

'That Exquisite Echo': Rhyme in English Poetry from the Seventeenth Century to the Present

12th September 2013, St Chad's College, University of Durham

Are you a Modernist? Or would you rather consider yourself an Edwardian? Perhaps you are only interested in the *fin de siècle*. The study of English Literature has become more and more specialized over the years, with scholars narrowing their research down to a certain period, or a specific author or movement, and growing fond of labelling each other according to the different inner partitions of English Literature. Literary associations and conferences reflect this trend, and group accordingly: the British Association of Romantic Studies, the Postcolonial Studies Association, and the T. S. Eliot Society are only a few examples. A synchronous study of literature is preferred over a more diachronic approach: in fact, it is often easy enough to know other scholars from the same 'label', but it is usually more difficult to get in touch with those studying different periods, or authors.

In this respect, the one-day conference I attended on 12th September, at St Chad's College, Durham, entitled *'That Exquisite Echo': Rhyme in English Poetry from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, organised by PhD students Oliver Clarkson and Andrew Hodgson (Durham), pleasantly refrained from the boundaries of academic labelling, and filled a gap by offering a programme which was not focused on one single author, or a single period, but rather managed to cover as much as five centuries and roughly twenty different authors, with only three panels and two keynote lectures, all joined together by the common (and indeed, diachronic) theme of 'Rhyme', and obviously poetry. Each panel was made up of three papers, all very consistently chronologically ordered; the two keynote lectures eluded this order though, for their primary position as conference 'frame', at the beginning and at the end of the day.

Surrounded by the Williams Library's bookshelves (St Chad's College), loaded with historical and literary volumes, Michael O'Neill (Durham University) started the day with 'Gleams and Dreams: Reflections on Romantic Rhyme', a lecture on the importance of rhyme in Romantic Poetry, through the examples of poems by William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, P. B. Shelley, and Felicia Hemans. In Professor O'Neill's words, 'Romantic poetry is washed with rhyme', and the Romantics were so conscious of using rhyme that it is indeed possible to talk about Romantic 'meta-rhyme', as the rhyme 'dream(s)/gleam(s)' itself, chosen for his lecture's title, shows in its multiple appearance

in works such as Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third*, Hemans' 'The Land of Dreams', and in Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode'. What was particularly interesting in O'Neill's lecture was his emphasizing the role played by intertextual as well as intratextual rhyme in Romantic poetry, by looking at how in fact a poem not only can continuously return to itself by using the same words, but the use of a similar rhyme actually can put texts by different authors into closer relation. For instance, O'Neill beautifully showed how Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' (1804) is an excellent example of Romantic usage of both intertextual and intratextual rhyme, as the poem is full of rhyming words returning to themselves endlessly, and at the same time it is in open dialogue with an earlier text, Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode' (1802), with one example being Wordsworth's alteration of Coleridge's rhyme 'endeavour/ever' into 'never/endeavour'.¹

The day continued with a panel with three most heterogeneous speakers: undergraduate student Matthew Foley (Durham), post-doc researcher Lilah Grace Canevaro (Heidelberg), and DPhil student Lucy Kellett (Oxford), chaired by one of the two conference organizers, Oliver Clarkson (Durham). Matthew Foley's paper discussed John Donne's 'art of Riming' in light of his criticism and the reception of his rhyme amongst such writers as Thomas Carew, S. T. Coleridge, William Hazlitt, and John Clare, and convincingly demonstrated that undergraduate research is perfectly possible, and should in fact be encouraged. Canevaro followed with a persuasive paper reevaluating Dryden's and Pope's translation of Homer using the heroic couplet, examining how their rhyming verse effectively captures something of the Greek text's essence and rhythm, which are instead lost in more recent, free-verse translations. Lucy Kellett explored ways in which William Blake showed a recurring ambivalence towards rhyme, trying to break free from it, as he perceived it as a restraining boundary for language.

From Blake's own complex relationship with rhyme, the conference continued smoothly with a second panel, chaired by Sarah Wootton (Durham), which investigated, and partly questioned, the importance of rhyme on various levels, throughout the 19th century. Olivia Reilly (Oxford) acutely conceptualized S. T. Coleridge's own definition of music as a necessity for the real poetic genius, and of the musical as the essential feature of good poetry, elaborating how this can bring us to a better appreciation of Coleridge's most celebrated poems, 'Kubla Khan' and *The Rhymer of the Ancient Mariner*, under the identification of a 'musico-poetics' of his rhyme which helps connection and

¹Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode', ll. 42-44, 'It were a vain endeavour, / Though I should gaze for ever / On that green light that lingers in the west:'; Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode', ll. 156-57, 'To perish never; / Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,'.

