

How Music Was Made Vacuity: An Exploration of the Meaning of Rhyme and Its Use in  
*Prufrock and Other Observations*

When we hear praise or criticism of T.S. Eliot's 'still distinctive Modernist voice',<sup>1</sup> our first thought is very likely not of his use of rhyme. In terms of poetic devices, rhyme is after all nearly as old as the hills and to the modern ear perhaps more at home in a kindergarten than in poems concerned with an 'overwhelming question'. Nevertheless, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and many of its compatriots in *Prufrock and Other Observations*<sup>2</sup> use rhyme as a central structural feature, which raises several questions: first of all, what meanings and connotations of its own does rhyme carry? Secondly, how are these meanings incorporated into the collection? Thirdly, we will question whether or not this use of rhyme was consonant with Eliot's purposes in light of his later criticism on the Metaphysical poets. In this essay, I will combine a discussion of the historical perception of rhyme with a reading of *Prufrock and Other Observations* that sees rhyme and structure as central to the voices of the poems. In examining rhyme as it relates to content, it becomes clear by illustrating Eliot's later concept of dissociation of sensibility that these *Observations* are prime examples of a modern voice.

Eliot's epigraphic use of Dante in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* at the opening of the pamphlet invites us firstly to consider a fundamental difference between the modern perception of rhyme and that of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Both *Prufrock* and the quoted verse from the *Inferno* deal with 'the theme of paralysed self-consciousness'.<sup>3</sup> Both works are also rhymed, but where Dante writes of rhyme as contributing to the 'sweetness of a whole unit in harmony'<sup>4</sup> when Eliot uses similar subject matter and the same device, it reads like a parody of Dante's harmony. This is particularly audible in line endings such as 'tedious argument/insidious intent'

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<sup>1</sup> C. Altieri (1994) 'Eliot's impact on twentieth century Anglo-American poetry' in ed. Moody, A.D., *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot (2001) *The Waste Land and Other Writings*, New York, Random House, pp. 3-20. All poems quoted are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> J.C.C. Mays (1994) 'Early poems: from "Prufrock" to "Gerontion"' in ed. Moody, A.D., *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> J.I. Wimsatt (2001) 'Natural Music in Middle French Verse and Chaucer', in ed. Gaylord, A. T., *Essays on the Art of Chaucer's Verse*, New York and London, Routledge, p. 244.

and 'cakes and ices/to its crisis'. They sound too rhymed, too musical. In order to find out why this is, and to explain why this difference between *Prufrock* and the chosen epigraph from the *Divine Comedy* is significant, we need to look back at the origins of rhyme in English in the 'natural' music of the time. Furthermore, it will be necessary to first understand the philosophical and cultural context within which medieval poets were working.

C.S. Lewis asserts that the Middle Ages were a period fundamentally concerned with the creation of a grand order within which to place the vast bodies of heterogeneous material inherited from classical, Christian, and Pagan traditions.<sup>5</sup> He describes the medieval mind as 'an organiser, a codifier, a builder of systems',<sup>6</sup> citing Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* as supreme and sublime examples of this kind of thinking. He calls this order within which medieval literature to a large extent existed and expressed itself a 'single, complex, harmonious mental Model of the Universe'.<sup>7</sup> Not only is knowledge of this Model important for understanding the content of medieval works from Chaucer to Machaut to Dante - and Lewis shows us how it is considered the most beautiful and important of things to be communicated in art<sup>8</sup> - it is incredibly significant for understanding the meanings ascribed to rhyme as it achieved its singular importance in English poetry. At this point we are reminded of Dante's description of rhyme, and can begin to consider that rhyme and other features of poetic form may, to the systematising medieval mind, possess a layer of 'harmony' entirely independent of, if intertwined with, the lexical content of a poem. Lewis states that the influence of this Model extended out of what we think of as the Middle Ages and 'was not confidently abandoned'<sup>9</sup> till the Renaissance and to some extent the early Enlightenment. With this in mind, I will refer to S.K. Heninger's discussion of order in the verse of Sidney and Spenser to shed further light on the way rhyme and other structural devices were originally conceived in English. Heninger, in an argument that expands on Lewis' more general discussion of medieval thought, states specifically that within

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis (1964) *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 10

