Chris Upward introduces
The Classic Concordance of Cacographic Chaos

A number of readers have been urging republication of The Chaos, the well-known versified catalogue of English spelling irregularities. The SSS Newsletter carried an incomplete, rather rough version in the summer of 1986 (pp.17–21) under the heading 'Author Unknown', with a parallel transcription into an early form of Cut Spelling. Since then a stream of further information and textual variants has come our way, culminating in 1993-94 with the most complete and authoritative version ever likely to emerge. The time is therefore now truly ripe for republication in the JSSS.

Our stuttering progress towards the present version is of interest, as it testifies to the poem's continuing international impact. Parts of it turned up from the mid-1980s onwards, with trails leading from France, Canada, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Turkey. The chequered career of the first version we received was typical: it consisted of a tattered typescript found in a girls' High School in Germany in 1945 by a British soldier, from whom it passed through various hands eventually to reach Terry De’Ath, who passed it to the SSS; but it did not mention who its author was. A rather sad instance of the mystery that has long surrounded the poem is seen in Hubert A Greven’s Elements of English Phonology, published in Paris in 1972: its introduction quoted 48 lines of the poem to demonstrate to French students how impossible English is to pronounce (ie to read aloud), and by way of acknowledgment said that the author "would like to pay a suitable tribute to Mr G Nolst Trenité for permission to copy his poem The Chaos. As he could not find out his whereabouts, the author presents his warmest thanks, should the latter happen to read this book". Alas, the poet in question had died over a quarter of a century earlier.

For the varied materials and information sent us over the years we are particularly indebted to: Terry De’Ath of Newcastle-upon-Tyne; Tom McArthur (Editor of English Today) of Cambridge; Benno Jost-Westendorf of Recklinghausen, Germany; Professor Che Kan Leong of the University of Saskatchewan, Canada; the Editor of Perfect Your English, Barcelona; and SSS committee member Nick Atkinson for the French reference. From them we learnt who the author was and that numerous versions of the poem were in circulation; but many tantalizing questions remained unanswered.

Three contributions in 1993-94 then largely filled in the gaps in the picture. The first of these contributions was due to the diligent research of Belgian SSS member Harry Cohen of Tervuren which outlined the author's life and told us a good deal about the successive editions of the poem. The second came from Bob Cobbing of New River Project (), who sent the SSS a handsome new edition (ISBN 1 870750 07 1) he had just published in conjunction with the author's nephew, Jan Nolst Trenité, who owns the copyright. This edition had been based on the final version published by the author in his lifetime (1944), and must therefore be considered particularly authoritative. Finally, Jan Nolst Trenité himself went to considerable trouble to correct and fill out the details of his uncle's biography and the poem's publishing history which the SSS had previously been able to compile.

The author of The Chaos was a Dutchman, the writer and traveller Dr Gerard Nolst Trenité. Born in 1870, he studied classics, then law, then political science at the University of Utrecht, but without graduating (his Doctorate came later, in 1901). From 1894 he was for a while a private teacher in California, where he taught the sons of the Netherlands Consul-General. From 1901 to 1918 he worked as a schoolteacher in Haarlem, and published several schoolbooks in English and French, as well as a study of the Dutch constitution. From 1909 until his death in 1946 he wrote frequently for an Amsterdam weekly paper, with a linguistic column under the pseudonym Charivarius.
The first known version of The Chaos appeared as an appendix (Aanhangsel) to the 4th edition of Nolst Trenité’s schoolbook Drop Your Foreign Accent: engelsche uitspraakoefeningen (Haarlem: H D Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1920). The book itself naturally used the Dutch spelling current before the 1947 reform - see JSSS 1987/2, pp14-16. That first version of the poem is entitled De Chaos, and gives words with problematic spellings in italics, but it has only 146 lines, compared with the 274 lines we now give (four more than in our 1986 version). The general importance of Drop your foreign accent is clear from the number of editions it went through, from the first (without the poem) in 1909, to a posthumous 11th revised edition in 1961. The last edition to appear during the author’s life was the 7th (1944), by which time the poem had nearly doubled its original length. It is not surprising, in view of the numerous editions and the poem’s steady expansion, that so many different versions have been in circulation in so many different countries.

