

## **ESSAY ON RIME**



**KARL SHAPIRO**

ESSAY ON **RIME**

*with*

TRIAL OF A POET

*Edited with an Afterword by Robert Phillips*

*Foreword by David Lehman*

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## **ESSAY ON RIME**

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## FOREWORD

This is a tract on the treble confusion 1  
In modern rime. The premise that our verse  
Is in decline has not, I am convinced,  
Been honestly attacked or well defended.  
Critics in particular have minced matters  
By acquiring all the authority to talk.  
I ask you not to balk at my presumption  
But with a certain reasonable kindness  
Toward the subject to attempt this study.  
I think it is high time that everybody 10  
With a true love of rime assert his views.

In the mid-century of our art we leave  
The park behind and rest beside the zoo  
Of rarities. Very fortunate for us  
That monsters of their own peculiarities  
Perish. Yet they remain. As visitors  
It is our privilege to stare at the adept  
Keepers and the odd assortment of the kept.

Some chimeras are real, some counterfeit. 20  
White unicorns are drinking from the brook;  
Bellowing from its cage the anthropophagus  
Rushes at us. These creatures, certainly,  
Deserve the status of actualities. But look,  
What is that perpendicular snake, that woman  
With hot eyes gleaming in her viscera?  
The question is one of language. No conception  
Too far removed from literal position  
Can keep its body. Ideas are no more words  
Than phoenixes are birds. The metaphysician  
Deals with ideas as words, the poet with things, 30  
For in the poet's mind the phoenix sings.

Now whether the egg of modern criticism  
Precedes the squawking chicken of semantics  
Is a scholar's quiz, but insofar as Meaning  
Has tried to adopt Poetics, the plot thickens.  
But can the science of definition relate to  
Poetry, even obliquely? To science belongs  
The isolation of knowledge, to art belongs  
The isolation of beauty; nor is it likely  
40 That even in this aviary can we mate two  
Creatures of such opposite feather. The owl  
Has many thoughts, the woodlark only songs.

Perhaps Lucretius felt that through the means  
Of language highly charged, more could be said  
Of his philosophy than prose could prove;  
His form is rare but not considered specious.  
Horace and Pope, this pair may be adduced  
As poets who argued in the voice of rime  
And argued well. But poets prefer to roost  
50 In arbors rather than the tree of knowledge.  
That bard expelled from Socrates' Republic  
Is held sweet to the world; for understand  
That dialectic is the foe of poetry.

If, then, I am accused of paradox  
In forcing argument to the cast of rime,  
My only answer is that criticism  
Has charted poetry into dangerous narrows  
And dashed its own brains out upon the rocks  
Of absolute meaning; that this essay is given  
60 In protest to the semantic muse, a pharos  
Perhaps to dialectics but to poetry  
A siren of the Homeric cut. To use  
Language emotionally and not as number  
Is my intention: my hope is to infuse  
Criticism with pleasure, sense with clarity.

One verse of Shakespeare's is a matter for  
A Vatican of wonder and research.  
I cannot take the scholar's perch or view  
The present field like critics, ex cathedra.  
My aim is to suggest, not to pronounce 70  
Sentence, or trounce the brothers of my trade;  
My wish is but to call a rose a rose  
And not a trope; my only rationale  
To answer homemade questions and not those  
Put by poetics old and new. I trust  
I have not bit off more than I can chew.

This essay deals with three major confusions:  
In Prosody, in Language, and in Belief,  
Each part discussing five aspects of rime  
As follows. Under Prosody: the first, 80  
Its English application; second, three  
Important studies; its forms and chaos third;  
Its metric fourth; and fifth and last its cults.  
Next under Language: first its idiom,  
General and personal; second, personality  
And style; its grammar third; rhetoric fourth;  
And fifth, translations and false dialects.  
Finally, under confusion in Belief  
These headings: first, the failure in belief;  
Second, the new and substitute beliefs; 90  
Personal systems third; our dialectic  
And criticism fourth; and fifth and last,  
The dead hand and exhaustion of our rime.