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 11

<sup>8</sup> As Lewis writes, 'Every particular fact and story became more interesting and more pleasurable if, by being properly fitted in, it carried one's mind back to the Model as a whole.' (*ibid*, p. 203)

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p. 13

the Platonic tradition known to the medievals through *Timaeus*, 'a poem of necessity is composed in meter because formal properties are essential... a poet can manifest the requisite proportions and harmonies...by rhyming and versing'.<sup>10</sup> This rhyming and versing is thus a way of introducing order to a poem and producing 'truth-value',<sup>11</sup> which is to a great extent the object of poetry seen in the medieval extensive communication of the Model: the 'artist...rejoiced also in that great imagined structure which gave them all their place'.<sup>12</sup> It was within this context that rhyme entered English as an influence from the lyric compositions of the French Middle Ages,<sup>13</sup> and the definition of a poet's tools by Guillaume de Machaut reinforces the importance of form in the communication of the Model. It is *scens*, what we would call meaning, *rhetorique*, the understanding of poetic techniques, and *musique*, the sound structure, that he calls the basic capacities of the poet.<sup>14</sup> This draws a direct line to Heninger's discussion of *mousike*, that which comes from the Muses; he states that within the Platonic tradition of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, writing which 'lacked music...therefore fell short of philosophy'<sup>15</sup> which as we have seen was a significant aspect of the object of medieval poets in communicating Lewis' Model. A final example through which to illustrate that form and musicality are seen by medieval and Renaissance poets as carrying their own layer of meaning may be seen in the tonal music of the Middle Ages. M.L. Martinez-Göllner writes that in thirteenth century motets, the strict mathematical sense of the structure is quite independent of its text. Indeed, the text is shaped by the laws of the music.<sup>16</sup> This implies once again that beyond the words to the music, sacred or secular, there is something to be communicated by the order of the motet. This something according to my line of reasoning is the Model of the Universe itself. Thus, to glance forward to

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<sup>10</sup> S.K. Heninger, Jr. (1991) 'Spenser, Sidney, and Poetic Form', *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 88, No. 2, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 143

<sup>12</sup> C.S. Lewis (1964) p. 203

<sup>13</sup> J.I. Wimsatt (1994) 'Rhyme/reason, Chaucer/Pope, icon/symbol', *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 1, p.17.

<sup>14</sup> S. Lukitsch (1983) 'The Poetics of the "Prologue": Machaut's Conception of the Purpose of his Art', *Medium Aevum*, vol. 52, pp. 258-272.

<sup>15</sup> S.K. Heninger (1991) p. 144

<sup>16</sup> M.L. Martinez-Göllner, (1999) 'Poetic Line and Musical Structure in the 13th-Century Motet', *Anuario Musical*, vol. 54, pp. 3-24.

the twentieth century, when Eliot rhymes in *Prufrock*, he is making use of a device which by virtue of its original context is intuitively inclined towards creating 'a symbolic entity that looks outward to a spiritual realm where weight, number, and measure reveal divine beauty'.<sup>17</sup>

This simple observation does not, however, account for the irony we perceive in Eliot's excessively rhyme-y rhymes. I will argue that the seeds of this irony lie in the abandonment of the Model over the course of the seventeenth century mentioned by Lewis above. It was towards the end of this great shift in thinking, in 1674, that John Milton described rhyme as 'the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meeter'.<sup>18</sup> Although he himself at times made use of the device and concedes that many respectable poets did also, he considers this as their having been carried away by the fashion of the times.<sup>19</sup> This sentiment is echoed by contemporary poet and dramatist Sir Robert Howard: 'therefore I follow'd it as a Fashion, though very far off'.<sup>20</sup> To some extent even more telling is the reasoning of poets such as John Dryden, who defended rhyme from these detractors. His argument for rhyme lies chiefly in its ornamental value, writing in his *A Defense of 'An Essay of Dramatic Poesy'* that he was 'satisfied if it cause delight; for delight is the chief, if not the only, end of poesy'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, from being regarded by the poets of the Middle Ages and Renaissance as a crucial symbol of a divine and cosmic harmony, rhyme has been relegated at best to being a sensory delight, and at worst to being barbarous. Basil Willey's *The Seventeenth Century Background* describes this turnabout as the rise of Cartesian scientific thought interrupting the Scholastic universe that had prevailed till around the time of the English Civil War.<sup>22</sup> To Willey, one of the central symptoms of this transition was that poets could either make 'verse as conformable to truth and reason as possible (e.g. the *Essay on Man*), or to indulge in agreeable visions in the full consciousness that they

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<sup>17</sup> Wimsatt (2001) p. 236

<sup>18</sup> J. Milton (2009) *Introduction to Paradise Lost*, Chicago, The Poetry Foundation. [Online] Available at [www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69378/introduction-to-paradise-lost](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69378/introduction-to-paradise-lost) (Accessed 31 January 2018).

