

Why rhyme pleases

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It does not please everyone. Even in the British eighteenth century, one of the times and places of its highest dominance, rhyme could appear to one critic an important component of ‘the source of the disorders of Great Britain’ (his choice of words). ‘A foolish admiration of this trifling and artificial ornament’, wrote Thomas Sheridan, ‘has turned people’s thoughts from the contemplation of the real and natural beauty of numbers. Like the Israelites, we have gone whoring after our own fancies, and worshipped this idol with so infatuated a zeal, that our language has in great measure fallen a sacrifice to it’.¹ Sheridan’s view was not unusual. Edward Young deprecated thus Pope’s decision to translate Homer into rhyme.

Had Milton never wrote, *Pope* had been less to blame: But when in *Milton’s* *Genius*, *Homer*, as it were, personally rose to forbid Britons doing him that ignoble wrong; it is less pardonable, by that *effeminate* decoration, to put *Achilles* in petticoats a second time: How much nobler had it been, if his numbers had rolled on

¹ Thomas Sheridan, *British Education: Or, The Source of the Disorders of Great Britain* (London, 1756), pp. 283-84. My thanks to David Nowell-Smith for his careful editorial work on this essay.

in full flow, through the various modulations of *masculine* melody, into those grandeurs of solemn sound, which are indispensably demanded by the native dignity of Heroick song? How much nobler, if he had resisted the temptation of that *Gothic* Daemon, which modern Poesy tasting, became mortal? ... *Blank* is a term of diminution; what we mean by blank verse, is verse unfallen, uncurst; verse reclaim'd, reinthroned in the true *language of the Gods*; who never thunder'd, nor suffer'd their *Homer* to thunder, in Rhime; ...²

Rhyme is here denounced as from a pulpit. Rhyme, in Sheridan, is the whore of Babylon, and, in Young, it is not only the apple offered by the serpent but is also a kind of prosodic cross-dressing. The implication, of course, is Reformation. Rhyme has laid waste to classic Rome, and erected the papist one. It is time to smash the idols. But there is also a possibility of mock hovering over this characteristically English fusion of idol-breaking with Duns-slaying. Not even the most zealous idol-breakers took themselves to be reversing the Fall of Man, yet something like that seems to be envisaged by Young for verse. We can at any moment speak the language of the gods again—by removing Achilles' skirt. The passage, in fact, snakes from light comedy to millennial prophecy. The question of rhyme is at once a matter of our everlasting salvation or perdition and, on the other hand, it is not all that serious.

Young's and Sheridan's verdicts are only the most vehement deployments of a repertoire of rhyme-hating which expanded rapidly (though by no means uncontestedly) just in the epoch of rhyme's most complete domination of English verse—practice. The lexicon itself also carries the double character evident in Young. Rhyme is an idol, it is witchcraft, it is contemptible, it is depraved, it is a prostitute, it is a mercenary, it is a barbarian, it is stupefaction. Yet rhyme is also a toy, a bawble, a gewgaw, a trifle; it jingles, it tinkles, it rattles and babbles. In short,

² Edward Young, *Conjectures upon Original Composition* (London, 1759), pp. 58-6.

it is something of absolutely no importance whatever, which must therefore be destroyed without further delay, because it is so deeply evil.

This is not just ancient history but also part of our history. These fantasies or observations about rhyme's meaning, whether rhymophilic or –phobic, still jingle in our heads today. Whoever selects rhyme as a practicing poet today will find that, first of all, he will be understood to have performed a socially symbolic act. Rhyme belongs, in the first place, to that repertoire of metacommunicative winks and nods by which a series of poetical party affiliations can be more or less adroitly negotiated: whether your lines begin with upper- or lower-case letters, whether they are metrical or para-metrical or non-metrical, whether they are left-justified or complexly indented or migrate everywhere across the page—these devices and the choices they entail, quite certainly constitute in the case of significant poets a timbral palette of tremendous complexity.³ But today, partly because you can see them without even needing to begin reading the poem, they are more immediately a kind of rough badge or uniform, very rapidly legible to friend or foe, who, as it were, already knows all about you even before you have begun to open your mouth. Their metacommunicative hyper-saturation threatens altogether to blot out their prosodic coloration.

There is in this way a kind of historical falling-silent of rhyme. As rhyme tends to the condition of the pure sign, the badge, its body retreats from audibility. I conjecture that each great rhyming authorship is, amongst other things, a singular rhyme-thesaurus, a repertoire of effects which are simultaneously and indissociably ideal, conceptual, semantic, syntactic, phonological, phonetic, material, contingent, stuff: in which rhyme mutely rings out its refutation of the dead metaphysics which would bore us into believing that all the categories I have just mentioned refer to real and really separable fields or entities, instead of belonging amongst the mere

³ Compare Eleanor Berry, 'The Emergence of Charles Olson's Prosody of the Page Space', *Journal of English Linguistics* 30: 1 (March 2002), 51-72.

conveniences of procedure itself. Rhyme sounds on all these instruments at once. The great philosophical systems have their formulas, autopilots which keep the machine in motion even when thinking may temporarily not in fact be taking place; the great rimaria, rather than exposing the formula only inadvertently, where the apparatus hits a bump, instead hold the formula out to us, admit to it as though admitting that thinking is never all our own work or a matter of finding that impossible quiddity, the distinctive personal voice, but that it is, rather, the question how we shall in the right way lose our voices into those of the dead and of the unborn. When rhyme itself, however, has become attenuated to a flag, a rallying point, a party card, these effects of long-term self-interlocution and self-relinquishment appear blocked or choked. These colours of sound are bound down beneath the myth: not form but its logo, not craft but its brochure, a Cause.