The Chaos represents a virtuoso feat of composition, a mammoth catalogue of about 800 of the most notorious irregularities of traditional English orthography, skilfully versified (if with a few awkward lines) into couplets with alternating feminine and masculine rhymes. The selection of examples now appears somewhat dated, as do a few of their pronunciations, indeed a few words may even be unknown to today’s readers (how many will know what a ‘studding-sail’ is, or that its nautical pronunciation is ‘stunsail’?), and not every rhyme will immediately ‘click’ (‘grits’ for ‘groats’?); but the overwhelming bulk of the poem represents as valid an indictment of the chaos of English spelling as it ever did. Who the ‘dearest creature in creation’ addressed in the first line, also addressed as ‘Susy’ in line 5, might have been is unknown, though a mimeographed version of the poem in Harry Cohen’s possession is dedicated to ‘Miss Susanne Delacruix, Paris’. Presumably she was one of Nolst Trenité’s students.

Readers will notice that The Chaos is written from the viewpoint of the foreign learner of English: it is not so much the spelling as such that is lamented, as the fact that the poor learner can never tell how to pronounce words encountered in writing (the poem was, after all, appended to a book of pronunciation exercises). With English today the prime language of international communication, this unpredictability of symbol-sound correspondence constitutes no less of a problem than the unpredictability of sound-symbol correspondence which is so bewailed by native speakers of English. Nevertheless, many native English-speaking readers will find the poem a revelation: the juxtaposition of so many differently pronounced parallel spellings brings home the sheer illogicality of the writing system in countless instances that such readers may have never previously noticed.

It would be interesting to know if Gerard Nolst Trenité, or anyone else, has ever actually used The Chaos to teach English pronunciation, since the tight rhythmic and rhyming structure of the poem might prove a valuable mnemonic aid. There could be material for experiments here: non-English-speaking learners who had practised reading parts of the poem aloud could be tested in reading the same problematic words in a plain prose context, and their success measured against a control group who had not practised them through The Chaos.
Dearest creature in creation
Studying English pronunciation,
    I will teach you in my verse
        Sounds like corpse, corps, horse and worse.
I will keep you, Susy, busy,
Make your head with heat grow dizzy;
    Tear in eye, your dress you'll tear;
    Queer, fair seer, hear my prayer.
Pray, console your loving poet,
Make my coat look new, dear, sew it!
    Just compare heart, hear and heard,
    Dies and diet, lord and word.
Sword and sward, retain and Britain
    (Mind the latter how it's written).
    Made has not the sound of bade,
    Say - said, pay - paid, laid but plaid.
Now I surely will not plague you
With such words as vague and ague,
    But be careful how you speak,
    Say: gush, bush, steak, streak, break, bleak,
Previous, precious, fuchsia, via,
    Recipe, pipe, studding-sail, choir;
    Woven, oven, how and low,
    Script, receipt, shoe, poem, toe.
Say, expecting fraud and trickery:
Daughter, laughter and Terpsichore,
    Branch, ranch, measles, topsails, aisles,
    Missiles, similes, reviles.
Wholly, holly, signal, signing,
    Same, examining, but mining,
    Scholar, vicar, and cigar,
    Solar, mica, war and far.
From "desire": desirable - admirable from "admire",
Lumber, plumber, bier, but brier,
    Topsham, brougham, renown, but known,
    Knowledge, done, lone, gone, none, tone,
One, anemone, Balmoral,
    Kitchen, lichen, laundry, laurel.
    Gertrude, German, wind and wind,
    Beau, kind, kindred, queue, mankind,
Tortoise, turquoise, chamois-leather,
Reading, Reading, heathen, heather.
    This phonetic labyrinth
        Gives moss, gross, brook, brooch, ninth, plinth.
Have you ever yet endeavoured
To pronounce revered and severed,
    Demon, lemon, ghoul, foul, soul,
    Peter, petrol and patrol?
Billet does not end like ballet;
Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet.
Blood and flood are not like food,  
Nor is mould like should and would.  
Banquet is not nearly parquet,  
Which exactly rhymes with khaki.  
Discount, viscount, load and broad,  
Toward, to forward, to reward,  
Ricocheted and crocheting, croquet?  

Right! Your pronunciation’s OK.  
Rounded, wounded, grieve and sieve,  
Friend and fiend, alive and live.  

