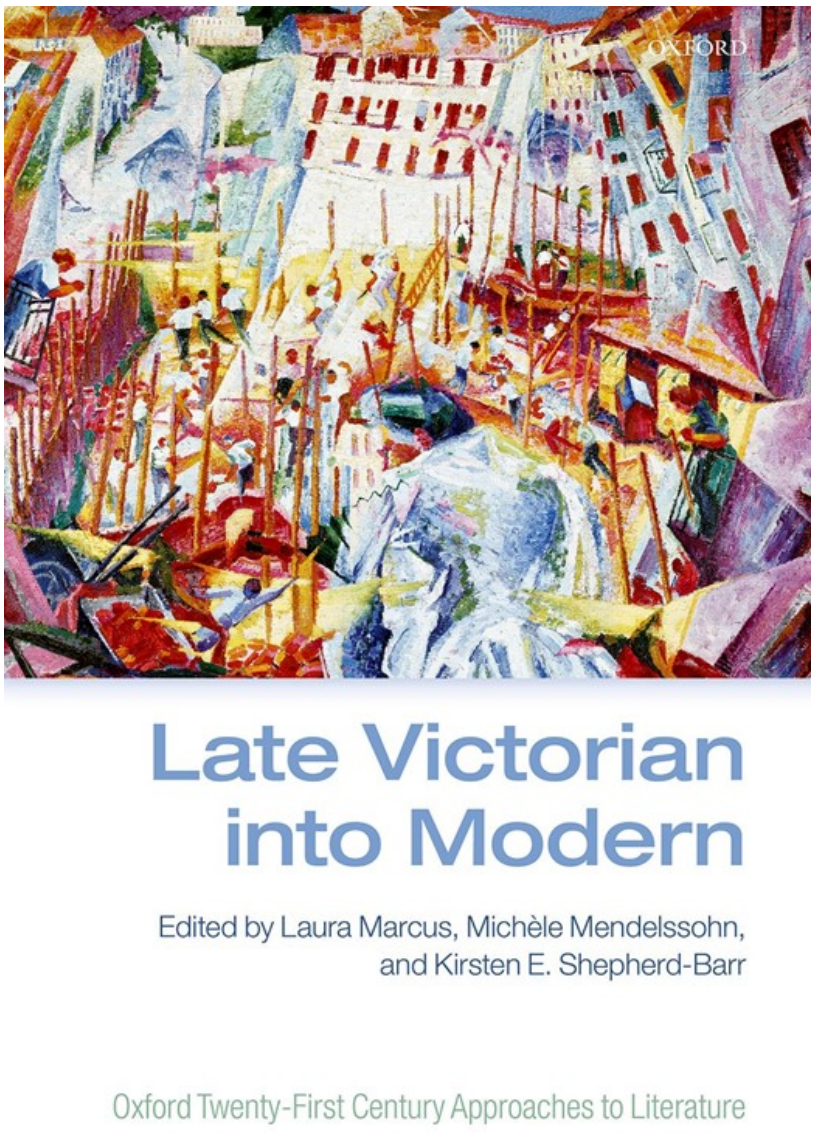

Late Victorian into Modern

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CHAPTER

6 Emerging Poetic Forms

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Abstract

This chapter fastens on the 'first moment in literary history when poetry was not expected to follow fixed, inherited, generically specific rules about scansion, line length, syllable weight, or rhyme'—a moment when poetry blossomed in a remarkable efflorescence of prosodic and musical experiment, as represented by Eliot, Dobson, Dowson, Pound, Whitman, and others. The First World War invigorated the writing and reading of poetry but it also had a recursive effect on form and diction. By the 1920s, it is contended, poetry was at a three-way stand-off between modish *vers libre*, the consoling traditional poetic forms of the soldier poets, and the increasingly complex experiments and pastiches of the avant-garde.

Keywords: Prosody, diction, vers libre, pastiche, experiment, scansion

Subject: Literary Studies (19th Century), Literature

Collection: Oxford Handbooks Online

p. 102 A conventional but mistaken history of poetic form runs as follows: by the end of the nineteenth century, poets began working in progressive, freer forms, loosening themselves from the rules of ictus, accent, foot, and line that had dominated English poetics since the Renaissance. Then, in the period of high modernism, these experiments solidified into free verse, an open, unconstricted form that remains dominant today.

