

## Analysing Poetry: Free Verse

### A. Free Verse as the 'Apogee' of Formal Innovation

[apogee: 1 the point at which the moon, the sun, a space vehicle etc., is farthest from the earth  
2 the highest point of power or success]

"to break the pentameter, that was the first heave"

Ezra Pound, "Canto LXXXI" (1941)

"I believe in an 'absolute rhythm'; a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable."

Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect" (1918)

"*Vers libre* does not exist [...] [It] has not even the excuse of a polemic; it is a battle cry of a freedom, and there is no freedom in art [...] [T]he ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras of even the 'freest' verse [...] freedom is only true freedom when it appears against the background of artificial limitation [...] [*S*]ome artificial limitation is necessary except in moments of first intensity [...] [T]he decay of intricate formal patterns has nothing to do with the advent of *vers libre*. It had set in long before. Only in a closely-knit and homogeneous society, where many men are at work on the same problems [...] will the development of such forms ever be carried to perfection. [...]

And as for *vers libre* we conclude that it is not defined by absence of pattern or absence of rhyme, for other verse is without these; that it is not defined by absence of meter, since even the *worst* verse can be scanned; and we conclude that the division between Conservative Verse and *Vers libre* does not exist, for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos."

T.S. Eliot, "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" (1917)

### Types of Free Verse:

- 1) free verse hovering intermittently around, in, and out of meter, alluding to and playing off of conventional measure.
- 2) long-lined, syntactically repetitive free verse modelled on the translations of the Psalms in the King James Bible: a sense of rhythm is established by parallelism/anaphora, a sense of closure is signalled by departing from this scheme of repetition.
- 3) short lines corresponding to syntactical units: line divisions reflect the syntactical current, grammar is compressed and urgent.
- 4) short lines with lots of enjambment: to facilitate run-ons, lines end in mid-phrase – with prepositions, conjunctions, articles, attributive words, or with adjectives whose nouns appear at the beginning of the line below. Effects: makes the verse paragraph rather than the line the basic unit, facilitates visual structures.

(cf. Timothy Steele, *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1999, 260-264.)