Is your R correct in higher?  
Keats asserts it rhymes Thalia.  
Hugh, but hug, and hood, but hoot,  
Buoyant, minute, but minute.  

Say abscission with precision,  
Now: position and transition;  
Would it tally with my rhyme  
If I mentioned paradigm?  

Twopence, threepence, tease are easy,  
But cease, crease, grease and greasy?  
Cornice, nice, valise, revise,  
Rabies, but lullabies.  

Of such puzzling words as nauseous,  
Rhyming well with cautious, tortious,  
You'll envelop lists, I hope,  
In a linen envelope.  
Would you like some more? You'll have it!  
Affidavit, David, davit.  
To abjure, to perjure. Sheik  
Does not sound like Czech but ache.  

Liberty, library, heave and heaven,  
Rachel, loch, moustache, eleven.  
We say hallowed, but allowed,  
People, leopard, towed but vowed.  

Mark the difference, moreover,  
Between mover, plover, Dover.  
Leeches, breeches, wise, precise,  
Chalice, but police and lice,  
Camel, constable, unstable,  
Principle, disciple, label.  
Petal, penal, and canal,  
Wait, surmise, plait, promise, pal,  
Suit, suite, ruin. Circuit, conduit  
Rhyme with "shirk it" and "beyond it",  
But it is not hard to tell  
Why it’s pall, mall, but Pall Mall.  
Muscle, muscular, gaol, iron,  
Timber, climber, bullion, lion,  
Worm and storm, chaise, chaos, chair,  
Senator, spectator, mayor,  

Ivy, privy, famous; clamour  
Has the A of drachm and hammer.  
Pussy, hussy and possess,  
Desert, but desert, address.  
Golf, wolf, countenance, lieutenants  

Hoist in lieu of flags left pennants.  
Courier, courtier, tomb, bomb, comb,  
Cow, but Cowper, some and home.  
"Soldier, soldier! Blood is thicker",  


Quoth he, "than liqueur or liquor",
Making, it is sad but true,
In bravado, much ado.
**Stranger** does not rhyme with **anger**.
Neither does **devour** with **clangour**.
  *Pilot, pivot, gaunt, but aunt,*
  *Font, front, wont, want, grand and grant.*
**Arsenic**, **specific**, **scenic**,
**Relic**, **rhetoric**, **hygienic**.
  *Gooseberry, goose, and close, but close,*
  *Paradise, rise, rose, and dose.*
Say **inveigh**, **neigh**, but **inveigle**,
Make the latter rhyme with **eagle**.
  *Mind! Meandering but mean,*
  *Valentine and magazine.*
And I bet you, dear, a penny,
You say **mani**-(fold) like many,
Which is wrong. Say **rapier, pier,**
  *Tier (one who ties), but tier.*
**Arch, archangel; pray, does erring**
Rhyme with **herring** or with **stirring**?
  *Prison, bison, treasure trove,*
  *Treason, hover, cover, cove,*
**Perseverance, severance. Ribald**
Rhymes (but **piebald** doesn't) with **nibbled**.
  *Phaeton, paean, gnat, ghat, gnaw,*
  *Lien, psychic, shone, bone, pshaw.*
Don't be down, my own, but rough it,
And distinguish **buffet, buffet**;
  *Brood, stood, roof, rook, school, wool, boon,*
  *Worcester, Boleyn, to impugn.*
Say in sounds correct and **sterling**
**Hearse, hear, hearken, year and yearling**.
  *Evil, devil, mezzotint,*
  *Mind the Z! (A gentle hint.)*
Now you need not pay attention
To such sounds as I don't mention,
  *Sounds like pores, pause, pours and paws,*
  *Rhyming with the pronoun yours;*
Nor are proper names **included**,
Though I often heard, as you did,
  *Funny rhymes to unicorn,*
  *Yes, you know them, Vaughan and Strachan.*
No, my maiden, coy and comely,
I don't want to speak of **Cholmondeley**,  
No. Yet **Froude** compared with **proud**  
Is no better than **McLeod**.
But mind **trivial and vial**;
**Tripod, menial, denial,**
  *Troll and trolley, realm and ream,*
  *Schedule, mischief, schism, and scheme.*
**Argil, gill, Argyll, gill. Surely**
May be made to rhyme with **Raleigh**,
    *But you're not supposed to say*  
    *Piquet rhymes with sobriquet.*
Had this **invalid invalid**
Worthless documents? How **pallid**,
  *How uncouth he, couchant, looked,*
  *When for Portsmouth I had booked!*
Zeus, Thebes, Thales, Aphrodite,
Paramour, enamoured, flighty,
Episodes, antipodes,
Acquiesce, and obsequies.