One easily available response to this is to settle down into the narrative of irreversibility: to think that rhyme, just as is widely supposed to have happened to diatonicity or to figurative painting, has died in history. But this view, even were it not already empirically deficient, mischaracterizes the very innovation it would wish for. Archaism and innovation have not in the history of poetry been chalk and cheese, but speaking twins. My short essay is of course not going to be able to explain why or even prove that rhyme pleases. Not only would even the attempt at such an explanation require some sort of fabulated theory of human nature, but, still less plausibly, it would imply that rhyme itself is in some way one thing, that it too has a nature remaining constant, rather than being a device whose force is utterly caught up in the authorships, genres, and other auditory habituations and economies within which it occurs. In this sense one might as well set out to explain why a perfect cadence or a glockenspiel or the colour red pleases. Instead I want to pursue a project I have been developing for a little while now in which I understand the repertoires of prosodic gestures deployed by poets not through the idea of form but rather as a distinctive mode of knowing. I want in this way to

help open up a wound, a cauterized place, in the body of our poetic culture; to attempt to listen in to rhyme's thinking through and beneath the over-saturated symbolic roles it has usually been made to play in our cultures.

14

In 1962 the young English poet and scholar J.H. Prynne gave a short but interesting radio talk on the BBC. The talk charted what Prynne understood to be a revolution in the lyric taking place in the shift from first to second-generation Romanticism.

Meditative poetry ... at some point after Wordsworth's last contact with the Augustan tradition abandoned the ambition to present the reflecting mind as part of an experiential context and withdrew into a self-generating ambience of regret. With this went an amazing degree of control over incantatory techniques, designed to preserve the cocoon of dream-like involvement and to present a kind of constant threshold music—the apparent movement of a gravely thoughtful mind. While the melancholia is switched on this noble undercurrent is unfailingly present.⁵

What Prynne calls the 'virtuoso incantation' thus developed is, for him, an alibi. It is as though Wordsworth's sense of the anaesthetic properties of metre, metre's ability to make the intolerably painful bearable and even pleasurable, were to have become full-on narcosis. In such an account, Wordsworth's marked asceticism with respect to rich instrumentations of the verse line would have been lapsed from. What replaces it is, in this account, designed not to reveal experience, but to blot it out. The techniques of incantation are a cocoon. Life, the unbearable, lies

⁴ A version of this section of the argument will appear in an article on 'The melodics of long poems' in a forthcoming issue of *Textual Practice* (Summer, 2010).

⁵ J.H. Prynne, 'The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry', *The Listener*, February 14th, 1963, 290-91, p. 290.

beyond them. So they are also a fetish, mere stuff fixated upon so as to obviate experience.

One of the most important of such incantatory techniques, of course, is rhyme, which Wordsworth had also deployed, but whose significance is much more foregrounded in the second-generation British Romantics by the greater richness of intra-linear instrumentation with which it enters into relation. Prynne's remarks strikingly echo the analysis of what still, perhaps, remains the single most important book ever written about rhyme, Viktor Zhirmunsky's *Rhyme: its history and theory*, published in Petrograd or Petersburg—the title pages, perhaps symptomatically, offer both—in 1923, and, sadly, still awaiting translation into English. Zhirmunsky's book owes part of its importance to its scepticism about the idea that rhyme is a natural fact. Zhirmunsky shows, much more thoroughly than anyone had previously managed to, how what counts as a rhyme differs radically in differing languages and in different historical epochs of the same language and in differing authorships within those historical epochs.

Zhirmunsky develops an extended contrast between two different ways of handling rhyme in modern European, and especially in Russian, poetry. One kind of poet, like Pushkin and like Baratynsky, holds to a particular series of canons about rhyme. Masculine and feminine rhymes alternate; dactylic rhyme is rare; and care is taken to avoid a plethora of parallelisms—that is to say, the recurring parallelism of rhyme is in continuous counterpoint to a recurring contrast at the level of semantics and of syntax. Pushkin prefers rhymes in which the two rhyme-words belong to different parts of speech. The automatism associated with rhyme is thus in tension with a refusal of automatism at the level of semantics and syntax. The rhymes both sound and think.⁶ (The essential features of the account which

⁶ For example, V. M. Zhirmunsky, *Rifma: ego istoriya i teoriya* (Petersburg, 1923) [repr. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1970, ed. Dmitriĭ Tschibekowski et al., with a new preface by the author [Slavische Propyläen: Texte in Neu- und Nachdrucken, 71]], p. 83, where Zhirmunsky discusses

we, perhaps, know chiefly through Wimsatt on Pope are already in place in Zhirmunsky on Pushkin.)

In contrast to this classical canon of rhyme-technique Zhirmunsky develops an account of what he calls a ‘musical-impressionistic’ handling of rhyme, already gathering in Lermontov, Tyutchev and Fet, but reaching a fortissimo in the verse of the Russian Swinburne, Konstantin Bal’mont. Bal’mont delights in just that plethora of parallelisms which had seemed vulgar to the earlier masters. Rhyme words very often come not only from the same parts of speech but also as part of repetitions of entire phrasal and melodic structures. What Roger Fowler later termed ‘metrical rhyme’, the repetition from one line to the next or to a later line of a parallelism which is both syntactic, because it is a repetition of parts of speech, and melodic, because it is a repetition of rhythmic patterns, this ‘metrical rhyme’ is made, over and over again, to coincide with rhyme proper. Dactylic rhyme is favoured, and canons of alternation need not be observed. Internal rhyme is not only more prevalent in Bal’mont than in Baratynsky, but, more importantly, when combined with this drive to parallelism, changes its function. Two segments of the same line will often perform a metrico-syntactic ‘rhyme’ as well as a phonetic one, thus bringing the integrity of the line itself into question.

These two types of prosodic repertoire, of course, are also two repertoires of thinking. Yet, for Zhirmunsky, it is clear that more thinking is going on in one repertoire than in the other. He remarks that ‘The romantic poets, who sought chiefly for effects of sound, are especially fond of short measures: the latter, characterized by the marks of an incantatory, ‘musical’ effect, represent a darkening of the side of verse which has to do with meaning, of the substantive significance of words, and a heightening of the general emotional coloration’.⁷

this phenomenon in Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman*, anticipating by some decades Wimsatt’s more often quoted article on the topic.

