The Allowable Rhyme

by H. P. Lovecraft

"Sed ubi plira nitent in carmine, non ego paucis Offendar maculis."

- Horace

The poetical tendency of the present and of the preceding century has been divided in a manner singularly curious. One loud and conspicuous faction of bards, giving way to the corrupt influences of a decaying general culture, seems to have abandoned all the properties of versification and reason in its mad scramble after sensational novelty; whilst the other and quieter school constituting a more logical evolution from the poesy of the Georgian period, demands an accuracy of rhyme and metre unknown even to the polished artists of the age of Pope.

The rational contemporary disciple of the Nine, justly ignoring the dissonant shrieks of the radicals, is therefore confronted with a grave choice of technique. May he retain the liberties of imperfect or "allowable" rhyming which were enjoyed by his ancestors, or must he conform to the new ideals of perfection evolved during the past century? The writer of this article is frankly an archaist in verse. He has not scrupled to rhyme "toss'd" with "coast", "come" with "Rome", or "home" with "gloom" in his very latest published efforts, thereby proclaiming his maintenance of the old-fashioned pets as models; but sound modern criticism, proceeding from Mr. Rheinhart Kleiner and from other sources which must needs command respect, has impelled him there to rehearse the question for public benefit, and particularly to present his own side, attempting to justify his adherence to the style of two centuries ago.

The earliest English attempts at rhyming probably included words whose agreement is so slight that it deserves the name of mere "assonance" rather than that of actual rhyme. Thus in the original ballad of "Chevy-Chase," we encounter "King" and "within" supposedly rhymed, whilst in the similar "Battle of Otterbourne" we behold "long" rhymed with "down," "ground" with "Agurstonne," and "name" with "again". In the ballad of "Sir Patrick Spense," "morn" and "storm," and "deep" and "feet" are rhymed. But the infelicities were obviously the result not of artistic negligence, but of plebeian ignorance, since the old ballads were undoubtedly the careless products of a peasant minstrelsy. In Chaucer, a poet of the Court, the allowable rhyme is but infrequently discovered, hence we may assume that the original ideal in English verse was the perfect rhyming sound.

Spenser uses allowable rhymes, giving in one of his characteristic stanzas the three distinct sounds of "Lord", "ador'd", and "word," all supposed to rhyme; but of his pronunciation we know little, and may justly guess that to the ears of his contemporaries the sounds were not conspicuously different. Ben Johnson's employment of imperfect rhyming was much like Spenser's; moderate, and partially to be excused on account of a

chaotic pronunciation. The better poets of the Restoration were also sparing of allowable rhymes; Cowley, Waller, Marvell, and many others being quite regular in this respect.

It was therefore upon a world unprepared that Samuel Butler burst forth with his immortal "Hudibras," whose comical familiarity of diction is in grotesqueness surpassed only by its clever licentiousness of rhyming. Butler's well-known double rhymes are of necessity forced and inexact, and in ordinary single rhymes he seems to have had no more regard for precision. "Vow'd" and "would," "talisman" and "slain," "restores" and "devours" are a few specimens selected at random.

Close after Butler came Jon Oldham, a satirist whose force and brilliance gained him universal praise, and whose enormous crudity both in rhyme and in metre was forgiven amidst the splendor of his attacks. Oldham was almost absolutely ungoverned by the demands of the ear, and perpetrated such atrocious rhymes as "heads" and "besides," "devise" and "this," "again" and "sin," "tool" and "foul," "end" and "design'd," and even "prays" and "cause."

The glorious Dryden, refiner and purifier of English verse, did less for rhyme than he did for metre. Though nowhere attaining the extravagances of his friend Oldham, he lent the sanction of his great authority to rhymes which Dr. Johnson admits are "open to objection." But one vast difference betwixt Dryden and his loose predecessors must be observed. Dryden had so far improved metrical cadence, that the final syllables of heroic couplets stood out in especial eminence, displaying and emphasizing every possible similarity of sound; that is, lending to sounds in the first place approximately similar, the added similarity caused by the new prominence of their perfectly corresponding positions in their respective lines.

