

Rules, rhyme schemes, and the autonomy of the poet

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Abstract. From an observation by the poet Paul Valéry, I argue that rhyme schemes, while constraining, also enable the poet to achieve autonomy from various surrounding influences, such as the domestic and the political. The demand to keep to the rhyme scheme takes priority, reducing the likelihood of these dominating.

Draft version: Version 2 (appendix added)

“Top of my list of wishes

Is that you do the dishes.”

Imagine a poet, a French poet even. What will the poet write about today? Well, just look at the things which loom large in his, or her, environment. Are there issues in the poet’s domestic life? What topics dominate the news? However, it is not so simple as this. What if the poet has a rhyme scheme? “To write regular verses... destroys an infinite number of fine possibilities,” a French poet tells us, “but at the same time it suggests a multitude of distant and unexpected thoughts.” (Valéry, cited in Auden and Kronenberger 1962: 282)

This remark, I think, was made by someone appreciating the scientific value of writing poetry to a rhyme scheme. It leads to unexpected but valuable thoughts. But I am interested in a kind of freedom it gives, or autonomy if that is a better word. The poet who writes rhyming couplets, say, once they have one line must now search for another that rhymes. The rhyme scheme takes priority over whatever impressions from everyday life are filling their mind, like so: if none of these impressions provide

a rhyme, they must go beyond these. Now they are not just blown about like a leaf by whatever is going on at the moment! The priority of the rhyme scheme gives them some freedom from these immediate matters, in that they reduce the likelihood that these matters will dominate content. It distances the poet from the diarist or the newspaper writer. The poet may seem strangely beyond his time even because of it. Why does Valéry not come over? His rhyme scheme!

Appendix

There is a question of how one clarifies the notion of freedom involved here. I suppose the following captures a sufficient condition for conscious freedom from the influence of a hot topic on a given day, though there may be less demanding ways or other ways of being free:

- (i) A person hears about the topic for the previous six days.
- (ii) There is no emergency affecting their life.
- (iii) News about the topic has not ceased.
- (iv) The person thinks about other things and does not have any conscious thoughts about the topic.

References

Auden, W.H. and Kronenberger, L. 1962. *The Faber Book of Aphorisms*. London: Faber and Faber.

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