⁷ Zhirmunsky, pp. 39-40.

Pushkin's and Baratynsky's or Batiushkov's rhyme-technique lights meaning up, by counterpointing it; Bal'mont's obscures it, drowning it out in music. There are two striking connections here with the account by Prynne which I discussed a little earlier on. First, Zhirmunsky supplies that precisely technical account which is missing from Prynne's short talk, and which would be needed in order to explain precisely what the 'virtuoso incantation' of which Prynne speaks might consist in. But second, we find in both Zhirmunsky and Prynne a sharply Platonic consensus about what thinking is and what its relation to sound might be. 'Musical' rhyming, however 'amazing' its 'mastery', is and must be cocoon or stimulant. It cannot itself be admitted to be a kind of thinking or involved in noticing. Instead, it screens those perceptions out. Musical rhyming is automatism. It is Ion's chain of magnets: the series of automatic transmissions of inspiration awarded by Socrates to rhapsody so as to destroy the rhapsode's claim to cognition.⁸

Over the last decade or so, I have been trying to explore the question of whether music need be opposed to thinking in this way. Can there not be a musical or a prosodic thinking, a thinking which is not simply a little picture of, nor even a counterpoint to, that more familiar kind of thinking whose medium is essentially semantic and syntactic, but whose medium, instead, is essentially prosodic: a kind of thinking in tunes? Necessarily central to the formulation of this question has been the German philosopher Theodor Adorno's late *Aesthetic Theory*, and, in particular, two sets of arguments within that book.⁹ The first is the argument that technique is the way art thinks. The second is the argument that art thinks historically, and that what it knows, when it thinks well, is natural-historical experience. So-called 'form' becomes in Adorno's account a kind of inexplicit mimesis, a mimesis which is not of individual objects in the world, but of those

⁸ Plato, *Ion* 533c-535a, in *Plato on Poetry*, ed. Penelope Murray (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 41-42.

⁹ T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002).

features of natural-historical experience which are at once the most elusive and amongst the most important: of structural shifts in the texture of experience itself which are too painful, or too blissful, directly to be thematized. No art is about itself. So technique knows something about the world. Yet it knows it, Adorno suggests, just by the most obsessive, and perhaps even the most fetishistic and solipsistic, absorption in its own proper stuff. We can see how this might suggest a different line of enquiry from that pursued by Prynne. If technique is the way art thinks, and if self-absorption is, curiously, the way art notices others, then might this ‘virtuoso incantation’ be, not simply a screen or a cocoon or an anaesthetic, but a medium—a medium for thinking, and for thinking about historical experience, just when in the very act of apparently retreating from it?

2

T.S. Eliot’s essay of 1917, ‘Reflections on vers libre’, expressed a hope which has hardly been realized: that a liberation *from* rhyme might also be a liberation *of* rhyme. ‘Freed from its exacting task of supporting lame verse’, Eliot wrote, ‘it could be applied with greater effect where it is most needed’.¹⁰ But rhyme’s imagined liberation does not, the way Eliot tells it, sound very free. If it were indeed intelligible to refer to a poetic *device’s* being ‘liberated’ or ‘imprisoned’, this would have to mean rhyme’s coming in some way into its own. But rhyme cannot come into its own as an instrument put in the service of needs already known, but only as the generation of new needs. Contesting Schopenhauer’s figures for rhyme, David Samoilov writes in his book about Russian rhyme that

[P]oetic thought is ‘formed’ in the rhythm, sound, and rhyme of verse. This is the novum which the composer of poetry introduces into thinking. And the devices of verse composition are neither

¹⁰ Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p.36.

fetters nor a mask, but something which conduces to the emancipation of thoughts and feelings.¹¹

Rhyme which merely served already existing needs and thoughts, without generating new ones, would not really be perfectly emancipated, but perfectly dead.

It is not only possible, but perhaps even probable that, when Prynne was composing the following passage of his poem ‘Aristeas, In Seven Years’, he had Eliot’s dictum in mind.

No one harms these people: they
are sacred and have no
weapons. They sit or pass, in
the form of divine song,
they are free in the apt form of
displacement. They change
their shape, being of the essence as
a figure of extent. Which
for the power in rhyme
7 *is gold, in this northern clime*
which the Greeks so held to themselves and
which in the steppe was no more
than the royal figment.¹²

The ‘seven years’ of the poem’s title are also seven numbers in the left margin, so that a ‘year’ comes also to be a passage of verse, and so that the transition from one ‘year’ to another is marked by this marginal figure. And each line next to such a figure is italicized, raising the possible implications that these lines are quotations, or that they should be read in sequence with each other instead of or as well as being read in sequence with the other lines of the poem. The previous such line

¹¹ David Samoilov, *Kniga o russkoi rifme* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1973), p. 5.

¹² J.H. Prynne, ‘Aristeas, In Seven Years’, in *Poems* (Tarset, Northumberland, and Fremantle, Western Australia: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), pp. 90-96, p. 94.

has read ‘6 *the true condition of bone*’, so that we may need to read ‘the true condition of bone is gold, in this northern clime’. But at the transition to the poem’s final ‘year’ something surprising happens. The poem, which has been not only unrhymed but apparently non- or even anti-metrical throughout, suddenly rhymes, and on the word ‘rhyme’ itself.