This is largely a story told by modernists, and by critics of modernism, and it has the ring of winner's history. Charles Hartman's influential book *Free Verse* begins with the idea that in 1908, poets wrote in a 'generally confident prosodic atmosphere', which exploded suddenly in 1912, when Ezra Pound formulated Imagism.[1] For Pericles Lewis, the prosodic fact is a given, and the important question is *why*: 'The victory of free verse over traditional meters, decisively won in English by Ezra Pound and his friends, was actually undertaken in the name of mimesis.'[2] Definitions of modernism often cite free verse as the prosodic change accompanying disjunctions of content and structure: 'modernism's stylistic ruptures—its disjointed syntax, free verse, unorthodox subjects, mythical superstructures, collage juxtapositions.'[3]

By refocusing on the period 1880-1920, I want to suggest that the conventional account dates the shift from metrical to free verse too late, attributes too much agency to modernist writers, and neglects the seriously important metrical changes that had already happened in nineteenth-century poetry. By drawing attention to five strategies for reforming poetry, I also want to draw attention to some unlikely, and neglected,
p. 104 affinities between writers we are prone sharply to demarcate: ↳ W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot; James Joyce and Ernest Dowson; Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins; late Tennyson and Walt Whitman.

A good place to start is with Pound's own famous but elliptical pronouncement of reform in *Canto* 81. The parentheses are usually omitted in citation. '(To break the pentameter, that was the first heave.)'[4] The line is memorable because it jumpily enacts the constraints it describes and, in doing so, it remains wedded to the form it decries. 'To break the metre, that was the first heave' would, after all, have *been* a line of iambic pentameter. And later, Canto 81 goes on, in some of the most devastating (and famous) lines in all of the Cantos, to resurrect the metre it claims to be 'broken'. 'What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee', 'Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down'. And finally it claims that error is not in the done, but in the not done, 'all in the diffidence that faltered'.

Like many conventional stories, like many Whig histories, 'the rise of free verse' is partly true. Before the late nineteenth century, very little poetry was written in a metre that could not be identified or, more importantly, copied; during the twentieth century, the majority of poems published were in unique, one-off

forms. But almost everything else about the conventional prehistory of free verse—with its accommodating reading of Pound—is wrong. Free verse is, as many critics have noted, not easy to define, nor obviously free.[5] Free from what? Not free from convention, once freedom has become convention; nor from the fact that stress in English is fixed at the level of the word and constrained at the level of the phrase by focus and nuclear stress; nor from an aesthetic pull towards sonic repetition. Whitman's prosody (in 'The Song of Myself', 1855) may be looser, and his lines longer, than most verse written in this period, but freedom of versification leads to constraints in syntax. The near-constant anaphora is a constraint on thought, as well as sound. Sometimes it is a constraint on realism:

> Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore;
> Twenty-eight young men, and all so friendly:
> Twenty-eight years of womanly life, and all so lonesome.[6]

Exactly twenty-eight? Really?

In fact, it isn't clear that Pound does not intend the parenthetical aside in Canto 81 to be an example of false belief—an idea that could have been entertained (notice also that he supplies no agent)—but which is actually, like many of the other ideas in this Canto, false dogma. He was certainly not sympathetic to the
p. 105 democratic principles that some of free verse's supporters have seen it as promoting. Indeed, the ↳ parenthesis occurs after a reported conversation between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams about monarchy versus aristocracy, 'You the one, I the few'. In this correspondence, both remain committed to a 'natural aristocracy'.[7] Nor does Pound represent himself as having any great agency over English prosody here or anywhere else; more often, in fact, he and Eliot present themselves as the metrically dispossessed, as victims. 'No verse is free', said Eliot, 'for the man who wants to do a good job' and 'there is no freedom in art'.[8] Pound was fond of misquoting this as 'no verse is libre'. The French term itself adds a note of suspicion, as Eliot perhaps also intended in his 'Vers Libre' essay.[9] Neither poet was hospitable to liberalism as a political idea.

