

The Nonsense about *Vers Libre* (Why not a little Free Prose, for a change?)

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"*Vers libre*" is French. France being, in part at least, a free country, we may dare a free translation of it. Here it is: *Vers libre*—free worms—free metrical worms. *Vers* means worms—so there you are. We cannot here pause to differentiate the species; the trichina is, of course, very common. But in all *vers libre*, there is one common characteristic, it has no vertebra.

Now it is very hard to keep the rules of a sonnet; to find words so aptly wedded to thought and music that all semblance of artificiality becomes lost; but it is no way out of the difficulty to write something which is entirely different, to call it a *free* sonnet, and then ask the world to admire it. Nor does it constitute literary distinction to remark some point common to all collocations of words such as stress, cadence, rhythm, aptness of imagery, or absence of meaning, and to describe the result as stressism. You can sit down hard on the piano, and nobody is going to mind very much; but if you conclude the performance by boasting that you have avoided the technique and formality of Beethoven, somebody *may* want to kick you.

Vers libre and stuff of its kind is not exactly new. "Piers Plowman" is all *vers libre*, but the author of it never insisted that his work constituted a "school."

Schools are the curse of art. The artist is a lone wolf. The moment that you put two artists together their art becomes negligible. The business of the artist is with God, and not with man. To produce a masterpiece, you must first have a master thought, white-hot; and you have next to get it fixed in words, or notes, or

paint, or stone. One is inspiration; the other technique. One is useless without the other; but the inspiration comes first.

The business of technique is to be inconspicuous. It is like the manners of a gentleman. And the free worm is always a parvenu; his loudness and self-assertiveness prove it. Nobody minds what he writes, so long as he gets the thought presented in the simplest and clearest and most forceful way. This is so difficult to do that there is not a perfect fifty line passage of poetry, or a perfect thousand words of prose, in the English language. To write a single sentence is an achievement; and it only comes by infinite practice added to a great original genius.

But the *verslibrist*—pray observe the lovely word it has coined to describe itself—recks nothing of all this. It writes something, anything; and then proceeds to prove that it is better than Shakespeare and Shelley and Swinburne and Swift and Sterne and Smollett and Stevenson—stylists all. The artist is a workman, and he never stops to admire his output. His mental attitude is ecstasy; he is beyond time and space; his contemporaries do not exist for him. The moment this ceases to be true, he becomes a common creature of the earth, a pushing tradesman. The free worm is too often engaged in trying to become a guinea-worm—or hack-writer worm, like Hall Craine, or Cyrus Townsend Brady.

So, the more restrictions we place upon art, the better that art will become. We must not publish our youthful metrical monkey-tricks—like our *Chants Royals* or our *Villanelles*—because they cannot possibly come out exactly right; language will not suffer such extremely tight lacing. A perfect sonnet, even, is a miracle beyond the hope of any rational poet. But, by trying to write *Rondeaux* and *Ballades* and *Pantoums*, a poet becomes the master of the essential difficulties of language; they are his "five finger exercises;" and when he has burnt about a million of them, perhaps, by God's grace, a

thought will come to him, and he will get it written down in moderately decent prose, or even in one of the simpler stanza forms of verse.

You can recognize success in writing because the product has this quality: it is inevitable. It is like a Greek tragedy; it is like Nature herself. It has being and form in perfect harmony. It is impossible to go into its details; for there are no details. They are all absorbed into the living unity of the whole; much as in the human body, the cells are absorbed into the living man. Anything which stands out in art, is deformity, or disease, or weakness. Consider the long bad passage in the middle of "Kubla Khan," and the anticlimax of the last verse of the "Ode to a Nightingale!" Even in so short a verse-form as the heroic, one is put to it to quote a dozen consecutive perfect couplets. (Swinburne's "Anactoria" would be our first candidate.)

If the free worms be really masters of the language, let them show it by producing just one perfect sonnet by way of advertisement. If their lack of ideas and lack of music, as well as their disproportion, redundancy and a dozen other faults, are not immediately evident, then we may begin to take their poets seriously. Until then, we shall maintain that this article is the greatest extant masterpiece of English, composed in cataleptic triturated parallelopipeds of a rhythmic—*motjustiste*—borborogmic paraprosoodian-aposeiopsis, the flower of the Washington Square or Dutch Oven School of Literature; or perhaps it would be cleverer to claim that it is not writing at all, but sculpture, or aviation, or imageless iconography, or something—anything—which it obviously is *not*. Then, a lot of my readers will look surprised, and I can pity them.