It were needless to dwell upon the rhetorical polish of the age immediately succeeding Dryden's. So far as English versification is concerned, Pope was the world, and all the world was Pope. Dryden had founded a new school of verse, but the development and ultimate perfections of this art remained for the sickly lad who before the age of twelve begged to be taken to Will's Coffee-House, that he might obtain a personal view of the aged Dryden, his idol and model. Delicately attuned to the subtlest harmonies of poetical construction, Alexander Pope brought English prosody to its zenith, and still stands alone on the heights. yet he, exquisite master of verse that he was, frowned not upon imperfect rhymes, provided they were set in faultless metre. Though most of his allowable rhymes are merely variations in the breadth and nature of vowel sounds, he in one instance departs far enough from rigid perfection to rhyme the words "vice" and "destroys." Yet who can take offence? The unvarying ebb and flow of the refined metrical impulse conceals and condones all else.

Every argument by which English blank verse or Spanish assonant verse is sustained, may with greater force be applied to the allowable rhyme. Metre is the real essential of poetical technique, and when two sounds of substantial resemblance are so placed that one follows the other in a certain measured relation, the normal ear cannot without cavilling find fault with a slight want of identity in the respective dominant vowels. The

rhyming of a long vowel with a short one is common in all the Georgian poets, and when well recited cannot but be overlooked amidst the general flow of the verse; as, for instance, the following from Pope:

> But thinks, admitted to that equal sky,
> His faithful dog shall bear him company.

Of like nature is the rhyming of actually different vowels whose sounds are, when pronounced in animated oration, by no means dissimilar. Out of verse, such words as "join" and "line" are quite unlike, but Pope well rhymes them when he writes:

> While expletives their feeble aid do join,
> and ten low words oft creep in one dull line.

It is the final consonantal sound in rhyming which can never vary. This, above all else, gives the desired similarity. Syllables which agree in vowels but not in the final consonants are not rhymes at all, but simply assonants. Yet such is the inconsistent carelessness of the average modern writer, that he often uses mere assonants to a greater extent than his fathers ever employed actually allowable rhymes. The writer, in his critical duties, has more than once been forced to point out the attempted rhyming of such words as "fame" and "lane," "task" and "glass," or "feels" and "yields" and in view of these impossible combinations he cannot blame himself very seriously for rhyming "art" and "shot" in the March Conservative; for this pair of words have at least identical consonants at the end.

That allowable rhymes have real advantages of a positive sort is an opinion by no means lightly to be denied. The monotony of a long heroic poem may often be pleasantly relieved by judicious interruptions in the perfect successions of rhymes, just as the metre may sometimes be adorned with occasional triplets and Alexandrines. Another advantage is the greater latitude allowed for the expression of thought. How numerous are the writers who, from restriction to perfect rhyming, are frequently compelled to abandon a neat epigram, or brilliant antithesis, which allowable rhyme would easily permit, or else to introduce a dull expletive merely to supply a desired rhyme!

But a return to historical considerations shows us only too clearly the logical trend of taste, and the reason Mr. Kleiner's demand for absolute perfection is no idle cry. In Oliver Goldsmith there arose one who, though retaining the familiar classical diction of Pope, yet advanced further still toward what he deemed ideal polish by virtually abandoning the allowable rhyme. In unvaried exactitude run the couplets of "The Traveler" and of "The Deserted Village," and none can deny to them a certain urbanity which pleases the critical ear. With but little less precision are molded the simple rhymes of Cowper, whilst the pompous Erasmus Darwin likewise shows more attention to identity of sound than do the Queen Anne Bards. Gifford's translations of Juvenal and Persius show to an almost equal degree the tendency of the age, and Campbell, Crabbe, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, and Thomas Moore are all inclined to refrain from the liberties practiced by those of former times. To deny the importance of such a widespread change of technique is fruitless, for

its existence argues for its naturalness. The best critics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries demand perfect rhyming, and no aspirant for fame can afford to depart from a standard so universal. It is evidently the true goal of the English, as well as of the French bard; the goal from which we are but temporarily deflected during the preceding age.

But exceptions should and must be made in the case of a few who have somehow absorbed the atmosphere of other days, and who long in their hearts for the stately sound of the old classic cadences. Well may their predilection for imperfect rhyming be discouraged to a limited extent, but to chain them wholly to modern rules would be barbarous. Every limited mind demands a certain freedom of expression, and the man who cannot express himself satisfactorily without the stimulation derived from the spirited mode of two centuries ago should certainly be permitted to follow without undue restraint a practice so harmless, so free from essential error, and so sanctioned by precedent, as that of employing in his poetical compositions the smooth and inoffensive allowable rhyme.