Eliot and Pound both recognized that if modern English poetry was and had to be metrically different from its antecedents, this was because the language itself had changed. Barthes's dictum that 'it is language which speaks, not the author' may hold truer for prosody than most other parts of poetic composition. In the preface to his mother's dramatic poem *Savonarola*, Eliot commented elliptically: 'The next form of drama will have to be a verse drama but in new verse forms. Perhaps the conditions of modern life (think how large a part is now played in sensory life by the internal combustion engine) have altered our rhythms.'[10] In the late chapter 'Poetry and Drama', reflecting on his playwriting career, 'the rhythm of regular blank verse had become too remote from the movement of modern speech'.[11] What was new in modernist poetry was, at times, an attempt to codify these changes (Hopkins's doctrine of sprung rhythm, Eliot's hankering after a new prosody for verse drama) and at others, a conscious attempt to evade them (e.g. in Pound's and Eliot's experiments with quatrain poems, after Gautier) by returning to the 'hard' chiselled forms in use before the Romantic period. The major modernist poets—Eliot, Yeats, Pound, Auden, Stevens—all wrote verse that is much *less* free than many of their contemporaries, and between them they reprised (not always successfully) a number of forms that the nineteenth century had forgotten: Auden's trochaic catalectics for example ('Lay your sleeping head, my love'), or un-enjambed *abab* tetrameter quatrains reminiscent of eighteenth-century verse (the nineteenth century preferred *abac* or the 'In Memoriam' *abba*), or rhyme royal (Auden's 'Letter to Lord Byron'), and ottava rima ('Sailing to Byzantium').[12]

p. 106 Compare the following two passages, written at either end of this long turn-of-the-century period. Which is freer? The first is from the end of the first part of Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, and was printed with the date 1919 above it.

> Tell her that sheds
> Such treasure in the air,
> Recking naught else but that her graces give
> Life to the moment,
> I would bid them live
> As roses might, in magic amber laid,
> Red overwrought with orange and all made
> One substance and one colour
> Braving time.

As an 'enigmatic pastiche' of Edmund Waller's 'Go, lovely rose', Pound's 'Envoi' has puzzled critics. He rated it highly enough to propose its inclusion in an anthology containing only two of his poems, but omitted it during a 1958 recording of *Mauberley*.[13] Sarah Davison has argued that it forms part of his attempt to 'resurrect the art of the lyric', and specifically the *classical* pre-romantic lyric—a project which continues in Canto 81 ('to break the pentameter'). And this was eminently a formal problem for Pound, who thought lyric could only be revived by going one step beyond Waller and Campion ('mere imitation of them won't do'): that is, by writing in new versions of their metres. In Canto 81, he produces another, even more lovely, virtuosic imitation of late Renaissance lyric, before quoting two lines attributed to Chaucer, and measuring out the gap: 'And for a hundred and eighty years almost nothing.'

A more typical example of the changes in nineteenth-century metrical norms is evident in the first stanza of Christina Rossetti's 'Song of Flight', published in 1881. Where Pound maintains the rule that there should be an equal number of stressed and unstressed syllables (allowing only for the possibility of a feminine rhyme, an extra unstressed at the end), Rossetti allows extra, unstressed syllables to creep in everywhere in her restless, leaping short lyric:

> While we slumber and sleep
> The sun leaps up from the deep-
> Daylight born at the leap!–
> Rapid, dominant, free
> Athirst to bathe in the uttermost sea.

How are we to hear or say (or sing) this lyric? The first line is made from two anapests; the second teases us.
p. 107 ↳
If it follows the pattern of the first, we should stress 'leaps', but, in that case, why didn't Rossetti write the perfectly possible 'The sun leaps from the deep'? The addition of the preposition 'up' leads to wilful metrical irregularity. And then the first line's pattern is repeated in the third, making the stress on the long vowel 'born' even heavier. The fourth line is irregular in a different way. The poem's ground rule, two anapests per line, has not been firmly enough established to stick, so the *possible* pronunciation 'rapid DOMinant FREE' falters, and the natural trochee of 'rapid', with the stress on the first syllable, swings against the notionally upward rhythm—turning, in the last line, into a pattern that seems more naturally dactylic, falling, than anapestic, rising ('bathe in the' and 'uttermost' are both, isolated, falling rhythms).