<sup>19</sup> M. Freedman (1961) 'Milton and Dryden on Rhyme', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4, p. 342.

<sup>20</sup> R. Howard (1665) *Preface to Four New Plays* in M. Freedman (1961) p. 342.

<sup>21</sup> M. Freedman (1961) p. 340

<sup>22</sup> B. Willey (1934) *The Seventeenth Century Background: Studies in the Thought of the Age in Relation to Poetry and Religion*, New York, Columbia University Press.

were fiction'.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it was no longer the business of poetry to be true (in the medieval sense of a communication of higher order), hence the status of rhyme for Dryden as well as Milton and Howard. Returning to the twentieth century, Eliot, and *Prufrock and Other Observations*, the question is then whether, in harking back to Dante, Eliot is attempting to use rhyme in a medieval sense or simply as auditory ornamentation *sans* parallel meaning through sound.

To begin at the beginning of *Prufrock and Other Observations*, we immediately happen on the central way in which Eliot utilises rhyme. The first two lines, 'Let us go then, you and I / when the evening is spread out against the sky' lend the listener a sense of security almost immediately shattered by the image of a patient sprawled upon an operating table. This interplay between the security of rhyme and the precariousness of description (and reality) is expanded upon throughout the first stanza. The stable rhyming of streets/retreats, hotels/oyster-shells, and argument/intent drops us on the unexpected 'overwhelming question' much as the first three lines left us hanging on an equally unexpected image. This is rhyme used for its qualities of stability, contrasting stability to uncertainty, and the harmony of rhyme to images antonymous to it. As Hart Crane observes, Eliot's poems demonstrate how 'the integrity of the individual consciousness has broken down'.<sup>24</sup> The use of rhyme and stability in *Prufrock and Other Observations*, I will argue, has two intertwined consequences: firstly, to emphasise the 'breakdown' of meaning by contrasting the orderly to the chaotic. The second, greater, effect that follows is to give the reader the sense that harmony and certainty are superfluous, or at least very much out of style.

Let us start with a good example of these two effects from the sixth stanza of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in which the speaker wonders whether he dares complete his errand, and describes himself as he does so.

‘Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —  
(They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”)  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p. 88

<sup>24</sup> H. Crane (1923) Letter to Alan Tate in ed. Weber, B. (1966) *The Complete Poems, and Selected Letters and Prose*, Garden City, Anchor.

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —  
 (They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)  
 Do I dare  
 Disturb the universe?  
 In a minute there is time  
 For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.’

The initial couplet and the following rhymes on thin/chin/pin/thin create a solidity in the continuance of rhyme that is diametrically opposed by Prufrock’s inner dialogue, which is filled with contradiction: first there is the juxtaposition between ‘my’ and ‘they’, echoing the separating ‘you and I’ of the poem’s first lines. Then there is the contradiction in terms as Prufrock describes his clothing — ‘rich’ contrasts to ‘modest’, ‘asserted’ to ‘simple’. This ‘breakdown’ of definition is reiterated by the subsequent break in the stanza at ‘Do I dare / Disturb the universe’, rhymed with the counterintuitive ‘reverse’. The first effect identified above is in action here: the rhyme of ‘universe’ and ‘reverse’ implies a consonance at odds with an enjambment-worthy disturbance to the universe. Furthermore, if the harmonic properties of rhyme may be seen as indicative of a sort of universal proportion, then the seemingly arbitrary separation of pronouns and descriptions shows a basic blurring of the subjective and objective for Eliot contrary to earlier traditions. Myriad examples of this use of rhyme are present in *Prufrock and Other Observations*. In *Portrait of a Lady* there is the harmonious couplet contrasted to the squeaky ‘The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin on an August afternoon’. In *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* we have ‘Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life. / The last twist of the knife.’

