

A Talk on Rhyme

*and*

A Bibliography on Rhyme  
and Related Issues

*by*

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## A Talk on Rhyme

*[As an overture to the talk, I sang “Take Me to the River,” following Al Green’s arrangement.]*

Thank you so much, everybody. Thank you very much. I’m really happy to be here. Thank you, Ian, for that terrific and apposite introduction. Thanks to the folks at Berl’s for this opportunity. And thanks also in absentia to Jamie Townsend, who invited me to do this but couldn’t be here. But I love him and miss him and think of him with some frequency.

So I was really happy to be invited to Leslie Flint, but it’s a little in some ways daunting because being a single reader sort of puts you on the spot and it’s an invitation to move around with a lot of space, both in terms of the temporality, but also in terms of the form.

And because it’s an opportunity to do anything you want, you kind of have to think about like, gosh, what do I actually want to do outside of the given generic form of the two-reader reading or the three-reader reading or whatever, you know, you all know these genres. So I thought what I’d actually like to do most is to think and talk about things that have been preoccupying me that I don’t really have answers to and that you all might be able to help me think about.

And I kind of wanted to engage in what I think of as a piece of kind of public thinking around this stuff, illustrated with examples from my recent work and sort of historical divagations and maybe with some

time to talk with folks about, you know, some feedback on some of this stuff.

And what I really wanted to talk about, and it's really good to be doing this in Berl's Poetry Shop, is rhyme; that's actually what I've been really preoccupied with lately. So my talk and presentation is going to be about rhyme. And I'll open with one thing which not only rhymes but is actually a sonnet, because I've been writing sonnets lately, and then I go from there. But this is something that I wrote this week for y'all. So it's for you. Take it if you want.

6:36

Rime is the body of my resurrection  
made apostolic in portals from here  
so that the after will yield a correction  
to each mortal garment and each earthly fear

When time is the instrument grace is the measure  
for each passing lineament mercy cant hold  
and when o my love shall we have the leisure  
to see how each would that we are might unfold.

We bring them forth out of our sovereign appointments  
with hours that shine in the mornings like stars  
and then like the oil of priestly anointments  
point up just where in the circuit we are.

I answer blessings outside of a prose,  
for we are not on the earth as you suppose.

So that's one of the sonnets I've been writing lately, and I wanted to use that as the overture and then frame what I want to talk about with two different text extracts. And I didn't have the time to prepare hand-outs—I would have loved to just made a little zine for you all you could take home or put on the wall with

some of these extracts that I had in mind. But hearing me say them—and I'd be happy to repeat them—will have to do.

The first one is a bit that comes from a book by Giorgio Agamben I have been turning over in my mind for years. It's his book on Paul and the letter to the Romans that's called *The Time that Remains*—came out in like '99. It's a terrific book, not just about Paul, but about religion in general and about messianic time, which is his theme. And he connects Paul with Walter Benjamin and kind of creates a historical rhyme between Paul's text to the Romans and Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" with which many of you are familiar.

And that's a thing to say about rhyme at the outset—with rhyme, I do mean end-rhyme, what we think of when we think of rhyme, but also rhyme as kind of a metonymy for form as such, right? Any kind of closed form or formal features that govern a poem, the structural principles of poetry. And then on top of those two things—that it's rhyme as such, and that it's a metonymy for structure—that also there is a larger kind of idea of what rhyme could mean. There's formal rhymes across the arts and there's all kinds of rhymes that you could call ontological rhymes or something like that that are much bigger sort of historical rhymes in how we live. You know, rhymes between cities, rhymes between periods as Ian kind of was adducing and which is very relevant to the late epoch of American capital, where Egypt seems like a very helpful analogue. I live across the San Francisco Bay from the Transamerica Pyramid, which is there satanically looking at me every morning.

So rhyme very broadly. Agamben sort of puts these figures who normally are thought of as totally separate and rhymes them. And so in his book, he has this aside where he does a reading of a sestina, one of the first sestinas, by Arnaut Daniel, a troubadour poet who wrote in Provençal. And he reads the sestina, and he reads the temporality of the sestina, according to its retrograde progression of the rhymes, and has this interesting argument about what that metaphorizes.

And at the end his discussion he has this passage that I really have been thinking about, and I've read this book many times and I've been thinking about this passage for just years, so I wanted to read it as one half of a diptych to frame the stuff I'm going to talk about. So this is Agamben: "I would like to end our exegesis of messianic time with the following hypothesis. Rhyme, understood in the broad sense of the term as the articulation of a difference between semiotic series and semantic series, is the messianic heritage that Paul leaves to modern poetry,"—rhyme is the messianic heritage Paul (Saint Paul!) leaves to contemporary poetry—"and the history and fate of rhyme coincide in poetry with the history and fate of the messianic announcement."

So, you know, that's a pretty heavy thing to bite off. And then he has a little bit that I didn't copy out from the same passage about Hölderlin. And Agamben says that we can date a moment in the history of the West to Hölderlin's thematic concern with the retreat of the gods, the withdrawal of the gods from the human world, and potentially even with the withdrawal of Christ, the last God for Hölderlin, and the ruin of Hölderlin's prosodic orientation, which had been using classical

meters and sort of arrived at the late, you know, works in free rhythm that nobody really knows how to characterize, that people have studied and have often been anticipated as sort of harbingers of modern poetics, which were so important for Celan and all kinds of people who work with fragmentation.

