

The Possibilities of Rhyme in Free Verse

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Far from being merely the straightforward device for which it might occasionally be taken, rhyme in poetry is a highly intricate phenomenon whose effects are largely determined by its contextual appropriateness. It interacts with syntax and metre; and even the semantic structure of a poem affects the perceptual quality and intensity of rhyme.¹ In this essay, then, I propose to examine the relationship between rhyme and its metrical and syntactic context, so that on the basis of this examination I may advance a hypothesis that will explain *why*, in some contexts, rhyme appears to be more effective than in others. Moreover, these insights will allow me to predict in what manner and to what extent rhyme can be advantageously employed as a valuable ingredient in free verse. Cognitive introspection based on the laws of gestalt psychology will help answer questions such as: what is the function of rhyme, and why do some forms of poetry appear to require rhyme as an essential component while others tend to dispense with rhyme? Although the results of my investigation will necessarily be tentative, I am confident that they will be supported by an argument sufficiently reassuring to open up further perspectives of inquiry. By way of definition, I quote William Harmon's statement that "rhyme proper ought to be understood as the relation between stressed syllables that begin differently and end alike" (1987:369). Features such as half-rhyme (*move-love*), assonance (*move-spoon*), or alliteration (*move-mind*) will only marginally be touched upon in this essay.

Traditional forms of English poetry generally comply with certain rhyming laws which govern the relationships between one rhyme and another, as well as between rhyme and metre, and rhyme and syntax. Most of these laws are so banal and self-evident that not even a mediocre poet would accidentally ignore them. The following

list is intended to provide an approximate overview of those rhyme-related features which the reader of, for instance, a ballad or sonnet usually takes for granted.

- (1) Rhyme most commonly occurs at the end of a line.
- (2) In respect of alternating line length - for example, a four-stress line followed by a three-stress line in the short ballad measure - rhymes are found between lines of equal length.
- (3) Four-beat verse makes rhyme all but compulsory, whereas a pentameter may easily do without this device.
- (4) Rhyme in poetry normally marks the end of a syntactic clause or phrase.
- (5) Whenever masculine and feminine rhymes (such as *mat-cat* and *busy-dizzy*, respectively) are employed alternately, the feminine rhyme tends to come first, the masculine second. (Cf. Harmon 1987:372).

The above laws, which are part and parcel of our rhythmic perception of poetic language, may be violated in some way or other to produce a comic or ironic effect. In order to understand why they control the rhythms of poetry as they do, we need to analyse the function of rhyme.

A poetic environment indicates the significance of speech sound not just as a conveyor of meaning but as an end in itself. Rhyme facilitates the mental task of abstracting the sonic features from their potential semantic weight by using repetition to activate the acoustic information before it is semantically charged.² Meaning, though indirectly affected by rhyme, remains comparatively inconspicuous. Since the perceptual intervals between a word and its rhyming counterpart seldom exceed three lines of verse, rhyme may ideally operate as rhythmic marker - a function which is also reflected by the etymological relatedness between the cognate forms of *rhyme*

and *rhythm*. However, rhyme unfolds its rhythmic power only in connection with syntax and metre. Where these components are rhythmically insignificant, as in prose, two rhyming words - if they are recognized as such - will hardly evoke a rhythmic response. Rhyme amplifies the effect of language rhythm in poetry. It organizes the rhythmic superstructure of a poem by indicating points of closure. An alternate rhyme *abab*, for instance, is perceived as one relatively stable, symmetrical unit, whereas the rearrangement in couplets *aabb* tends to yield two fairly compact units *aa* and *bb*. As Reuven Tsur (1996:65-66) notes, the grouping of the couplets is motivated by the gestalt psychological laws of similarity and proximity. While the alternate rhyme postpones the completion of its pattern until the fourth line where the second *b*-rhyme marks the closure of the quatrain, the two couplets are closed in themselves rather than in combination.

