

“ANOTHER MUSIC” - RHYMING AND TRANSFORMATION

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Rhyme, for any one brought up in the English language, is there from the start of our experience:

Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,
The beggars are coming to town
Some in tags and some in rags
And one in a velvet gown.

In the twentieth century rhyme was often seen as the most conventional part of poetry and something to be rebelled against in order to free the individual voice of the poet. More recently, many poets have returned to it, enjoying its discipline and its absurdity: its power to weld unlike things together and to topple hierarchies of meaning and reference. Carol Ann Duffy explores all its subtle intimacies; Tony Harrison is one of the world's great rhymesters, unafraid of doggerel. And currently advertisers flaunt rhyme, making things stick in our heads even when we don't want them.

When George Herbert was writing, rhyme was understood as an essential tool, shaping and condensing verse, creating a thrill of connection across disparate lines. Sometimes in the hands of less skilled poets it offered only soporific cliché but in the hands of a master such as Herbert it can break apart our preconceptions and passionately join the holy and the everyday, the unquiet and the contemplative. One of Herbert's skills was parody. While many parodists lower the tone of the original, and that's the fun of it, Herbert inverted the process, raising worldly amorous verses to religious intensity, as in 'Church Music' where the lover becomes sacred music, yet the ravishing pleasures of erotic love are not forgotten.

'Church Music'

Sweetest of sweets, I thank you: when displeasure
Did through my bodie wound my minde,
You took me thence, and in your house of pleasure
A daintie lodging me assign'd.

Now I in you without a bodie move,
Rising and falling with your wings:
We both together sweetly live and love,
Yet say sometimes, *God help poore Kings.*

Comfort, I'll die; for if you poste from me,
Sure I shall do so, and much more:
But if I travel in your companie,
You know the way to heavens doore.

In 'Jordan I' he mocks trite sentiment and forced fictions ('Must purling streams refresh a lover's loves?') yet allows others their pleasures, while claiming his own plain speaking devotion:

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing:
Riddle who list, for me, and pull for prime:
I envie no mans nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with losse of rime,
Who plainly say, *My God, My King.*

Most of Herbert's poems are essentially dialogues – dialogues between the contradictory impulses in himself or between himself and God (though God often remains silent and forces the poet to continue beyond what he had imagined ever saying). The profoundly touching poem called 'Dialogue' comes to an abrupt ending when the poet interrupts the Saviour's reproaches:

The Saviour: *That as I did freely part
With my glorie and desert,
Left all joyes to feel all smart –
Ah! no more: thou break'st my heart.*

In dialogue rhyme comes to full affinity. Rhyme is itself a form of dialogue. It does not begin to exist until the second term appears to *make* a rhyme, backwards (renown leads back to crown, for instance). Rhyme always looks back and forward at once, janus faced, propelling our ears ahead to listen for the *chime* that has not yet arrived while giving us a cluster of sounds like a ground bass. Rhyme transforms. Words lose their secure outlines when they are made to play across syllables or phonemes that they share with other words. Rhyme can match high and low words, moving across registers to stir up our assumptions about what is most valuable, or what is kin to what.

What then is peculiar to the way Herbert makes rhymes be, and mean? One thing particular to Herbert is his power of making us experience *from within ourselves* the process of his poem. Passion is a proper word for this. And one of his chief means of making us know the verse *from within* is rhyming, whose sonorities tell in the inner ear, and whose

unlooked for alliances between words cause a pulse of recognition or unease at once in mind and body. The rhymes seem to come to him, as they come to us, discovered in the poem's need, starting up afresh in different contexts though often deeply known and repeated from poem to poem.