It becomes clear through the emphasis of the ‘breakdown’<sup>25</sup> identified by Crane that to a poet of Eliot’s persuasion, the idea of a unified vision seems absurd; operating within this Modernist paradigm, many of the most honest passages and significant words in *Prufrock and Other Observations* go unrhymed. In *Prufrock*, for example, the tenth stanza sums up simply the essence of what Prufrock experiences of urban loneliness and pointlessness: ‘Shall I say I have

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<sup>25</sup> Further examples of this blurring not directly linked to the use of rhyme may be found, for instance, in the cat-like fog of *J. Alfred Prufrock*, and also the anthropomorphisation of times of day in *Prufrock*, *Preludes*, and *Portrait of a Lady*; all imply a porousness between the inner and the outer, and the inability of the character perceiving them to separate them from his imagination.

gone at dusk through narrow streets / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirtsleeves, leaning out of windows...’ Similarly in *Morning at the Window* there is ‘I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids / Sprouting despondently at area gates’. Neither of these are ironic statements. They are merely the narrator’s sad (and eponymous) observations of his environment. A third unrhymed passage, namely the final two stanzas of *Preludes* holds the keys to the absurdity I have mentioned.

‘I am moved by fancies that are curled  
Around these images, and cling:  
The notion of some infinitely gentle  
Infinitely suffering thing.

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh:  
The worlds revolve like ancient women  
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.’

The first four lines are almost Romantic in their sentimentality, and the latter three as brutal as the former are lyrical in puncturing the narrator’s ‘movement’ by the world. C.M. Shanahan is quite right in saying that ‘this sounds very much as if he didn’t want either himself or the reader to take seriously the sentiment of disgust expressed in the rest of the poem’.<sup>26</sup> I would extend this reading beyond the sentiment or content of the poem to the second intention behind Eliot’s use of rhyme: he is making the belief in a single, harmonic truth a laughingstock. We see that rhyme is placed side by side with the confusion of characters such as Prufrock, and contrasted, as here in *Preludes*, to a kind of ‘why care so much? The world is disintegrating anyhow’. Rhyme in this position is completely helpless to fulfill its purpose except in an empty and ironic fashion. The rhyming poems in the *Observations* are rife with this; I will look at only a few particularly clear examples here. In *Portrait of a Lady*, the rhyme on ‘bloom’ and ‘room’ is recycled twice, reflecting rhyme’s inherently predictable nature: it is not new, it is not fresh, it says the same thing every time. This particular poem, which fittingly speaks emptily of music - ‘in a life composed so much’ - has no unrhymed passage, only brief orphan lines. Thus, ultimately, it seems neither character is able to say anything. The refrain of *Prufrock*, ‘In the room the women

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<sup>26</sup> C.M. Shanahan (1955) ‘Irony in Laforgue, Corbiere, and Eliot’, *Modern Philology*, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 118.

come and go / Talking of Michelangelo', embodies the same quality, as do lines such as 'Is it perfume from a dress / That makes me so digress?'. One more example from *Conversation Galante* lends us the language with which to sum up this second use of rhyme and answer the question posed earlier: is Eliot reflecting on the medieval or the Cartesian sense of rhyme?

'And I then: "Some one frames upon the keys  
That exquisite nocturne, with which we explain  
The night and moonshine; the music which we seize  
To body forth our own vacuity."  
She then: "Does this refer to me?"  
"Oh no, it is I who am inane."'

In line with the examples from *Prufrock*, the combination of 'vacuity' and 'me' as a rhyme is slightly absurd. According to Shanahan, this is a device Eliot has acquired to some extent from Laforgue and Corbiere - the poem is 'rendered ridiculous...by surprising rhyme words'.<sup>27</sup> With regard to the bigger picture, the phrase 'the music which we seize to body forth our own vacuity' can be read as the key. We have seen how rhyme embodies; it gives order and structure for the original purpose of truth-value. As the vacuous conversations in *Portrait of a Lady* related back to music as an empty, orchestrated order, so here music is related by reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ('bodies forth') to the truth in verse of the poet. But this truth in Eliot, while recognised through its use as a contrast to subjective confusion, can only comment on 'our own vacuity'. Thus we find that the question of Scholastic or Cartesian versions of rhyme is not as dual or rhetorical as it seems. Eliot appears well aware of the connotations rhyme brings with it from Dante through to his day, and chooses to use it in such a way that its perversion creates irony, and tragedy. If his intention was simply to showcase the vacuity of modern society through his subjects and his use of rhyme, so far so good. However, there is some consensus that when Eliot wrote some four years later against the 'dissociation of sensibility', he was very much concerned with the topics of his own early poetry.<sup>28</sup>

In *The Metaphysical Poets*, Eliot too puts forward the idea that a great transition took place in English poetics in the mid-seventeenth century. He describes the difference between the

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p. 127.