In one sense, this small poem is in free verse, because no pattern that is replicable can be discerned from it, and its form is unique. At the same time, it is also typical of a general tendency in later nineteenth-century poetry to agglutinate extra, unstressed syllables, while keeping the stresses constant, creating sound patterns that would traditionally be defined as anapestic or dactylic: one long, two shorts. If we allow that stresses can always be separated by one or two syllables, then the alternation between dimeter and tetrameter is, in an abstract sense, the same pattern as Waller's 'Go lovely rose', although the pacing and mood produced is very different.

Pound's uncertainty about 'Envoi' is testament to the fact that the English lyric never really had a codified form. In fact, poets' search for new forms at the turn of the twentieth century can be understood as part of a much longer search for a lyric metre. Traditionally, lyric's prestige was lower than that of dramatic, epic, or narrative verse, and the most ingenious and experimental of Renaissance versifiers devoted their metrical attention elsewhere. But during the long nineteenth century, this all changed. After romanticism, the abject lyric became the most privileged of poetic modes, for J. S. Mill, 'more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other'.[14] *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*, first published in 1861, is often described as a watershed moment in this history; for Marjorie Perloff it is testament to 'the codification of Romantic theory, with its gradual privileging of lyric over other modes'.[15] Marion Thain has recently suggested that it inaugurates, in addition, a movement away from the self-aware lyric of Tennyson, Arnold, or Clough towards the pathological 'lyric solipsism' evident in the Decadent poetry of Swinburne and Symons.[16]

The metrical consequences of a turn to lyric are not so often discussed as the thematic and generic ones, but
p. 108 if English poetry had backed itself into a 'lyric ↳ ghetto' by 1900 (in Mark Jeffreys' memorable phrase) it is not surprising that it had also lost use of its most natural, conversational line, the pentameter.[17] A poem such as Tennyson's 'Ulysses' is a soliloquy in a blank frame, a remote, dramatized speaker, obviously not the poet himself, talking to a remote listener. Its lyricism lies in the surreptitious way we are asked to 'overhear', but the speaker himself, being quite solidly a dramatic character, inhabits blank verse easily. But, in Palgrave's first edition, there is not a single poem like this: nothing in blank verse. All of the poems rhyme. The most metrically irregular are the ballads in dialect, but even here an underlying, if flexible and variable, structure can be discerned.[18] Even the number of poems in rhyming iambic pentameter is fairly low (under 25 per cent). Take out Shakespeare's sonnets, and it would be much lower again. Traditionally, lyric used different forms: trochaic catalectics ('Fear no more the heat of the sun'), heavily rhymed, artificial iambic tetrameter ('When as in silks my Julia goes'), and structures describable only at the level of the strophe, not the line.

The turn to lyric was accompanied, as Rossetti's lyric shows, by a phonological or aural change in English poets' attitude towards unstressed syllables, 'quick rhythms', and trisyllabic feet. In fact, these changes, one of mode, one of phonology, may not be entirely unrelated. In his study of the English lyric, George Saintsbury tellingly observes that disyllabic feet had, from the beginning of English poetry, been problematic for lyricists, perhaps because of musical monotony: 'the deplorable heresy that there was in English "only a foot of two syllables" – from which it almost necessarily followed that lyric must be crippled or at least fettered.'[19] Lyric in English, he is saying, seems to encourage poetry written with different kinds of metrical base rhythms. Are there historical, linguistic reasons to explain why old forms might cease to work for modern English? It is tempting to say so, and changes in pronunciation would be a good, basic explanation for new prosodies. But there was no great vowel shift around 1880.

The deep causes—phonological or, as Eliot suggests, technological—of changes in the English ear in the nineteenth century require much more systematic investigation by scholars. But the solutions, the new forms, that poets found as a response to these pressures might be loosely categorized into five kinds, and I will discuss them in order of increasing metrical 'freedom'.

First, a classicist interest in preserving traditional forms: poems in isometric (equal-length) lines and with almost entirely trochaic or iambic feet. This, which is the solution of many of the high modernist poets, at
p. 109 least at points during their ↳ career, was accompanied by distaste for sentimental, personal, or effusive poetry—in fact, a distaste for lyric. The quatrain poems that Pound and Eliot wrote in the mid-teens, supposedly under the influence of Gautier, are some of the clearest examples; in fact, a poem like 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales', where clauses are contained within the unit of the line, is also reminiscent of eighteenth-century quatrain writing. When Yeats approved the ending of this poem as speaking 'in the grand manner', he was recognizing not its continental, but its English, ancestry. This solution, not always a success, was conservative both in its desire to preserve the traditional metres of English and, just as