At least, it seems to rhyme. But for many of the currently respectable definitions of rhyme, this may not be a rhyme at all. Sheer sound replay is not enough. For Samoilov, ‘Rhyme [...] may not be something which can equally *be present* or *not be present*—its *presence must be necessary*—for it constitutes a non-circumnavigable element of the composition of a given verse, one of its organizing principles’.¹³ In a long fragment left unpublished at his death, Hugh Kenner described rhyme as ‘... the production of like sounds according to a schedule that makes them predictable’.¹⁴ By neither of these accounts would this place in Prynne count as a rhyme. Its presence does not seem either necessary or predictable, because it is the only rhyme in the poem. Except that when you start to look, there are others; or, there would be others, if we were permitted to treat them as such. For example:

But it was not blessing, rather a fact so
hard-won that only the twist in middle
air would do it anyway, so even he be wise
or with any recourse to the darkness of
his tent. The sequence of issue is no
more than this, ...

Lines one and five of this excerpt rhyme too, don’t they? So : no. Here, though, we might be likely to invoke the distance between these lines, the fact that these lines

¹³ Samoilov, p. 13.

¹⁴ Hugh Kenner, ‘Rhyme: An Unfinished Monograph’, in *Common Knowledge* 10:3 (2004), 377-425.

end with particles (just as, throughout the poem, there is an extraordinarily high incidence of lines which end with articles, prepositions, and other verbal small change), and, here, we would be likely to invoke the absence of metre. For Viktor Zhirmunsky, in his treatise on *Rhyme: its history and theory*, rhyme is ‘any sonic replay bearing an organizational function in the metrical composition of the poem’.¹⁵ This leaves the question open about our case, though. On one hand, this poem is not metrical, and therefore this replay of ‘so : no’ can hardly be said to have an organizational function in its metrical composition. On the other hand it can be argued that all verse is in a minimal way metrically composed in that it is divided into lines. In that case, any sonic replay at line-end would qualify. But this absence of metre also applies to ‘rhyme : clime’. It begins to look as though our certainty that this is a rhyme rests on the fact that it is a rhyme on the word rhyme itself. Without that word, we perhaps would not even notice this replay at all.

At any rate, it does appear that there is a kind of gap between what metricians will agree to call rhyme and what readers can recognize as rhyme. For most readers, these lines by Prynne make a rhyme, and no amount of Kenner, Samoilov or Zhirmunsky will persuade them otherwise. In dominant theories of rhyme, we are in the presence, in fact, of a *metricization* of rhyme. This metricization, I want to suggest, this insistence that sonic replay which does not play an organizational role in the composition of the poem is not rhyme, is also accompanied, in the corresponding poetics, by a *logicization* of rhyme’s role.

3

¹⁵ Viktor Zhirmunsky, *Rifma: ego istoriya i teoriya* [“Rhyme: its history and theory”] (Petersburg, 1923) [repr. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1970, ed. Dmitrij Tschischewski et al., with a new preface by the author [Slavische Propyläen: Texte in Neu- und Nachdrucken, 71]], p. 3 (my translation).

Both the metricization and logicization of rhyme, of course, are in one way impeccably motivated. Without its metricization we should, it is feared, be unable to distinguish rhyme from sonic replays occurring any old where in lines; without its logicization we should not see how rhyme is a form of thinking and not merely a species of sensation. Yet that last motive should give us pause. John Hollander's fine discussion of some lines from Wallace Stevens's 'Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction' illustrates the point.

There was a mystic marriage in Catawba,
At noon it was on the mid-day of the year
Between a great captain and the maiden Bawda,

This was their ceremonial hymn: Anon
We loved but would no marriage make. Anon
The one refused the other one to take . . .

Hollander comments thus:

The epithalamium embedded in the firm stanzas is the rhyming couplet, pentameter to Alexandrine, concluding the Spenserian stanza: 'Anon we loved but would no marriage make. / Anon the one refused the other one to take', where the inversion is part of the Spenserian echo. The brilliantly framing and bracketing 'Anon's, the rhyming of the internal, but marked 'make' with the line-and-tercet terminal 'take' typify Stevens's magnificent control over the structures of his verse.¹⁶

And he continues: 'Rhyming for the later Stevens does the imagination's work and not the jingling and tinkling of evasions; it occurs as "the luminous melody of proper sound"'.¹⁷ There's nothing to quarrel with in this impressive analysis and evaluation, but there is something to notice: the re-appearance of some favoured

¹⁶ Hollander, 'Rhyme and the true calling of words', in *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 117-34, pp. 132-3.

¹⁷ Hollander, p. 133.

terms from the lexicon of rhyme-hating. Rhyme which is to be the imagination's has to do some serious 'work'. Otherwise it is evasive, jingling and tinkling. The reproach that rhyme 'jingles', perhaps the most frequent of all in eighteenth-century attacks on bad rhyme or on rhyme in general, accuses it of being a meaningless noise, like the jingling of bells. The strongly Protestant character of attacks on rhyme can, here, coalesce with mockery of Papist ritual. And to be attracted by such jingling is not only potentially idolatrous, but also fetishistic or perverse. We are consuming the wrapping, not the product.

Isn't there a way, here, in which the attacks on rhyme have left some mark even on one of its most ardent sympathizers? Good rhyme has to be serious rhyme which does work; it must not be evasive; it must not jingle and tinkle. Its chimes, if any, must be fully masculine, as in Emerson's resonant desiderata, quoted by Hollander:

Rhyme; not tinkling rhyme but grand Pindaric strokes as firm as the tread of a horse. Rhyme that vindicates itself as an art, the stroke of the bell of a cathedral. Rhyme which knocks at prose & dulness with the stroke of a cannon ball. Rhyme which builds out of Chaos & Old night a splendid architecture to bridge the impassable, & call aloud on all the children of morning that the Creation is recommencing'.¹⁸

The jubilation is infectious, but there's also quite a lot of hitting and knocking going on here, not to mention a certain amount of military activity, and Emerson's account suggests a rhyme which certainly does have an organizing role in metrical composition: the firm tread of the Pindaric horse, the beat, precisely, of metre, will rescue rhyme from perverse or effeminate tinkling (we note that rhyme plays little

¹⁸ Emerson's journal, 27 June 1839. Quoted in John Hollander, 'Rhyme and the true calling of words', in *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 119.

role in Pindar).¹⁹ This need to cleanse rhyme from the associative colorations of idolatry, fetishism, and perversity, I want to suggest, is one of the fundamental but concealed motives behind the metricization and logicization of rhyme in canonical rhyme-theory.