Please don't monkey with the geyser,
Don't peel 'taters with my razor;
Rather say in accents pure:
Nature, stature and mature.

Pious, impious, limb, climb, glumly,
Worsted, worsted, crumbly, dumbly,
Conquer, conquest, vase, phase, fan,
Wan, sedan and artisan.

The Th will surely trouble you
More than R, Ch or W.
Say then these phonetic gems:
Thomas, thyme, Theresa, Thames.

Thompson, Chatham, Waltham, Streatham,
There are more but I forget 'em -
Wait! I've got it: Anthony,
Lighten your anxiety.

The archaic word albeit
Does not rhyme with eight - you see it;
With and forthwith, one has voice,
One has not, you make your choice.

Shoes, goes, does*. Now first say: finger;
Then say: singer, ginger, linger.

Real, zeal, mauve, gauze and gauge,
Marriage, foliage, mirage, age,
Hero, heron, query, very,
Parry, tarry fury, bury,
Dost, lost, post, and doth, cloth, loth,
Job, Job, blossom, bosom, oath.

Faugh, oppugnant, keen oppugners,
Bowing, bowing, banjo-tuners
Holm you know, but noes, canoes,
Puisne, truism, use, to use?

Though the difference seems little,
We say actual, but victual,
Seat, sweat, chaste, caste, Leigh, eight, height,
Put, nut, granite, and unite.

Reefer does not rhyme with deafer,
Feoffer does, and zephyr, heifer.

Dull, bull, Geoffrey, George, ate, late,
Hint, pint, senate, but sedate.

Gaelic, Arabic, pacific,
Science, conscience, scientific;
Tour, but our, dour, succour, four,
Gas, alas, and Arkansas.

Say manoeuvre, yacht and vomit,
Next omit, which differs from it
Bona fide, alibi
Gyrate, dowry and awry.

Sea, idea, guinea, area,
Psalm, Maria, but malaria.
Youth, south, southern, cleanse and clean,
Doctrine, turpentine, marine.

Compare alien with Italian,
Dandelion with battalion,
Rally with ally; yea, ye,
Eye, I, ay, aye, whey, key, quay!

Say aver, but ever, fever,

Neither, leisure, skein, receiver.

Never guess - it is not safe,

We say calves, valves, half, but Ralf.

Starry, granary, canary,

Crevice, but device, and eyrie,

   Face, but preface, then grimace,

   Phlegm, phlegmatic, ass, glass, bass.

Bass, large, target, gin, give, verging,

Ought, oust, joust, and scour, but scourging;

   Ear, but eart; and ere and tear

   Do not rhyme with here but heir.

Mind the O of off and often

Which may be pronounced as orphan,

   With the sound of saw and sauce;

   Also soft, lost, cloth and cross.

Pudding, puddle, putting. Putting?

   Yes: at golf it rhymes with shutting.

   Respite, spite, consent, resent.

   Liable, but Parliament.

Seven is right, but so is even,

Hyphen, roughen, nephew, Stephen,

   Monkey, donkey, clerk and jerk,

   Asp, grasp, wasp, demesne, cork, work.

A of valour, vapid vapour,

S of news (compare newspaper),

   G of gibbet, gibbon, gist,

   I of antichrist and grist,

Differ like diverse and divers,

Rivers, strivers, shivers, fivers.

   Once, but none, toll, doll, but roll,

   Polish, Polish, poll and poll.

Pronunciation - think of Psyche!

   Is a paling, stout and spiky.

   Won't it make you lose your wits

   Writing groats and saying 'grits'?

   It's a dark abyss or tunnel

Strewn with stones like rowlock, gunwale,

   Islington, and Isle of Wight,

   Housewife, verdict and indict.

Don't you think so, reader, rather,

Saying lather, bather, father?

   Finally, which rhymes with enough,

   Though, through, bough, cough, hough,

   sough, tough??

Hiccough has the sound of sup...

My advice is: GIVE IT UP!

* No, you're wrong. This is the plural of doe.