**Free verse**

Free verse is a technique of poetic composition that was employed and discussed by poets and critics during the modernist period. Exemplified by a disregard for regular metre and rhyme, free verse came into English poetry via two main routes: the work of the American poet Walt Whitman, and late nineteenth-century French Symbolist poetry. Although not a literal translation, the French term *vers libre* began to be used interchangeably with free verse in the early 1910s, when members of the Imagist movement began to advocate its use to develop an aesthetic that shifted verse written in English away from the Victorian poetry they considered hackneyed and full of unnecessary words. The movement toward free verse had a tremendous influence on English-language poetry throughout the modernist period and beyond, even though, by the 1920s and 30s, some of the mode’s earliest advocates (including Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot) were criticizing what they saw as a decline in the quality of poems written in free verse, and urging a return to the more formal features of rhyme and regular lineation.

**Timeline of Key Works Relating to Free Verse**

**1896 1897 1908 1916**

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Stéphane Mallarmé Gustave Kahn T.E. Hulme Amy Lowell

‘Crise de vers’ ‘Preface’ to *Premiers Poèmes ‘*Lecture on Modern Poetry’ ‘Preface’ to *Some Imagist Poets*

**1917 1918 1920 1942**

| | | |

T.S. Eliot Ezra Pound D.H. Lawrence T.S. Eliot

‘Reflections on Vers Libre’ ‘A Retrospect’ ‘Preface’ to *New Poems*  ‘The Music of Poetry’

Although it was during the period of modernism that free verse/*vers libre* became much more widely known, resistance to regular rhythm and rhyme in poetry was nothing new. In addition to Walt Whitman (1819-92), Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89) has been credited with a form of free verse, and Amy Lowell claimed in her ‘Preface’ to *Some Imagist Poets* (1916) that free verse had existed since Chaucer. However, in his ‘A Lecture on Modern Poetry’ (1908), T.E. Hulme argued that the French Symbolist poet Gustave Kahn (1859-1936) was responsible for inventing *vers libre*, and that he had thus brought about the kind of ‘emancipation of verse’ in French poetry which Hulme believed was essential for English writing. In issues of the journal *La Vogue* in 1886, Kahn published Rimbaud’s prose poems *Illuminations*, translations of Whitman by Jules Laforgue, and some of Laforgue’s own *vers libre* poems. *Vers libre* was given even greater importance after Stéphane Mallarmé identified it in ‘Crise de vers’ (1896) as being an essential element of French Symbolist practice.

Influenced by F.S. Flint’s promotion of the Symbolists and their use of assonance rather than rhyme, Ezra Pound created Imagisme, suggesting that poets should think of their lines as musical phrases and, following Hulme, liberate poetic forms. In his ‘A Few Don’ts By An Imagiste’ (1913), he advised poets not to ‘make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin every next line with a heave.’ H.D.’s ‘Hermes of the Ways’ (1912) exemplifies the kind of poetry which Pound intended to result from the emphasis upon assonance and a freeing of lineation:

The hard sand breaks,

And the grains of it

Are clear as wine.

The possibility of the musical phrase in poetry was developed further by Flint when he explored the ‘unrhymed cadence’, and by Lowell when she developed ‘polyphonic prose’. Throughout the 1910s, these sorts of controversial experiments caused the pages of little magazines like *Poetry*, the *Little Review*, and *Others* to pulse with attacks and counterattacks about how poetry should be defined and just how free it should really be. In 1917, T.S. Eliot penned an article for the *New Statesman* denying the existence of *vers libre*, and contending that some metrical form always lay behind ‘free’ verse. He and Pound subsequently led a turn towards ‘[r]hyme and regular strophes’, an emphasis upon craft that Pound claimed produced Eliot’s *Poems* (1919) and his own *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920). By contrast, D.H. Lawrence declared that free verse had no laws, and that it encapsulated ‘the insurgent naked throb of the instant moment.’ As Lawrence’s assertion suggests, the energy behind the creation of free verse during the modernist period was representative of wider, radical changes in attitudes toward social and political freedoms.

Despite the considerable influence of Pound and Eliot, William Carlos Williams and others continued to write in free verse, with Williams identifying the need for a ‘variable foot’ that he saw at work in Book II of his poem *Paterson* (1948), and which he believed could better capture the speech rhythms of Americans. The legacy of free verse has continued right up to the present day, with many contemporary poets, despite notable objections from groups such as the New Formalists, considering free verse to be the standard form in which to write poetry.

Further reading:

Primary

Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Crise de vers’, 1896

Gustave Kahn, ‘Preface’ to *Premiers Poèmes*, 1897

T.E. Hulme, ‘Lecture on Modern Poetry’, 1908

F.S. Flint, ‘Contemporary French Poetry’, 1912

Amy Lowell, ‘Preface’ to *Some Imagist Poets*, 1916

T.S. Eliot, ‘Reflections on Vers Libre’, 1917

Ezra Pound, ‘A Retrospect’, 1918

D.H. Lawrence, ‘Preface’ to the American Edition of *New Poems*, 1920

Ezra Pound, ‘Harold Monro’, 1932

T.S. Eliot, ‘The Music of Poetry’, 1942

Secondary

Helen Carr, *The Verse Revolutionaries: Ezra Pound, H.D. and the Imagists* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009).

H.T. Kirby-Smith, *The Origins of Free Verse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

Clive Scott, ‘The Prose Poem and Free Verse’, in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 349-68.

Andrew Thacker, ‘The Free Verse Controversy’, in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Volume II: North America 1894-1960*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 293-98. The three essays collected under this heading in the volume all deal with magazines associated with discussions about free verse.

Donald Wesling and Eniko Bollobaś,‘Free Verse’, in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 425-27. See also the entries of Clive Scott, *vers libre* (pp. 1344-45), and David H. Chisholm, *freie Rhythmen* (p. 427).

Paratextual material:

William Carlos Williams reading an excerpt of *Paterson* (book II, section 3) which contains his ‘variable foot’: http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Williams-WC/03\_Library-of-Congress-NBC\_10-18-47/Williams-WC\_04\_Paterson-II-iii\_Library-of-Congress\_10-18-47.mp3