One of the peaks of that range, even today, is W.B. Wimsatt's essay 'One relation of rhyme to reason'. In that essay Wimsatt argues that part of what makes Alexander Pope an accomplished master of rhyme is the relationship between the logical and the alogical in his rhyming. He shows, famously, how Pope varies the part of speech in his rhyme words, so that instead of nouns continually rhyming with nouns, verbs with verbs, and so on, rhyme-partnerships are more often exogamous: nouns with verbs, and so on. This matters, in Wimsatt's view, because 'In literary art only the wedding of the alogical with the logical gives the former an aesthetic value. The words of a rhyme, with their curious harmony of sound and distinction of sense, are an amalgam of the sensory and the logical, or an arrest and precipitation of the logical in sensory form; they are the icon in which the idea is caught'.²⁰ So that, for Wimsatt, when rhyme-partners present not only a semantic distinction but also a syntactical contrast, the wedding of the logical with the alogical takes place across a more marked disjunction, and is therefore more satisfying.

Illuminating as the account of Pope's technique here is, there lies behind it not only a certain poetic but also, of course, a certain metaphysic. Both depend on first making a clean cut between the sensory and the logical and, then, their subsequent satisfying wedding. Without that wedding, the alogical, including the

¹⁹ For a discussion of rhyme and near-rhyme in classical Latin and Greek, see Eva H. Guggenheimer, *Rhyme Effects and Rhyming Figures: A Comparative Study of Sound Repetitions in the Classics with Emphasis on Latin Poetry* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1972 [De proprietatibus litterarum, series maior, 18]).

²⁰ W.B. Wimsatt, "One Relation of Rhyme to Reason", in *The Verbal Icon. Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1958), pp. 152-66, p. 165.

non-semantic and non-syntactical bits of rhyme words, has no aesthetic value. It is just stuff, a corpse, waiting to be given life by the soul of logic. ‘The music of spoken words’, Wimsatt is sure, ‘in itself is meager, so meager in comparison to the music of song or instrument as to be hardly worth discussion. It has become a platitude of criticism to point out that verses composed of meaningless words afford no pleasure of any kind and can scarcely be called rhythmical—let them even be rhymed’.²¹ Like many platitudes, however, this one may not be true, not at least if the pleasure which small children can be observed to take in Velimir Khlebnikov’s ‘Language of the Gods’ is anything to go by.²² As the medievalist James I. Wimsatt has pointed out in an important article, the assumption that the music of spoken words is ‘meager’ is not proven.²³ In the first place, the richness or poverty of music is in no way dependent upon the acoustic complexity of the forces involved. Otherwise the ‘music’ of Bach’s cello suites would always be ‘meager’ in comparison to that of an orchestral suite by Delius. So that even were we to grant, as I do not, the assumption that the repertoires of vocal gestures deployed by poetry are in some absolute qualitative or quantitative sense insufficiently rich, this would still tell us nothing one way or the other about the poverty or richness of verbal music, which is dependent not upon the materials, but on what is done with them.

The elder Wimsatt’s view has been influential, producing such significant developments and modifications of the thesis as Hugh Kenner’s essay ‘Pope’s Reasonable Rhymes’.²⁴ Yet other critics who have written since Wimsatt and Kenner have been working at this question in ways that tend to break down the logicization of rhyme—we can think immediately, for examples, of Garrett

²¹ Wimsatt, p. 165.

²² Personal experiment, 4.iii. 2005.

²³ James I. Wimsatt, ‘Rhyme/Reason, Chaucer/Pope, Icon/Symbol’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 55.1 (March 1994), 17-46.

²⁴ Hugh Kenner, ‘Pope’s Reasonable Rhymes’, *English Literary History*, 41:1 (Spring, 1974), 74-88.

Stewart's work on transegmental rhyme,²⁵ of Debra Fried's on rhyme as pun,²⁶ or of J. Paul Hunter's critique of what he aptly calls the 'second shoe' theory of couplet rhyming.²⁷

Clive Scott has drawn attention to whole practices of rhyme which, in his phrase, free rhyme from the rhyming dictionary, among them Louis Aragon's use of so-called *rimes enjambées*. In one lyric from *Les Yeux d'Elsa*, as Scott shows, there are two line-end rhymes but also a rhyme straddled deliberately across the line-end:

Bertrand mieux que Chéhérazade
Savait faire passer le temps
Qui va la jeunesse insultant
Faut-il que le coeur me brise A
D'autres partir pour la croisade.

A 'rhyme scheme' for this passage would require a new philological algebra able to incorporate verse fractions as well as integers. In this case we know that this is not simply the critic's ingenuity, both because there are many such instances in Aragon's wartime lyrics, and because in Aragon's essay, 'La Rime en 1940', he explicitly promoted this kind of rhyme.²⁸ Like Prynne's rhyme, Aragon's is there, is a rhyme, but refuses to play an organizational role in the metrical composition of the poem (unless its deliberately *disorganizational* role—as Scott says, *rimes*

²⁵ Garrett Stewart, 'Rhymed treason: A Microlinguistic Test Case' in *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), pp. 66-99, p. 69.

²⁶ Debra Fried, 'Rhyme Puns' in Jonathan Culler, ed. *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 83-99, p. 89.

²⁷ J. Paul Hunter, "The Heroic Couplet: Its Rhyme and Reason", *Ideas*, vol. 4 (1) (1996): <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ideasv41/hunter4.htm> (accessed 28. vi. 2010). See also the same author's "Sleeping Beauties: Are Historical Aesthetics Worth Recovering?", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34.1 (2000), 1-20.

