametrical villanelle, whilst still maintaining the author's style. It does not fit in the nineteen line long pattern, but a forty three line pattern (which seems to attain the classic thirty nine lines norm of *sestina* poems). The sequence of the poem: A1bcde - A2 - bcde - bcdehghiA1 - A2 - bcde - bcde - bcd - bcd - bc - bcdef, does not really show the author's free stanzas *villanella*.

⁵ Kane, Julie. The Myth of the Fixed-Form Villanelle, *Modern Language Quarterly*, Volume 64, Number 4. December 2003, pp. 427-443.



I dare say - up to a point - that the poem also features some characteristics which rather belong to the form of dramatic monologues since the poetic voice largely focuses on portraying a significant event as he reveals in his own words the dramatic situation in which he may be involved. In this manner, the author demonstrates his character through the poem by addressing a listener who does not engage in dialogue but helps develop the speech. Perhaps this revelation of his character may be unintentional (in negative terms), but it allows readers to foresee the implications of what he really means and what he is really admitting to.

In the analysis, we can also infer that the poem lacks metaphors. Needless to say, there are no functions of dialectal argument since the author does not resort to superfluous nouns and adjectives, which do not reveal anything. The poem is most notably a collection of voices marked by italics, punctuation, marks and parentheses, and the majority of them are apparently the author's internal voices.

In addition, the conception of image as an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time or static snapshots remains difficult to assimilate. Besides in this very poem, the presentation of such a “complex” gives the sense of a sudden liberation; although that sense



of freedom from the limitations of time and space is not present. So, the idea that "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further discussion"⁶ rather remains in the foreground of the poem inasmuch as its interest lies more in the fact that the sensation of motion must be attained.

In this respect, the poem becomes the author's version of the idiom of modern French verse⁷. Even though he strives to keep his own free-form in the poem as shown above; it stands in opposition to his casual defence of what a villanelle really is, and is probably a more accurate index to the attitude he assumed due to the crisis he might have faced at that precise moment in which he conceived this villanelle.

⁶ Charles Olson, Projective verse, 1950.

⁷ French versification is to be distinguished from the English counterpart (syllable-stress metre) for this reason: the intensity of the French line depends on the number of its syllables rather than on the number and nature of its rhythmic segments (French: measures, English: feet); the position of French accents (equivalent of English stresses) is determined by the syntactic structure of the line rather than by the inherent stress patterns on individual words; the French accent falls on the last accentuable syllable of each syntactic unit in the line, and since these units naturally vary in length, French rhythmic measures obey no law of recurrence and no principle of regularity, and thus have no connection with the notion of beat; because French accents are linked also with pitch, and because the French line always ends with accentuated syllable, there is a natural tendency in French verse for the end of the line to coincide with a syntactical break, that is, to be end-stopped; that is why that enjambment is potentially a greater transgression in French verse than in English. Individual lines of verse in French thus have a peculiar rhythmic of one line - which in no way - predicts the rhythms of the following line.

Another aspect to bear in mind is that it also seems contradictory to find the necessity to capitalize the first letter of every foot of the poem regardless of its sentence structure. It configures a visual, syntactical phenomenon, and as such, can be taken as a comment on the visuality of texts, but in some cases that comment is only half-attained: perhaps the author did want to maintain his own individual style by keeping it this way. This “visuality” leads us to believe that the author endeavors to create a process of motion and dynamics in order to capture this sensation in an image: it is in this way that the writer operates a real effect of “complexity” which goes beyond a mere arrangement of forms to create a static image. He jumps from the stage of stillness in his imagism to an upper stage, the one of movement, but always bearing in mind the image as a core in *The Psychological Hour*, where only the adjective “psychological” in the title and the play on words used in the second line, indicate that the poem explores the mind and the word: this mobile image snapshots the emotions experienced by the author in his inner mind; it is therefore a subjective manifestation of what is going on within him and that can only be expressed through the use of words wisely chosen (that is, in the sense of economy). Thus, in this poem we can infer the author's slight tendency towards the poetry of reminiscences and the word rather than the poetry focused on merely static images working on the visual and aural senses.



In this villanelle, the writer uses the language of common speech, whether subjective or objective as stated above; this is not in the sense of creating new rhythms, but free stanzas. Pound is more concerned with absolute freedom in the choice of his subject, which anticipates continuity between the definition of image as a static element and the concept of image as a process of capturing motion. Thus, he underlines the principle of juxtaposition as the building-block, which he presents in other poems such as Cantos⁸. Besides, there is a tendency in the poem to transmit the author's sensations and emotions in order to create stimuli in readers and to keep a *commun'entente* vision of the language used; a means of interacting among humans who need to express their feelings, fears and sorrows. We might say that the author sought to communicate through his poem Wittgenstein's conception of poetry, which consisted of considering that poems are not merely used in the language-game of giving or sharing information - even if they might be composed of this language of information.