I want to show him at work in a number of different poems, and on the occasion of our visit to Lower Bemerton I read them, or parts of them, aloud so that you could hear the way human breath and voice also become part of his meaning. That I cannot repeat on paper alone. One of the most striking examples of how rhyme makes meaning *happen* in the listener is in 'The Collar', that famous poem with its quibble in the title between a necktie or leash (the collar) and cholera (anger). The poem is 36 lines long. I am told by a friend who works in acoustics that the ear ordinarily holds a sound for about four seconds before its memory decays. One of the powers of rhyme is to prolong that memory and to hold connections across quite wide spans of time. In this poem that power is used with a virtuosic leap that accounts for the satisfaction (and some may feel) the entrapment of the poem's ending. The poem's first and second lines will be immediately familiar:

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more,
I will abroad.

'Board' in the middle of the first line rhymes with the end word of the brief second line 'abroad'. Unforgettable. That rhyme pair is then laid aside, though there are many rhymes on 'more' with its incomplete consonance with 'board' and 'abroad'. Late-on, in line 27, the cry 'I will abroad' is reiterated, not fully rhyming with anything around it, intervening insistently. The poem's famous last four lines (33-36) are:

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
At every word,
Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I reply'd, *My Lord.*

Board, abroad, at the start; word (or ward), Lord, at the end: that last term 'Lord' has been lying in wait, as it were, since the beginning of the poem. The prompt of the intervening line 27 'I will abroad' has kept the rhyme and the rebellion current. It produces finally its own opposite impulse. The word 'Lord' clinches together end and beginning of the poem physically (board, abroad, Lord), closing like a necklace, or more, like the collar mentioned *only* in the title but acted out as this rhyme. As reader or listener we accept the inevitability of this, not as argument, but as

experience vouched for by the human ear. Curtailment becomes fulfilment. The acceptance (and the satisfaction) felt come from the great journey undertaken by that initial rhyme, lancing across the whole sound structure of the poem. The Lord is waiting there at the end. To us, ‘word’ is not a full rhyme: in the seventeenth century the sound may have been more like ‘ward’ and so also carried the sense ‘guard’, further reinforced the rhyme and meaning here .

Herbert loves play as well as work; he loves his own ingenuity, and mistrusts it.

As flames do work and winde, when they ascend,
So did I weave my self into the sense.
But while I bustled, I might heare a friend
Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence!*
There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:
Copie out only that, and save expense. (Jordan II)

‘Give me simplicity, that I may live’ he writes, in one of his most intricately plaited poems ‘A Wreath’. Writing about his own verse in ‘The Quidditie’ he sets aside even as he evokes – and jokes about – worldly pleasures. The small neat lines snap shut on pithy rhymes starting and often ending with consonantal sounds (crown, renown, suit, lute, play, day, Spain, domain). Then in the last verse the timbre shifts:

It is no office, art, or news,
Nor the exchange, or busie Hall;
But it is that which, while I use
I am with thee, and *most take all*.

Here, ‘Hall’ rhymes with the last, italicised, word ‘all’: a softer vowel rhyme, the initial letter gone, no plosives or panache here. Yet ‘all’ is the word that embraces all lesser meanings. (It’s amusing to note that he turns to a phrase from card-games to close the argument, just as he used the expression ‘pull for prime’ – or ‘draw for the winning card’ in ‘Jordan I’).

In others of his poems, like ‘Paradise’, he strips away in order to expand. ‘Paradise’ takes as its controlling metaphor God as the gardener, pruning the trees, and the poet here clips away the fronts of words to reveal their inner force (for example, friend, rend, end). God, he indicates, likewise pares the soul to its essentials so that it may grow. And Herbert makes clear his pleasure in his own ingenuity with those capitalised words.

From '*Paradise*' Lines 4-15 (end)

What open force, or hidden CHARM
Can blast my fruit, or bring me HARM,
While the inclosure is thine ARM?

Inclose me still for fear I START.
Be to me rather sharp and TART,
Then let me want thy hand & ART.

When thou dost greater judgments SPARE,
And with thy knife but prune and PARE,
Ev'n fruitful trees more fruitfull ARE.

Such sharpnes shows the sweetest FREND:
Such cuttings rather heal then REND:
And such beginnings touch their END.