²⁸ Clive Scott, 'Aragon, *Les Yeux d'Elsa*' in *The Riches of Rhyme: Studies in French Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 266-304, p. 271.

enjambées have a tendency ‘to dissolve the syllabic integrity of the lines’—could be understood, via a kind of metrical theodicy, as an organizational role by negation).

4

Picking up some of these hints from those who have gone before me, I want now to consider a single passage from Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*.

But now secure the painted Vessel glides,
The Sun-beams trembling on the floating Tydes,
While melting Musick steals upon the Sky,
And soften’d Sounds along the Waters die.
Smooth flow the Waves, the Zephyrs gently play,
Belinda smil’d, and all the World was gay.
All but the *Sylph*—With careful Thoughts opprest,
Th’impending Woe sate heavy on his Breast.
He summons strait his Denizens of Air;
The lucid Squadrons round the Sails repair:
Soft o’er the Shrouds Aerial Whispers breathe,
That seem’d but *Zephyrs* to the train beneath.
Some to the Sun their Insect-Wings unfold,
Waft on the Breeze, or sink in Clouds of Gold.
Transparent Forms, too fine for mortal Sight,
Their fluid Bodies half dissolv’d in Light.
Loose to the Wind their airy Garments flew,
Thin glitt’ring Textures of the filmy Dew;
Dipt in the richest Tincture of the Skies,
Where Light disports in ever-mingling Dies,
While ev’ry Beam new transient Colours flings,
Colours that change, whene’er they wave their Wings.²⁹

If all is well you will, like me, be struck by a powerful sense of the intense musicality of these lines. If not, the analysis which follows cannot have the foolish

²⁹ Alexander Pope, ‘The Rape of the Lock’ [five-canto version] in *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson (London: Methuen and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 162-64, ll. 47-68.

hope of, as Wordsworth put it, trying to reason you into a belief that the lines are beautiful, but rather that of attempting analytically to account for an overwhelming experience of my own, an experience of evanescent liquidity, of a powerful seduction whose force is present precisely in its transience, in its continuous disappearance and elusiveness, rather than in, say, its symmetry or its balance or its order.

Of course some of the chief and well-known features of Pope's couplet style are in play here: the coincidence of line-ends with sentences or at least phrases, so that every large metrical unit in this passage coincides with a syntactical unit; and, just as Wimsatt stipulates, there is a high level of variation in the parts of speech placed in this position, so that only two couplets end each line with the same part of speech (sight : light/ /skies : dies). Yet it seems to me that this accounts very little even for the power of the rhymes in this passage, and that in order to account for that we need to think a little more about the cross-contamination between rhyme and other kinds of 'sonic replay'.

The first of these would be assonance, by which I mean (following Percy Adams) vowel echoes coinciding with stresses.³⁰ There is one very obvious reason to treat assonance in relation to rhyme, which is that it can be an important feature linking rhyme-pairs. So, if we look at the very opening of this passage, the rhyme glides/Tydes is immediately followed by the rhyme Sky/die. In other words, the verse paragraph begins not only, like every other passage, with a series of two rhyming pairs, but, much more unusually, with an emphatic series of four identical vowel sounds in identical stress-positions. The effect, I would argue, is anything but ordered and balanced: it is, rather, excessive, emphatic, enthusiastic, something like a series of cries of acclamation. The effect is something like that of rhyming rhymes, a geometrical, rather than an arithmetic, ratio of rhyme. And, I would

³⁰ Percy G. Adams, *Graces of Harmony: Alliteration, Assonance and Consonance in Eighteenth-Century British Poetry* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1977).

argue, the presence of a quadruple assonance, in such a heavily metrically marked position, sheds an influence over the whole verse paragraph. Later on, that is, when this vowel sound recurs in other rhymes, we are likely involuntarily to recall this pedal point which has been set at the start of the verse paragraph: when we have Sight/Light, and Skies/Dies, we are at once likely unconsciously to recall the beginning of this passage. In these circumstances established by vowel-music, a series of thematic associations can begin to establish themselves. We are given a miniature rhyming dictionary for this rhyme which establishes a set of semantic connections: Sky, Skies, Sight and Light establish a temporary link between this vowel sound and the idea of lightness or brightness. This is not the claim that there could somehow be a natural palette of vowel-sounds, each bearing its appropriate thematic or semantic coloration. There is no such natural correspondence. But there can, instead, be what one might call clouds or mists of such associations, clouds whose force is not necessary or natural but is rather a kind of prosodic weather formation gathering in the poet's peculiar handling of verbal music. And I would want to argue that phonotextual clusters can with sufficient attention and power become something more permanently established in the *reader's* repertoire of response, too. They become in this sense something like a *prosodic idiom*, a widely understood convention of response which poets and readers can become used to manipulating, and which can even, in course of time, and misleadingly, come to feel to poets and readers as though it were something like a feature of the language itself. This, I'd argue, is one crucial difference between linguistic competence and art-verse competence. Poets' virtuosity with prosodic patterning and prosodic idiom is not something that can ever be contractually assured. It is, instead, a performance which, like a potlatch, calls for an answering performance from the reader. Virtuosity in writing prosodic tunes calls forth an answering virtuosity in hearing them: that such tunes can sometimes be, in Johnson's word, nugatory, mists rising from the reader's brain, is in fact not simply

a sign of error, but a structural feature of what it is like to respond to prosodic virtuosity. A cloud, after all, is not nothing. In *Le plaisir du texte*, Barthes writes that:

Si je lis avec plaisir cette phrase, cette histoire ou ce mot, c'est qu'ils ont été écrits dans le plaisir (ce plaisir n'est pas en contradiction avec les plaintes de l'écrivain). Mais le contraire ? Ecrire dans le plaisir m'assure-t-il—moi, écrivain—du plaisir de mon lecteur ? Nullement. Ce lecteur, il faut que je le cherche (que je le « drague »), *sans savoir où il est*. Un espace de la jouissance est alors créé. Ce n'est pas la « personne » de l'autre qui m'est nécessaire, c'est l'espace: la possibilité d'une dialectique du désir, d'une *imprévision* de la jouissance: que les jeux ne soient pas faits, qu'il y ait un jeu.³¹

[If I read this phrase, this story or this word with pleasure, it is because they have been written in pleasure (this pleasure is in no way contradicted by the complaints of the writer). But the opposite? Does writing in pleasure guarantee me—me, the writer—the pleasure of my reader? In no way. This reader, it is necessary that I seek him (that I 'chat him up'), *without knowing where he is*. A space for bliss is thus created. It is not the 'person' of the other which I require, it is the space: the possibility of a dialectic of desire, of an *unforeseenness* of bliss: that all bets are not already placed, that there be something in play] (my translation).