If a poetic structure is perceived as balanced, it is also likely to be perceived as closed, because structural stability indicates completion. However, if the same structure is repeated again and again, its closural effect will be somewhat diminished. "A systematic repetition," as Barbara Herrnstein-Smith (1968:48) writes, "is [...] a force for continuation that must be overcome if closure is to occur." Thus, the all too frequent recurrence of a symmetrical pattern establishes a macro-pattern whose open-ended form calls for some deviational device to stop the structural repetition. According to the law of *Prägnanz*, a gestalt will always tend to be perceived as "good", that is, regular, symmetrical, simple, and so on (cf. Koffka 1935:110). Recurrent patterns, it is true, form larger symmetrical wholes; but the closural force decreases as the size and complexity of such a macro-structure increase. For instance, a poem consisting of two quatrains is more easily perceived as symmetrical than a poem consisting of, say, 32 quatrains. Before studying the closural function of rhyme in its rhythmic context, I shall examine the deviational means by which a poetic metre

may interrupt its continuous flow to signify closure. For only if we understand the perceptual effects of metrical patterns will we be able to assess the potential of rhyme.

A series of regular metrical lines is sometimes brought to an end by a line that is either longer or shorter than those preceding it. While the first method is only occasionally employed, for example, in the Spenserian stanza, which has eight pentameter lines (rhyming *ababbcb*) followed by a hexameter (with *c*-rhyme), the second method becomes manifest in most metres with lines of varying length. Thus, the short ballad measure features four-stress lines followed by three-stress lines in regular alternation. The rhythmic recitation of a poem composed in this metre requires a compensatory pause at the end of each short line, so that there is no temporal difference between the recitation of a four-stress line and the recitation of a three-stress line. Yet, why is there hardly any regular four-beat metre that begins with a three-stress line and ends with a four-stress line in each couplet? Would not the change from short to long close the couplet as effectively as the change from long to short? Obviously, the second possibility is rhythmically more appealing than the first: as cognitive introspection will confirm, a sequence in which the pattern *xXxXxX* (with *X* denoting metrical stress and *x* metrical non-stress) precedes the pattern *xXxXxXxX*, runs counter to our habitual experience and expectation. What matters, here, is not so much the change in linear length, but the placement of the metrical pause. In the context of a regular four-beat metre, closure is most effectively indicated by a metrically required pause. This functional aspect of pausing becomes particularly clear in syntax, where a pause is naturally made to signify the end of a clause or sentence.

The following construct variations will demonstrate how interlinear patterning affects the rhythmic force of a quatrain in strong four-beat measure:

(A)

One should not go out during thunder,
Walk slowly down the lane,
For lightning splits the trees asunder
Despite the pouring rain.

(a)

Despite the pouring rain,
One should not go out during thunder,
Walk slowly down the lane,
For lightning splits the trees asunder.

(B)

One should not go out during thunder,
Walk slowly down the muddy lane,
For lightning splits the trees asunder
Despite the peaceful pouring rain.

(b)

Despite the peaceful pouring rain,
One should not go out during thunder,
Walk slowly down the muddy lane,
For lightning splits the trees asunder.

(C)

One should not go out during thunder:
The bolt splits trees asunder;
Walk slowly down the muddy lane
Despite the pouring rain.

(c)

The bolt splits trees asunder:
One should not go out during thunder;
Despite the pouring rain,
Walk slowly down the muddy lane.

A comparison of (A) and (a) reveals the rhythmic difference mentioned above between placement of metrical pause at potential points of closure, that is, at the end of each distich (A), and placement of metrical pause at points where closure is unwarranted by lineation (a). The same principle operates less conspicuously in quatrains (B) and (b): here, the shorter, catalectic lines have a slight closural effect if they come after the longer, hypercatalectic lines. Examples (C) and (c) show that it is unusual for rhyme to link lines of unequal length, because in both cases the resulting gestalt is not well-balanced. Yet, in quatrain (C), the closural ineffectiveness of weak

shape is outweighed by a strong metrical pause which terminates lines 2 and 4, and, thus, emphasizes the rhyming couplets regardless of their lineal asymmetry.

In the Spenserian combination of a pentameter line with a hexameter line, the notion of pause remains comparatively vague, because the metrical patterns are rhythmically less compelling than those of a four-beat metre. The reason is obvious: while a tetrameter features a strong symmetrical gestalt, the accentual structure of a pentameter is less balanced (cf. also Tsur 1996:67). And unless a hexameter is syntactically subdivided by a caesura which renders it two three-stress patterns measured in four, the rhythmic force of such a line will be similarly restricted. Compare, for instance, the final couplet of a stanza from *The Faerie Queene* (I, xi, 55, 8-9):

Then God she prayd, and thankt her faithfull knight
That had atchieu'd so great a conquest by his might.

