

## HISTORICAL SURVEY:

### FREE VERSE

“Free verse (*vers libre*), poetry without a fixed metrical pattern, having a loosely organized rhythm. It is to be found in the work of some 19th-century American poets, e.g. Whitman and Stephen Crane, but it has been commonly employed only since World War I, its earlier users including the Imagists, Sandburg, Masters, Pound, and E. E. Cummings.”

James D. Hart  
*Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Ezra Pound once quoted T. S. Eliot as saying, ‘No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job.’ Because *vers libre* equals ‘free verse,’ the same maxim applies. It certainly may be the case that no verse is free if it uses a common language, because every human language is an overweening system of regulation and bondage that no speaker can escape without landing in unintelligibility.

Even so, verse may be relatively free, especially if we take pains in specifying what it is free *of*. It seems that the quantitative or alliterative verse of the ancients--speakers of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and all Old Germanic languages--was already so lax in its requirements that nobody thought of trying to emancipate verse. Once, however, rhymed verse in accentual-syllabic qualitative measures was established, the noose must have felt a bit too tight, for poets began looking for some relief. Surrey’s innovation of blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) in the mid-sixteenth century offered a measure of freedom in one dimension.

By the eighteenth century, a few far-seeing poets could manage without rhyme, meter, or regular rhythm, and Christopher Smart and William Blake could write a verse qualifying for the term *free*. Several poets of the nineteenth century continued the tradition; among them Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman were foremost. In much of the newer *free verse*, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, the old shackles of rhyme were thrown off but, in some cases, new chains (such as Whitman’s reliance on parallelism and anaphora) quickly took their place. Even today, very little of published verse is truly *free* in every respect.” [References: Charles O. Hartraan, *Free Verse* (1980); Graham Hough, *Free Verse* (1958); Walter Sutton, *American Free Verse* (1973).]

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon  
*A Handbook to Literature*, 6th edition  
(Macmillan 1936-92)

“Free verse (sometimes called *vers libre*) is a literary phenomenon that has attracted wide public attention, largely within the 20th century. It is regarded as being a movement typically modern and typically American, and it is believed that if it originated at all beyond our shores, the seed came first from France. In actual fact the avoidance of mathematically accurate metrics (in rhythm, line-length, and sound repetition) which is characteristic of free verse represents a dichotomy within English poetry that is as old as English poetry itself; and so-called free verse--that is, of deliberately irregular pattern--can be found throughout the whole course of English literature.

During the 19th century it was mainly American poets who sounded the tocsin of revolt against the old and familiar metrics. They felt intensely that these old techniques were no longer suitable for expressing the tumultuous thoughts and bewildering emotions of a new land and a new age. Foremost in establishing new patterns were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Stephen Crane. Emerson placed greater emphasis on images, cadenced phrases, and rhetoric than on rhymes and meter. Whitman, though one occasionally hears the rhythms of Ossian in his poetry, was most strongly affected by the parallelistic lines of the *Bible*--likewise Ossian’s source. Henry Seidel Canby stresses his long rolling lines, his catalogues, his exhortations, his dialogues with himself, also his ‘extensive, sometimes tiresome use of alliteration.’ Only the careless reader, moreover, can fail to note Whitman’s employment of assonance and

internal rhyme. On the other hand, Whitman's pattern was so loose that it encouraged discursiveness and loquacity.

Emily Dickinson was in general conventional enough as far as internal rhythm, line length, and stanzaic structure went, but she boldly innovated in the kind of rhymes she employed. She continued the loosening of the bonds which Emerson began, pointing toward Stephen Crane and the Imagists. Whether Crane knew Miss Dickinson's poetry and to what extent he was influenced by the French Symbolists has been argued. His poems, all short, have a sardonic irony and a disillusioned stoicism that places them in a class apart from the free verse written since his time.

Early in the 20th century the trend toward metrical freedom reached a peak in the so-called 'new poetry,' in the spate of verse magazines, and particularly in the Imagist movement. A few of the poets who won renown then wrote free verse--among them Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters. The Imagist movement was both American and English, and was spawned in London between 1908 and 1912. T. E. Hulme, Richard Aldington, and F. S. Flint were the English instigators; Hilda Doolittle, Ezra Pound, John Gould Fletcher, and Amy Lowell the American members of the partnership. They wrote in what they called 'unrhymed cadence,' they stressed the stripped-down and clear image, they sought to use the language of common speech. Meanwhile the 'little magazines' (which, in Keith Preston's satiric quatrain, 'died to make verse free') proliferated and did much to encourage experimental forms. The post-war generation--such poets as T. S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, E. E. Cummings, Conrad Aiken, Wallace Stevens--emphasized the need for rigor in free verse and often returned to conventional forms, giving them new force and functional validity.

The purpose of free verse with no fettering meter or rhyme is to give an effect of directness. But the indictment by T. S. Eliot in 1917 still holds: '*Vers libre*...is a battlecry of freedom, and there is no freedom in art.' Writing free verse, said Frost, is like playing tennis without a net. Unresistant material is not material for an artist, and the really noteworthy writers of 'free' verse have set up for themselves disciplines of sound and rhythm as severe as any under which Chaucer, Pope, or Tennyson worked."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)