I want to suggest that it may be just this kind of space for bliss (admittedly not the only nor the usual translation of *jouissance*) that Pope's 'unfixed' prosodic effects open up—precisely one that can never be guaranteed but that is like a venture, a gamble, a surmise. It is a seduction in which I do not know where the other is, and in which I therefore do not know what it would take to please her, and in which I therefore take the risk that my pleasure can also be hers: in other words, in which I can seduce the other only by relinquishing myself into my own art. Common sense and professional literary criticism alike have often tended, for some good reasons,

³¹ Roland Barthes, "Le Plaisir du texte" [1973] in *Oeuvres complètes* (5 vols, Paris: 2002), vol. 4, pp. 219-61, p. 220.

to operate an excluded middle between fantasy and intention. Either the poet intended an effect or the reader is making it up. But because prosodic thinking operates right at the threshold of intentionality, the difficulty of deciding whether its effects are nugatory or real is in fact constitutive of the field of prosodic thinking, both in its composition and in the recomposition which takes place every time even a silent performance of verse is undertaken. All the right responses always have to be fantasized first before they can be real. Art makes up what is already there, and then the reader has to make it up again too.

What all this first of all instructs us in, I want to suggest, is the somewhat theoreticist character of any sharp distinction between terminal-rhyme or 'rhyme proper' and so-called 'casual' (Zhirmunsky) or intra-linear rhyme when compared with any actual experience of the phonotext. The distinction, that is, may be a clear one for the analyst, yet in the *experience* of reading, rhyme and assonance are intimately linked, and especially so when, as we have seen here, there is assonance among the rhyme-pairs themselves, and especially so when these rhyming rhymes occur at the very beginning of a verse paragraph. This passage is quite exceptionally saturated with assonantal and alliterative echoes, and Pope continually varies the degree of saturation which he permits. In lines 53-54, for example, we have very little of this kind of instrumentation going on; the lines stand as a kind of plain contrast to the prosodic fireworks set off around them. Let's take, for example, the assonances in lines 59-60: 'Some to the Sun their Insect-Wings unfold,/ Waft on the Breeze, or sink in Clouds of Gold'. Here we have rhymes not only at the end of the line, unfold/Gold, but also 'rhymes' buried right in the middle of the line 'sink' and 'wings'. The rhymes are buried here not only because they are in the middle of lines, at different metrical positions, and therefore, according to Kenner's or Zhirmunsky's schedules, do not count as rhymes, but also because they are buried within word-units: the rhyme in each case is 'ing', and in both cases, the rhyme is completed before the final consonant of

the word-unit is finished. As I have said, for Kenner and Zhirmunsky these are merely assonances. Yet ‘assonance’ does not quite seem right either, because assonance concerns only the stressed vowel, whereas here we have a complete replay of both vowel and consonant. In other words, the only aspect which is missing for these to be recognized as ‘rhymes’ is metrical function. I should like to suggest that we think of these replays as ‘fugitive’ rhymes, or, to borrow my lexicon from the poem itself, as ‘quick’ and ‘unfixed’ ones.

This, though, is only the start of the saturatedness of this couplet. In the second line of it we not only have a buried fugitive rhyme with the middle of the first line, we also have a buried rhyme within the second line itself ‘ink ink’: ‘sink in Clouds’. Once explained, this subsides. It’s like explaining a joke or making explicit a flirtation: not funny once explained, not seductive once explained. But it is part of the poet’s virtuosity that of course this event—and here it is completely unlike line-end rhyme—will go past far too fast consciously to be noticed. Later these quick and unfixed rhymes sound out with the whole band behind them. Those singing inks which have been seen and heard only beneath the threshold now spill over or take flight into the end rhymes ‘flings’ and ‘wings’.

5

After all this, then, I would like to propose a different interpretation of the power in Pope’s rhyme than the logicized one given by Wimsatt and Kenner. Pope’s rhyme has the power it does partly because of its opening itself to all sorts of other, less metrically foregrounded, tinklings and jinglings. The illicit, perverse attachment which Pope shows to passages of deeply saturated phonotextual repetition achieves a power in itself which pulls sometimes against, rather than always with, the semantic organization of argument. Pope’s virtuosity works through contamination between assonance and rhyme, so that the emphatic

chords of end rhyme gain half their power from the whispers and mutterings which have gone before them. In this atmosphere they sound less like returns to order after an excursion than like the full soundings out of an obsessiveness which has earlier been kept suppressed. Here indeed is ‘virtuoso incantation’, and long before the date fixed for its ascent by the young Prynne.

In *The Rape of the Lock* Pope does something much more interesting than satirizing the *beau monde*. What he does instead is to enter into its obsessions. The poem’s first line promises an account of ‘what mighty contests rise from trivial things’. This is no joke. Mighty feelings fix upon what are, from another point of view, mere toys. Readers are never permitted to attain a secure distance from their magic. A well-known trap lies in wait for anyone advertising calm detachment. Belinda’s lock is compared to Othello’s missing handkerchief. But this is double mock: a handkerchief is no way grander than a lock of hair, and so the irony redounds not on Belinda, but on whoever would imagine that he himself could never be so foolish as to get upset about something so insignificant.