interplay between different temporal dimensions. Clara Dawson (Birmingham) continued on the topic of rhyme's musicality in quite an opposite direction from Olivia Reilly's paper, exploring Elizabeth Barrett Browning's use of 'pseudo-rhyme' through first-hand material from contemporary periodical reviews of her work, who accused her of cheating her readers through a kind of 'imitation rhyme', harshly compared in one instance to the shameful act of trying to sell plated goods for silver ones. Dawson skillfully expanded on this, by exploring ways in which rhyme was perceived in Victorian times as the lowest art of all, hence a possible misconception of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's use of rhyme, and by showing Barrett Browning's own skills with language by usage of half-rhymes, off-rhymes, assonances and consonances in close-reading of various passages from her 1838 poem 'A Drama of Exile'. Martin Dubois (Newcastle) consistently followed discussing similar attitudes toward Gerald Manley Hopkins' use of rhyme, arguing against Robert Bridges's characterisation of his rhyming as 'childish', by showing how Hopkins' idiosyncratic and seemingly wayward rhyming is a sign of his 'ingenuousness', a kind of Catholic 'holy folly', rather than mere 'childishness'.

Stephen Regan (Durham) chaired the third and last panel of the day, which was mainly focused on 20th-century rhyme: Jack Baker (Durham) started with considerations on Modernist poet Wallace Stevens' use of rhyme, within the frames of Modernism itself, as well as in his own specific prose and poetry, with the particular case of the poem 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'. Following T. S. Eliot's much-quoted statement that 'liberation from rhyme might be as well a liberation *of* rhyme' ('Reflections on Vers Libre'),² Baker offered an insight into Stevens' use of rhyme as a liberation from the paradoxical qualities of his own poem, highlighting the tension between imagination and reality in Stevens' poetics. The panel then moved forward into the 20th century with Stacey McDowell (Bristol) discussing Normal Nicholson's 'inevitable' yet 'surprising' rhymes, addressing Yeats' conception of the poet's necessity to be able to find 'the right word which is also the surprising word'. Lastly, Ahmed Badrideen (Durham) embarked on a quite ambitious poetic journey on the aural function of rhyme in modern and contemporary elegies in English, spanning from Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin up to Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney and Douglas Dunn, and the role of rhyme in elegies as performance of repetition and weaving, descending from their Greek elegiac antecedents.

² T. S. Eliot, 'Reflections on Vers Libre', *New Statesman*, no. 3, 1917 (London: Statesman and Nation Publishing), 519.

In the final keynote lecture, ‘Arnold Misrhyming’, Seamus Perry (Oxford) picked up on many themes that had been discussed over the day, in an erudite and witty manner entirely appropriate for what is possibly the most difficult time slot in every conference, the concluding one. Perry’s lecture touched brilliantly on many important questions on the use of rhyme, using Matthew Arnold’s poetry³ as a reference point to discuss ‘bad’ rhymes, or misrhymes that are only true to the eye, thus re-connecting to some of the papers discussed earlier and at the same time discussing Arnold’s choice of misrhyming as his own reaction to the ‘unpoetrylessness’ of the age, and as in fact a new form of poetics, as successful misrhyming can indeed help towards the meaning of a poem.

During one of the coffee breaks, one of the speakers exclaimed: ‘I can’t believe that today I can actually spend the entire day discussing...rhyme! It is such a privilege!’ - I think these words summarize well the enthusiasm generating at the conference ‘*That Exquisite Echo*’: *Rhyme in English Poetry from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*: it was a much enjoyable event, precisely because it was somewhat – one could say - old-fashioned, and off-trend, in its own celebration of rhyme and thus poetry as something that is still worth studying, and researching *per se*, for scholars of poetic diction, as well as for budding poets. Oxford University Press came out with the *New Oxford Rhyming Dictionary* only last year, edited by John Lennard, which seems to me a confirmation of the still ongoing importance of rhyme in poetry, and in scholarly research, after T. S. Eliot’s definition of ‘liberation of rhyme’ and the abundance of free verse in 20th- and 21st-century English poetry, there is still scope for an ‘old-fashioned’ study of poetry and for a genuine love of words as such.

³ Poems by Matthew Arnold discussed during the lecture: ‘Resignation’, ‘Self-Deception’, ‘In Memory of the Author of “Obermann”’, ‘The Scholar-Gipsy’, ‘Memorial Verses 1850’, ‘Isolation. To Marguerite’, ‘Tristram and Iseult’, ‘A Farewell’, ‘Growing Old’.