Since these two lines are linked by rhyme and syntax, they should be perceived as rhythmically related. We expect the five-stress line to be followed by another five-stress line; yet, instead, we get a six-stress line, which disturbs the metrical symmetry of the couplet. The disturbance is slightly less pronounced if the hexameter precedes the pentameter:

He had achieved so great a conquest by his might
That God she praised, and thanked her faithful knight.

Here, the closural function of a possible compensatory pause at the end of the shorter line can only be dimly sensed, because it is the coincidence of linear and syntactic

boundaries rather than the metrical pattern which motivates line-terminal pause in both the hexameter and pentameter line. Whether we are metrically forced to extend the pause at the end of the five-stress line until it offsets the time taken up by the preceding six-stress line remains unanswerable. In the context of a comparatively little-pointed metre, closure cannot be convincingly explained by a rhythmic pause. Yet, since we do recognize the difference between the longer and the shorter line, it is this change in length which perceptually terminates the metrical structure.

Poetic closure, then, can be achieved in three different ways: either by producing patterns of good gestalt, which are generally closed in themselves; or by breaking the rule of a regular recurring pattern; or by inducing a metrically or syntactically required pause. Many poems employ a variety of techniques, using different features for different kinds of closure. The Spenserian stanza, for example, while choosing the rule-breaking method to conclude its metrical pattern, features a rhyme scheme that exploits the closural effects of symmetrical shape. Our highly flexible perception of the structure *ababbcbcc* depends to a large extent on syntactic and semantic cues. Thus, we may perceive two quatrains with a *c*-rhyme added; or, alternatively, a strong *b*-couplet highlighting the pattern of the first five lines; or a strong *c*-couplet signalling the end of the stanza as a whole. Rhyme diversifies the relative monotony of the regular iambic pentameter in lines 1 through 8. It is worth noting that blank verse, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, inclines towards metro-syntactic variation with frequent enjambment since, owing to the lack of rhyme, a syntactically generated line-terminal pause is no longer needed.

In order that it may unfold its full force, rhyme depends on rhythmic support from both metre and syntax. If either of these features fails to give that support, a poem is more likely to go unrhymed. On the other hand, if the metro-syntactic patterns converge, rhyme becomes almost indispensable, especially in the case of a regular

four-beat metre. Considering the function of rhyme as a means of marking rhythm and structuring it, a strongly rhythmical poem can hardly afford to ignore rhyme. Thus, a rhymeless limerick, for instance, parodies its own poetic form:

There was an old man of St Bees,
Who was stung in the arm by a wasp.
When asked "Does it hurt?"
He replied "No, it doesn't,
I'm so glad it wasn't a hornet."³

The rhyme scheme of a limerick ought to be *aabba*, that is, rhyming three three-stress lines with each other and two two-stress lines. Metrically, the spurious dimeter lines merge into one tetrameter line with internal rhyme. This prepares the way for the compelling closural power of the last line: being linked by rhyme to the two three-stress lines at the beginning, its metrical pause signifies closure not just in connection with the preceding four-stress pattern but closes the poem as a whole. In a limerick, rhyme, metre, and syntax normally line up in perfect co-ordination. From a physical point of view, such co-ordination achieves the greatest effects. However, a caveat is appropriate, here, since the physically most penetrating effects need not be most effective from a perceptual point of view: although a piece of music performed *fortissimo* throughout excites the eardrums more than a piece performed at a lower volume, the dynamics of the latter may produce a stronger perceptual effect. In poetry, it is often the deviation from a norm - whether in rhyming techniques, or metro-syntactic patterns - which evokes the most vivid response.

Rhyme, metre, and syntax are closely interrelated in their common task to produce poetic rhythm. None of these elements can be said to prevail over the others. There

are, however, differences regarding the necessity of combination. Thus, for rhyme to become rhythmically effective presupposes its coincidence with a clausal or, at least, phrasal boundary - even in the context of a regular metre. Consider, for instance, the effect of word-splitting enjambment in the following metrical exercise, *Love Poem 16*, which is conceived as a parody of the Spenserian stanza:

So late in life no time for love but bu-
sy read I true knights' fancy for fair dam-
sels, pleasing my imagination ea-
sily with cruel sex and crime to ham-
per help from evil spirits as they gam-
bol between fits of jealousy and pun-
ishment. True heroines provide exam-
ples of you somewhere far above the fun-
damental ecstasy, which only few do shun.