So anyway, at the end of this little discussion of Hölderlin, Agamben says: “the absence of the gods is one with the disappearance of closed metrical form; atheology immediately becomes a-prosody,” right? So, again, this kind of crazy, sort of Heideggerian claim about the intimacy of poetry with being as such, which is on the one hand obviously sort of nuts, but on the other hand, maybe it’s true?

And if you’re a poet, I think you’re definitely interested. And I have been provoked by it for a long time.

And then the other thing I wanted to read, which I think kind of rhymes with that on the subject, is a little passage, which again, has been bugging me for years. And it comes from Jack Spicer’s “Textbook of Poetry,” which is, of course, such a fertile text, also totally concerned with Christ, among other things.

So this is Section 17 of Spicer’s “Textbook of Poetry.” And he says:

— A human love object is untrue.  
Screw you.

12:27

— A divine love object is unfair  
Define the air  
It walks in.

The old human argument goes on with the rhymes to show that it still goes on. A stiffening in time as puns are a stiffening in meaning.

## A Bibliography on Rhyme and Related Issues

*A Talk on Rhyme* is a text distilled in 2021 from a talk given on October 17, 2014, for the Leslie Flint Series at Berl's Poetry Store in Brooklyn, New York, as the first in a series of occasional presentations on fundamental issues in poetry.

The talk, presented at the invitation of Jamie Townsend and introduced by Ian Dreibratt, was conceived as a performance lecture, and in part as an experiment in orality and memory. Apart from the opening epigraphs from Giorgio Agamben and Jack Spicer, and my own poetry, the entire presentation was delivered extemporaneously and without notes over the course of about an hour. Through the fine hospitality of Farrah Field and Jared White, the proprietors of Berl's, who I here thank, the talk was recorded and preserved on the bookstore's website, where it remains at time of writing. At the suggestion of Phil Baber, publisher of the Yellow Papers pamphlet series, I set about transforming the 2014 recording into a 2021 text—reading what was never written. As part of this process, Phil suggested that I prepare a bibliography, and that is the text which you are reading right now.

It seems appropriate that Phil should have asked me for a bibliography, since he first became aware of my work through the essayistic bibliography I prepared for *Revolution: A Reader* (Lisa Robertson and

Matthew Stadler, eds.; Publication Studio, 2012). It's a book that never had much distribution in the US (my contributor's copy was the only one I ever saw), but it obviously had some interesting circulation in Europe. In that text, I was preoccupied with deepening and challenging the idea of revolution by considering transformative moments in the full history of human beings as a species, including the emergence of art and writing as well as more recent developments like the printing press, without losing sight of the political urgency of revolutionary transformations in our social and economic life. Because of its concern with symbolic systems, there's some overlap between that text and this one. As Gertrude Stein is supposed to have said: *I do not repeat, I insist.*

The Berl's talk opens with "Rime is the Body of My Resurrection," a sonnet published in *Holy Ghost* (City Lights, 2017). The closer translates a verse from the first canto of Dante's *Paradiso*, which I like to read in the Modern Library rendition by Anthony Esolen. (Don't read Laurence Binyon's translation in *The Portable Dante* (Viking, 1953).) This line was around in my household because my now-ex-wife Sara Larsen had translated Canto I for a reading we gave in San Francisco in 2010, the year my father died. (I had translated *Paradiso XIV*, on the resurrection of the body.) Thinking about rhyme is always thinking about history, and Dante's work is an inescapable part of poetry's progress. One of the few volumes that survived my cross-country move from Oakland to New Orleans was the blue-bound one-volume *Commedia* (C. H. Grandgent, ed.; D. C. Heath and Company, 1933). Its bookmark is a postcard of

Domenico di Michelino's painting *Dante e il suo Poema*, purchased at the Duomo where the original painting is on view, and signed on the back by me, Sara, Anne Winters, and Julian Talamantez Brolaski the night we finished a years-long project of reading the text of the poem in Italian, sitting in the apartment on Alcatraz Avenue. "well, my window / looked out on the Squero where Ogni Santi / meets San Trovaso / things have ends and beginnings" (from Canto LXXVI of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (New Directions, 1995)).

The book about Dante I've gone back to with greatest frequency is John Freccero's *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Harvard, 1988), which among other riches has a fine essay on the philosophical and theological meanings of the poem's *terza rima* scheme. The relationship between Dante and Pound is studied in James Wilhelm's *Dante and Pound: The Epic of Judgment* (University of Maine, 1974).

My talk's first epigraph derives from Giorgio Agamben's *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford, 2005), the reading of which I owe to a conversation with Chris Nealon in Juliana Spahr's backyard during the baby shower for her son Sasha, which was organized by Stephanie Young and Judith Goldman (another ex). Chris told me he had been teaching about the "Pauline turn"—a term that designated continental philosophy's attention to the texts of the apostle as evidenced in Agamben's book and other works like Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, 2003). I didn't know it at the time, but the study of Agamben's book, which I've read many times since, was an important nudge of the Holy Spirit toward my