<sup>28</sup> See J.C.C. Mays (1994) and A. Austin (1962) 'T.S. Eliot's Theory of Dissociation', *College English*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp. 309-12.



Metaphysical poets and their successors as one of the unity of thought and feeling or the lack thereof; Milton and those who came after, according to Eliot, 'think', but no longer 'feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose'.<sup>29</sup> It is clear that the Eliot of 1921 regards the loss of thought as experience as a great loss to English verse and one that he wishes to remedy. If Austin Allen's statement that Eliot was most interested in 'defending poetry which is both witty and emotional, the kind of poetry that he himself was writing'<sup>30</sup> is accurate, then it is probable that the Eliot who was writing and editing his first collection also wished to bring these elements back together. This desire to reconnect emotion with diverse images can be read in many moments in the *Observations*, for instance in the famous 'I have measured out my life with coffee spoons'. The unexpected, highly visible metaphor for a methodical, mundane life is worthy of a pessimistic Metaphysical, and may be compared to their unlikely similes, for instance Andrew Marvell's love like straight lines: 'ours so truly parallel, / though infinite, can never meet'.<sup>31</sup> For this aspect of a dissociation of sensibility, Eliot is very much addressing the issues he perceives in verse after the Metaphysical poets. As Allen concludes, however, Eliot's perception of the dissociation of sensibility does not go beyond the loss of 'felt' thought: he is 'not concerned with this loss of belief in poems',<sup>32</sup> which is the central to Basil Willey's aforementioned account of the changes in seventeenth century writing. Here, Eliot's dissociation of sensibility in the sense of the separation of wit and emotion is only one aspect of the much larger intellectual shift in which 'poetry had been reduced to catering for 'delight'...having no relation to 'reality''.<sup>33</sup> In order to fully address this schism in the *Observations*, then, Eliot would have had to reply intellectually and emotionally not only to the content of the diverse literary and religious sources such as the *Divine Comedy* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to which he refers back, but to the world-views embedded in their uses of rhyme and structure. In other words,

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<sup>29</sup> T.S. Eliot (2001) 'The Metaphysical Poets' in *The Waste Land and Other Writings*, New York, Random House, p. 231.

<sup>30</sup> A. Austin (1962) p. 311

<sup>31</sup> A. Marvell (2006) 'The Definition of Love' in ed. Burrow, C., *Metaphysical Poetry*, London, Penguin, p. 202.

<sup>32</sup> A. Allen (1962) p. 310

<sup>33</sup> B. Willey (1934) p. 87

while while Eliot is highlighting dissociation in modern, urban life, he cannot fully shape the material into a new unity as he considers the Metaphysical poets to have done.

To conclude, rhyme in *Prufrock and Other Observations* has been used in such a way as to pervert its original purpose for poetic effect. In placing stability and confusion, objective and subjective side by side, Eliot achieves sufficient impersonality to ensure 'a constant emptiness' that is characteristic of Prufrock and his fellows. As such, the *Observations* are completely successful in illustrating the sometimes humorous, usually ironic, and generally tragic dissociation of sensibility of the early 20th century. I believe these poems speak to us so strongly still today because, like Eliot, we also have a residual feeling of what rhyme is supposed to be like, and an equally strong sense that it can no longer be that way. In this sense, the collection has captured something essential about the shifting paradigms identified by Eliot in 1921, Willey in 1934, and many others since. For rhyme's sake, however, we have to mourn: instead of beginning to provide a cure for the dissociation of sensibility, as Eliot may have wished, these early poems are simply symptoms of the basic separation in English poetics crying out for our attention. Whether or not Eliot was able to cleanse the disease from his later writing is a question for another day. *Prufrock and Other Observations* remains a collection that rhymes within the lineage of Milton, Dryden and their contemporaries with all that this entails.