importantly, in its commitment to keeping the diegetic range of poetry as wide as possible. The combatant soldier poets, whose recourse to traditional poetic forms is usually read as nostalgic, comforting, and stylistically outmoded, also wrote largely in traditional metres. Rupert Brooke's sonnets and T. S. Eliot's quatrain poems are not, in terms of their sound and form, at quite such divergent ends of the poetic spectrum as Paul Fussell suggests.[20] The difference lies in the sonnets' plush lyricism and archaic diction, their lack of irony, and their voicing.

A related, though less successful, strategy was the importation of new forms into English, usually from French. The poets of the Rhymers' Club experimented with intricate, repetitious forms not seen much in English poetry before or (except as exercises in writing workshops) since: sestinas, villanelles, rondeaus, rondels. But however quickly poets threw up new structures, none seemed to stick. The villanelle that Stephen Dedalus writes on the back of a cigarette packet in *A Portrait of the Artist* seems intended, within its context, to be read ironically as an example of Stephen's aesthetic pretentiousness. The nagging repetitiousness of the form has a hollowing-out effect; like the diary with which the novel finishes, it suggests that Stephen, along with Joyce's other Dubliners, is destined to paralysis, to staying put. Pound's own 'Villanelle: The Psychological Hour' is *not* a villanelle, but it is a satirical take on the mood of these Decadent forms: 'I had over-prepared the event', 'So much barren regret!/So many hours wasted!' In fact, both Pound and Joyce had written poems of this kind in earnest in their early twenties, copying the examples of Symons and Dowson.[21] The impulse to produce new forms for lyric poetry to inhabit is essentially modernist; the problem was simply that these kinds of poems quickly became self-limiting and self-thematizing—studies of circularity, indifference, impotence. Dowson's 'Dregs', with its sense of everything gone leewards, is one typical example.

The third solution, already seen in Rossetti's song, was to keep the traditional rhyming, stress, and line
p. 110 structures of English poetry, but without insisting on ↳ isosyllabism (the same number of syllables per line). Almost always in this period, the tendency is to keep the number of stresses constant, while increasing the number of syllables. Rossetti's poem is one example; another, more metrically consistent, would be Hardy's 'The Voice', written in 1912, which calls out in a predominantly dactylic metre:

> Woman much missed how you call to me, call to me
> Saying that now you are not as you were . . .

In his early poetry, Yeats was also fond of these triple rhythms. He presents the curious example of a versifier who becomes stricter, not freer over time; the Pound-influenced modernist poet of the 1920s was writing in more classical forms than the Celtic twilight poet of *The Rose*:

> I would that we were, my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea!

Even Hopkins's notorious theory of sprung rhythm—described by recent critics as 'completely idiosyncratic',[22] 'puzzling',[23] 'peculiar', and badly described by Hopkins—can be understood as an attempt to drive this tendency in late nineteenth-century poetry to its codified extreme.[24] In her recent work on the cultural significance of the (surprisingly vehement) metrical debates at this period, Meredith Martin asks: 'What if Hopkins's prosody is part of a larger story about the instability of English meter in the nineteenth century?'[25] Her own focus is, however, more on the intellectual history of prosody than its comparative employment. This is Hopkins's description:

> Sprung Rhythm, as used in this book, is measured by feet of from one to four syllables, regularly, and for particular effects any number of weak or slack syllables may be used. It has one stress, which falls on the only syllable, if there is only one, if there are more, then scanning as above, on the first, and so gives rise to four sorts of feet, a monosyllable and the so-called accentual Trochee, Dactyl, and the First Paeon.[26]

The most important point here is that each foot has 'one stress', and that 'any number of weak or slack
p. 111 syllables may be used'. Hopkins also points out that these ↳ patterns are primarily strophic (phrasal) rather than stichic (line-based), for 'it is natural in Sprung Rhythm for the lines to be *rove over*, that is for the scanning of each line immediately to take up that of the one before'.

