

This poem was quoted by Abraham Tauber in [Spelling Progress Bulletin Fall 1976](#).
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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](#) (Item 5) 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 uitspraak oefeningen* (Haarlem: H D Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1920). The book itself naturally used the Dutch spelling current before the 1947 reform — see [JSSS 1987/2, J5](#) Item 12. 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*.

The Chaos Gerard Nolst Trenité

This version is essentially the author's own final text, as also published by New River Project in 1993. A few minor corrections have however been made, and occasional words from earlier editions have been preferred. Following earlier practice, words with clashing spellings or pronunciations are here printed in italics.

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!* 10
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, 20
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, 30
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, 40
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. 50
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. 60
 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?* 70
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.* 80
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. 90
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, 100
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*", 110
 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. 120
 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*? 130
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. 140
 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*, 150
 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. 160
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, 170
 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.* 180
 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*, 190
 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. 200
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 *deaffer*,
Feoffer does, and *zephyr, heifer.* 210
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. 220
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. 230
 Never guess — it is not *safe*,
 We say *calves, valves, half*, but *Ralf*.
Starry, granary, canary,
Crevise, 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 earn; and ere and tear
 Do not rhyme with *here* but *heir.* 240
 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, 250
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 nonce, toll, doll, but roll,
Polish, Polish, poll and poll. 260
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?* 270
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*.