The rhymes are rather inconspicuous - not because of their sometimes imperfect vowel quality, but because we do not recognize them in word-initial or word-medial position. On the other hand, rhyme that dispenses with metrical regularity but conforms to syntactic exigencies plays a very important role in the rhythmic phrasing of a poem. By way of example, here are the opening lines of two poems by Coventry Patmore and Ogden Nash, respectively:

Here, in this little Bay,
Full of tumultuous life and great repose,
Where, twice a day,

The purposeless, glad ocean comes and goes,
Under high cliffs, and far from the huge town,
I sit me down.⁴

Let us pause to consider the English,
Who when they pause to consider themselves get all reticently thrilled
and tinglish,
Because every Englishman is convinced of one thing, viz:
That to be an Englishman is to belong to the most exclusive club there
is:
A club to which benighted bounders of Frenchmen and Germans and
Italians et cetera cannot even aspire to belong,
Because they don't even speak English, and the Americans are worst of
all because they speak it wrong.⁵

The two poems differ with regard to their distribution of metrical stresses. While the second passage represents rhymed free verse, the first is best described as *vers libres classiques*, in which *intra*linear metrical regularity is combined with *inter*linear metrical irregularity. Both poems exhibit rhyme as the major device for rhythmic phrasing. Patmore, whose lines do not exceed the length of ten syllables, can afford to metricize in regular iambic patterns and employ, in addition to clausal, also phrasal boundaries at the end of a line, because the intervals between rhymes are kept within perceptually manageable limits. Nash, on the other hand, depends on strong syntactic breaks at line endings as well as on a fast rhythm that brooks no temporal constraints through regular metrical alternation, because his extremely long lines - the longest in the poem contains 67 syllables - require to be temporally condensed into recognizable

rhyming units. Thus, rhyme maintains its rhythmic influence. However, if rhyming words are arranged independently of metro-syntactic structures - for example, in immediate succession (cf. Arno Holz's *Phantasmus*) - they lose their function as rhythmic marker and produce merely an emphatic chime.

Rhyme in free verse is no longer supported by a metrical structure that can be described on the basis of lineation. Metre relies mostly on syntactic units within which the metrical stress patterns are perceived as more or less regular gestalts. Rhythmically effective rhyme will preferably occur at the end of these metro-syntactic units. However, we must not forget that, owing to its unpredictable rhythms, free verse generally does not attract rhyme. There are no accentual patterns so irresistibly compelling that they required to be rhymed. The decision whether to rhyme or not to rhyme in free verse is entirely at the discretion of the poet. Some metro-syntactic structures, it is true, are more suitable for rhyme than others; still, even the more suitable ones remain mostly rhymeless. Where rhyme is, then, no longer necessary, it may operate more independently and more selectively. As T.S. Eliot (1965:189) points out in his "Reflections on Vers Libre" of 1917: "[the] liberation from rhyme might be as well a liberation *of* rhyme. Freed from its exacting task of supporting lame verse, it could be applied with greater effect where it is most needed." In order to assess the applicational possibilities of rhyme in metrically irregular poetry, we must distinguish between free verse that approximates to regular stress patterns, and free verse in which the accentual structures are marginalized by breaking up the natural flow of language. It is patent that, as a rhythmic device, rhyme can be more effectively employed in moderately irregular rather than in radically split-up free verse.

Rhyme is not altogether inappropriate to highly fragmented poetry; only, here, it serves primarily as a means of producing cognitive links between different words or

phrases, not as a means of enhancing the rather inconspicuous accentual rhythms. In other words, its function is reduced to that of a poem's general sound structure. "If we will listen for rhyme and rhyme-related parallelism in much free verse," Donald Wesling (1980:95-6) writes, "we will be amazed at the richness and variety of what we hear." Acoustic features, including rhyme proper, interact with related acoustic features to yield a web of poetic sounds. But although rhyme is the most conspicuous sound device, its effect in a linguistically or lineally discontinuous free verse poem does not much exceed that of half-rhyme, assonance, or alliteration. By contrast, in a free verse poem with a marked, though irregular, metrical stress pattern, rhyme becomes also rhythmically significant, whereas a more subtle device might not be distinct enough to affect rhythm. Assonance and half-rhyme will best unfold their rhythmic potential in metrically regular verse, where they can be substituted for rhyme proper. In free verse, they principally contribute to a purely sonic structure.