The poet boasts repeatedly to God in other poems that he knows learning, honour, pleasure, and their marvellous delights ('I know the wayes of Pleasure, the sweet strains,/ The lullings and the relishes of it') yet he renounces them as repeatedly, as in the abrupt half-line riposte which closes every verse here: 'Yet I love Thee'. Perhaps rhyme let him sometimes hold unlike and irreconcilable things together without relinquishing either.

He loved too the drop down that rhyme allows into the homely, the unexpectedly colloquial, as when he rhymes 'grief' and 'handkerchief' or ends 'The Pilgrimage', with its Bunyanesque story of man's trials in an image of travels across difficult country, with this stanza:

My hill was further: so I flung away,
Yet heard a crie
Just as I went, *None goes that way*
And lives: If that be all, said I,
After so foul a journey death is fair,
And but a chair.

The exhausted traveller drops down plump into a chair. In the riposte there is also a trace of traveller's irritability 'If that be all, said I/ After so foul a journey death is fair,/ And but a chair.' Death is both reduced and a homely comfort.

One particularly fashionable poem-form of the time that Herbert was writing was the echo poem. In 'Heaven' he takes the usually quite trivial ingenuity and turns it into a meditation on natural and religious meaning: the leaves of the tree and the leaves of the bible give different kinds of insight:

'Heaven'

O who will show me those delights on high?
Echo. I.
Thou Echo, thou art mortall, all men know.
Echo. No.
Wert thou not born among the trees and leaves?
Echo. Leaves.
And are there any leaves, that still abide?
Echo. Bide.
What leaves are they? Impart the matter wholly.
Echo. Holy.
Are holy leaves the echo then of blisse?
Echo. Yes.
Then tell me, what is that supreme delight?
Echo. Light.
Light to the minde: what shall the will enjoy?
Echo. Joy.
But are there cares and businesse with the pleasure?
Echo. Leisure.
Light, joy, and leisure; but shall they persever?
Echo. Ever.

Plenitude, perfection, joy, conjured out of a wisp of poetry. Reducing words into echoes can open fuller meaning.

In 'Aaron' he achieves an equally remarkable transformation, this time by letting things stand still and be transformed. Aaron feels himself inadequate to his role as priest. Each verse has five lines and those five lines end always with the same words, seemingly immoveable: head, breast, dead, rest, drest. Listen now to how the rhymes do the work of change so that the man can become holy priest, and clothed in Christ. So that we rise with him.

'Aaron'

Holinesse on the head,
Light and perfections on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To lead them unto life and rest:
Thus are true Aarons drest.

Profanesse in my head,
Defects and darknesse in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest:
Poore priest thus am I drest.

Onely another head
I have, another heart and breast,
Another musick, making live not dead,
Without whom I could have no rest:
In him I am well drest.

Christ is my onely head,
My alone onely heart and breast,
My onely musick, striking me ev'n dead;
That to the old man I may rest,
And be in him new drest.

So holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my deare breast,
My doctrine tun'd by Christ, (who is not dead,
But lives in me while I do rest)
Come people; Aaron's drest.

Again, the element of performance is implicit in the rhyme. And in this poem a further unvoiced rhyme haunts the work: the priest *vests* himself. The process of taking on priestly garb is being acted out: breast, rest, drest evoke the further, silent 'vest'.

Herbert makes in us as readers a full intimacy with the *being* of his poems. Love III conjures a scene we half-recognise: the shy guest hovering at the door, ourselves in this first person. Again he uses dialogue with its full measure of doubleness, uncertainty, debate (whether to flee, whether to act as servant standing at table or guest sitting down).

And again he peels back one letter in the final word of the poem to make a rhyme both homely and divine: meat/eat, a rhyme that includes the meeting of profoundly loving friends, as well as appetite at last satisfied, communion fulfilled.

'Love III'

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guiltie of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 "If I lack'd anything."

"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here."
 Love said, "you shall be he."
"I, the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
 I cannot look on thee."
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve."
"And know you not," sayes Love, "who bore the blame?"
 "My deare, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," sayes Love, "and taste my meat."
 So I did sit and eat.