

Gerard Nolst Trenité – The Chaos (1922)

A very funny poem by Gerard Nolst Trenité about English pronunciation and irregularities. This is a very long one, so just go as far as you can. After fifteen stanzas or so, you just cannot pronounce even the easiest words...

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*.

"*Solder*, *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, *paeon*, *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 *deaf(er)*,
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 scouring;
Ear, but earn; 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*, *fishers*.
Once, but *nonce*, *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!