The author did want to make clear that this task in *The Psychological Hour* was to imitate a natural state or mood and represent it through new models and conceptions of free, dynamic images. Then, as a dramatic reality, the poem is precisely focused on the

⁸ Ezra Pound, ed. des Imagistes. New York: Boni, 1914.



communication of feelings that show a strong “emotive function” of language⁹, but are intimately related to the context and “reference” that surrounded the poet when he decided to write his villanelle. These functions are predominantly expressed through the self-ironic questions “*Are people less friends because one has just, at last, found them?*” and “*friends?*”, when he makes use of the exclamation marks in “*speak up!*”, the interjection “*Oh*” and the quotation marks in “*their little cosmos is shaken*”, “*Dear Pound I am leaving England*” among others. Such usage of language communicates in the author the necessity to express his inner sorrow and disappointment. Yet, through the use of these language items, he establishes the whole tone of his poem - a free poem which fits in his own style, interpretation and mastery of the villanelle form - this obviously connotes an ironic tone, not in the negative sense towards his friends and their absence from the rendezvous already fixed, but rather to the embarrassing moment which makes him reflect on the losses he might face later. Thus, the nature of irony is neither used as a surfeit of meaning nor as a structurally organizing principle.

Now if we try to consider the poem from *a psychological perspective*, we can surmise that it is the poet's diagnosis of a moment of crisis he might have gone through. On the one

⁹ Jakobson R., Halle M., Fundamentals of language, 1956.



hand, the poem alludes to a possible visit of some friends and their eventual departure; the internal voices in it help us understand that the author confesses his weakness - a sort of inhibiting self-consciousness - not only due to the imminent abandonment of his friends, but also to the impromptu departure of his youth (probably because in this period of time the poet was deeply aware that he was ageing). We can also infer that the whole poem constitutes an emotional fact which seeks to become a vain attempt to run away - through the written style and meaning of the poem - from the deep crisis he experienced.

From this perspective, the poem turns into a form of dramatizing and exaggerating a specific moment or event; in this case, the author's bitter feelings towards these two big losses. On the other hand, the poet seemed to have felt a bitter rejection from the traditional patrons in poetry. This is so because several factors impinged upon the literary movements of his age, such as the excessive allusion to structure, the tonal and structural irony, the deconstructive but general self-awareness of the medium and the forms made of collage and disintegrations; that is, a resistance to standardizing structures.

Last but not least, *The Psychological Hour* reveals that the author suffers the aestheticized, psychologized, depoliticized and disregard concept of great art that traditional patrons



imposed; that is why Pound's poem rather becomes a high-culture experiment of a villanelle, full of emotional patterns, albeit with a single mental image "*rain, wandering buses*" which responded to the popular-culture manifestations surrounding the author in this period and the condensed bunch of mental flashes that the same popular-culture impinged upon Pound's inner mind and ego.

Accordingly, this villanelle is also an attempt to be a declaration and thesis in language about an inner human experience, whether good or evil. It is a rhythmical composition of words expressing the poet's attitude - designed to surprise, delight and generate an emotional response in Pounds' modern world. He wants to say more with this poem than with ordinary language.

Thus, he involves intellect, emotions, imagination, but most importantly, motion and senses here so as to give more weight per word than ordinary communication. He achieves this not by means of the use of his free-style-poem, but rather through the use of items of banal communication and direct treatment of the natural object and its intimate link to the semantics of the real, but urban world. It is a poem of *commun'entente* among the poet

himself, the reader and the mental image projected in both the poet and the reader, whether that be the same image, or a different one for both of them.

Villanelle: "The psychological hour" by Ezra Pound

I		
I HAD over-prepared the event— that much was ominous. With middle-aging care I had laid out just the right books, I almost turned down the right pages.	5	<i>Beauty would drink of my mind.</i> Youth would awhile forget my youth is gone from me. Youth would hear speech of beauty.
		25
<i>Beauty is so rare a thing ... So few drink of my fountain.</i>		
So much barren regret! So many hours wasted!		
And now I watch from the window rain, wandering busses.	1 0	II ("Speak up! You have danced so stiffly? Someone admired your works, And said so frankly.
		30
Their little cosmos is shaken— the air is alive with that fact. In their parts of the city they are played on by diverse forces;	1 5	III Now the third day is here— no word from either; No word from her nor him, Only another man's note: "Dear Pound, I am leaving England."
		35
I had over-prepared the event. <i>Beauty is so rare a thing ... So few drink at my fountain.</i>		
Two friends: a breath of the forest ... Friends? Are people less friends because one has just, at last, found them?	2 0	
Twice they promised to come. "Between the night and morning?"		



Harriet Monroe, ed. (1860–1936). *The New Poetry: An anthology*. 1917. Poem

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