Of Pope’s ways of understanding how deeply serious triviality is, the most significant, I want to suggest, is not by the conventional means of characterizing it or exhaustively describing it. Pope enters in by means of an obsessive attention to the requirements of his own world of luxury objects of desire, the world of the traps, toys, and devices of verse. He is able to understand the polite world as a world of signs, of part-objects, partly because of his own relationship to verse. I said earlier on that rhyme tends to fall silent, that its force tends to become suppressed by its metacommunicative job. When Pope makes *all Arabia breathe from yonder box*, what he is describing is the very fragrance of such metacommunication. You inhale the perfume, but you smell Arabia. It is a scent more delicious and more death-like and more tenaciously fixated upon than any earthly one could ever be, the scent of a sign.

Here I am, in front of the television. I am watching a short film about a computer. In the middle of the film, its undersong of bad imitation-*Kraftwerk* is interrupted. A glowing logo (the death-mask of *logos*) shines out, and, simultaneously, a new *musical* element breaks in upon me: the *acoustic trademark*, music's very coffin. This proprietor has succeeded in compelling every manufacturer who uses this component to stick this sounding symbol in its film. Every last part of skin must be made symbolic. The ear is to be branded from inside. We are today undergoing the attempted discursification and infrastructuralization of the entire perceptual field. At every moment some kind sign, some logico-sensuous avatar or other icon, would screen us from the unbearable reality of perception.

For Wordsworth, the opposition between imagination and fantasy was cardinal. To blur it risked raising counter-spirits. Matthew Arnold's view was that Pope was a classic of our prose. But Wordsworth thought Pope was a witch, a sorcerer and seducer through melody. The pleasures of verse in no way represent some entirely unmediated category of 'sheer sensuous pleasure', however much they might feel like that. The notion of sheer sensuous pleasure, in the case of verbal art, is only the obverse of an inner logicism. Yet might they be, not counter-spirits, but counter-fetishes? Collections of all sorts of paralinguistic material are invested by the adepts with intensely powerful feelings, meanings and associations which come from all sorts of other places. Can there be subterranean affinities and reproaches operating among Pope's verse fetishism, the reader's verse fetishism, and those relays and circuits of fetishism which organize and produce pleasure in our collective life? That Pope's style was habitually and routinely by everyone described as 'polished'—this itself testifies to a felt link between the intensively worked-over surface of his verse and the gleaming cabinets, tables, canes and snuff-boxes evoked in *The Rape of the Lock*. Grant this, that rhyme is a bawble, a

gewgaw, a toy; then Pope might perhaps be playing about with it, yet in such a way that the whole toyshop is named and known.

It is Arnold's view, not Wordsworth's, which has prevailed, even and especially where Pope is praised. Pope's technique—with some of the exceptions I mentioned earlier—is taken for an exhibit in the imaginary museum of a so-called and in fact truly nugatory 'Augustanism'. But it is Wordsworth, and not Arnold, who actually understood what was at stake in Pope's writing, because he knew in person the tremors of those melodies, having lived before that radical emancipation or deafening of the prosodic ear which reduced to a heading in a sub-romantic narrative of dead ratiocination a verse repertoire which was in its time the occasion of actual intensities of delight. No one read Pope primarily because of his balance, his orderliness, or his Augustan moral vision. What Pope's contemporaries mostly noticed about his verse, instead (these are all their terms, not mine—not all are compliments) was its sweetness, its variety, its gay finery, its embroidery, its vivacity, its colouring, its glitterings, its flourish, its debauch, its embellishment, its *enflure*, its tunableness, its suavity, its easiness, its spirit, its elevation, its glare, its dazzle, its fluency, its musicality, its melodiousness.³² We have been well taught to distinguish rhyme which does the imagination's work from another kind of rhyme which offers 'the tinkling and jingling of evasions'. But Pope, the verse-junkie, also offers us, if you like, the tinklings and jinglings of imagination. In epochs of tendentially total deflection, might imagination be bound also to work through and out of fantasy rather than only in purification from it?

³² 'Sweet', 'sweetly': Leonard Welsted (John Barnard, ed., *Pope: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 53), George Granville, Baron Lansdowne (Barnard, p. 60); 'Variety': Thomas Parnell (Barnard, p. 56 ('How ev'ry Music varies in thy Lines!'), Lewis Theobald (Barnard, p. 122), though John Dennis disagreed (Barnard, p. 76, p. 97); 'finery': dialogists invented by Joseph Spence (Barnard, p. 174, p. 179); 'embroidery': in Spence (Barnard, p. 180); 'vivacity': in Spence (Barnard, p. 179); 'colouring': in Spence (Barnard, p. 170); 'glitterings': in Spence (Barnard, p. 171); flourish: in Spence (Barnard, *ibid.*); 'debauch': in Spence (Barnard, p. 174); 'embellish[ed]': William Melmoth (Barnard, p. 137); '*Enflure*': Spence, *An Essay on Pope's Odyssey* (2 vols, London and Oxford, 1726), vol. 1, p. 71; 'tunableness': in Spence (Barnard, p. 178); 'suavity of numbers': Gilbert Wakefield, *Observations on Pope* (London, 1796), sig. a2; 'easy measures': Leonard Welsted (Barnard, p. 53); 'sprightly and easy': Richard Fiddes, *A Prefatory Epistle Concerning some Remarks To be published on Homer's Iliad: Occasioned by the Proposals of Mr. Pope towards a new English Version of that Poem* (London, 1714), p. 9; 'spirit': Berkeley (Barnard, p. 94); 'elevated beauties': in Spence (Barnard, p. 171); 'glaring', 'dazzling': in Spence, *An Essay*, vol. 1, p.10; 'fluency': in Spence, *An Essay*, vol. 1, p. 54 'musical', 'melodious': Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (3rd edition, 2 vols, London, 1772), p.10.

Just as though, after all, these quick and unfixed rhymes might turn out to be the
very melody of bliss