Given the use of rhyme in free verse, and given its rhythmic relevance, to what extent does lineation influence the possibilities of rhyme? Free verse liberates the line from its traditional function as the sole and indisputable delimitation of metre. The effect of lineation is no longer, in the first place, tied up with the effect of metre: while, in traditional verse forms, any non-metrical linear effect must be considered subordinate to the *metrical* significance of the line, the free verse line is free to select any linguistic feature(s) for effectual predominance. Yet, if lineation is to be utilized for rhythmic purposes in combination with rhyme, linear breaks must concur with metro-syntactic boundaries. Compare, for instance, the following stanza of a free verse poem by D.H. Lawrence which approximates to metrical regularity:

I should like to lie still

As if I was dead; but feeling

Her hand go stealing
Over my face and my head, until
This ache was shed.⁶

Of the three rhymes in this stanza (*still-until*, *dead-head-shed*, *feeling-stealing*), two occur at the end of a line, which, however, turns out to be in part a metro-syntactically weak position (*until*, *feeling*), and one occurs in a metro-syntactically strong position which fails, for two of the three rhyming words (*dead*, *head*), to coincide with a linear break. Lawrence exploits, here, the traditional function of the visual line as a metrical unit by artificially using line-terminal rhymes that lack rhythmic support. The only rhyme warranted by syntax and metre emerges at the end of the last line, indicating that the rhyming link between intralineal *dead* in line 2 and *head* in line 4 is not merely accidental. The rhythmic effectiveness of this rhyme suggests a different lineal subdivision:

I should like to lie still as if I was dead;
But feeling her hand go stealing
Over my face and my head,
Until this ache was shed.

This rearrangement reveals the dominant phrasings within the stanza, which Lawrence's lineation skilfully disguises. Yet, whereas the now internal feminine rhyme (*feeling-stealing*) retains its momentum, the correspondence of sound between *still* and *until* is likely to go unheeded. The line is a useful tool when it comes to promoting rhythmically weak rhymes.

In this essay, I have shown how rhyme interacts with metro-syntactic structures, and how the closure of these structures and their rhythmic perception is governed by psychological laws of gestalt. As “the organizing principle of the text in which it occurs” (Küper 1996:118), rhyme enhances the recognition of rhythmic patterns and integrates them into a wider structural scheme. Yet, in order to become rhythmically effective, rhyming syllables must occur in accordance with metro-syntactic phrasing. As the above examples reveal, it is more important for rhyme to coincide with a syntactic than with a lineal or metrical boundary. The rhythmic potential of rhyme is largely dependent on the rhythmicity of the linguistic material. Thus, in free verse, the recurrence of like speech sounds will only affect the rhythm of a poem, if sonic and rhythmic features reinforce one another. If that is not the case, rhyme may, like any conspicuous sound feature, emphasize or bring about lexical links without impinging on the language rhythm. In other words, the possibilities of rhyme in free verse might be said to originate in the same narrow, but infinitely diverse, linguistic source as the possibilities of rhythm.

NOTES:

¹ For a very perceptive and interesting investigation into the relationship between rhyme and meaning, cf. Tsur (1996:71-77).

² A more detailed account of the cognitive aspects involved in the perception of rhyme can be found in Tsur (1996:61).

³ This limerick by W.S. Gilbert is quoted from *The Penguin Book of Light Verse*, ed. Gavin Ewart (London: Allen Lane, 1980), 426. Elsewhere, however, the poem appears in slightly different versions.

⁴ From “Magna Est Veritas”, poem XII of “The Unknown Eros”, in Patmore (1949:369).

⁵ From “England Expects”, in *The Penguin Book of Light Verse*, 449.

⁶ From “Dog-Tired”, in *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence*, vol.I (London: Heinemann, 1964), 35.

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