A huge amount of attention has been paid by both linguisticians and literary critics to the subtleties of Hopkins's metre, but many of these studies err by assuming that Hopkins's own *rules* for pronunciation, suggested in part by diacritical marks, show the actual pronunciation of the poems. In fact, it makes very little sense for poets to be prescriptive about metre, because readers don't follow their advice; we know by eye that 'prove' and 'love' must rhyme, in a Shakespeare sonnet, but the eye is not enough to persuade the ear. Hopkins's rhythms are largely falling with a stress every three or four syllables (often, emphatically, on syllables that are quantitatively long). His diacritics *overmark* the amount of stress we actually pronounce. Once they are removed, is the opening of 'Spring and Fall' so different from Hardy's 'The Voice'? The similarity is seen more clearly when two lines are written as one long dactylic line:

> Margaret, are you grieving over Goldengrove unleaving?[27]

Or compare this little lyric to Rossetti's 'the sun leaps up from the deep'.

> And I have asked to be
> Where no storms come,
> Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
> And out of the swing of the sea.[28]

In the fifth volume of *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*, which was added to the others in 1926 and covered verse from the beginning of the Victorian period to Yeats, a very high proportion of the poems work with triple rhythms, from Tennyson's 'Break, Break, Break' and Browning's 'Love Among the Ruins' to the huntsman's chorus from *Atalanta in Calydon* and James Clarence Mangan's translation from Irish 'My dark Rosaleen' (Rosaleen's name itself forcing the metre).

A fourth, more visually surprising solution was long lines (sometimes combined, as in Hardy's case, with triple rhythms). Ten syllables, and five stresses, had traditionally been about as far as English could stretch. Even the alexandrine seemed too long; Samuel Johnson's observation that it 'invariably requires a break at the sixth syllable' illustrates that it was traditionally felt to be no more than two trimeters stuck together.[29] Was this increased tolerance for long lines the result of industrial time speeding things up? Tennyson
p. 112 claimed to have made the fifteen syllable ↳ rollicking line of 'Locksley Hall', 'Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change', after travelling by rail for the first time: 'When I went by the first train from Liverpool to Manchester (1830), I thought that the wheels ran in a groove. It was a black night and there was such a vast crowd round the train at the station that we could not see the wheels. Then I made this line.'[30] It is a tempting correspondence, but I do not think it can be quite so simple; in the hands of other poets, particularly Decadent poets of the 1890s, excess length produces languor and diffuseness. The initial anapest in Tennyson's line gives the same kind of speedy upsurge that Rossetti uses in her leaping flight poem. The long initial iamb in Arthur Symons's 'Grey Hours: Naples' produces a very different effect.

> There are some hours when I seem so indifferent; all things fade
> To an indifferent greyness, like that grey of the sky;
> Always at evening-ends, on grey days; and I know not why,
> But life, and art, and love, and death, are the shade of a shade.[31]

The break after 'indifferent' is world-weary, and the overlong line's tendency to cluster nouns (life and art and love *and* death), repeat words (grey, indifferent), and dwell on long syllables creates intellectual flaccidity and enervation.

One might object, following Johnson, that the very long lines in 'Locksley Hall' are only superficially unusual, an experiment in lineation and pagination, rather than metrical form. As one handbook has it, the line 'readily breaks down into standard ballad metre of common measure of alternating three and four stress lines'.[32] By this argument, each of the couplets resolves into *abcb* ballad metre, so:

> Not in vain the distance beckons. Forward, forward let us range,
> Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change.[33]

has, as its underlying metrical or grammatical structure, this:

> Not in vain the distance beckons.
> Forward, forward let us range,
> Let the great world spin forever
> Down the ringing grooves of change.

This works in some cases, but not all, because polysyllables sometimes prevent the line from being broken up. We can scan the line trochaically as 'LET the GREAT world SPIN forEVer', but we tend to hear it more hurriedly, in an upward movement, 'let the GREAT world spin forEVer'.

p. 113 The *difference* between this line and a traditional common metre is even more apparent in the later poem, 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After', published in 1886.[34] It is nominally in the same form as the original 'Locksley Hall'. But, somehow, it also is not. It is much closer to being 'free' verse. It is harder to turn these fifteen-syllable lines back into ballad metre, because the sense units do not fit so readily into line units. In fact, the second poem, which casts a seriously pessimistic look back over a century of progress, seems to display, in the way that the first poem did not quite, a more essential problem of formal entropy. Take these couplets, for example, from the opening of the poem's second section.

> Here is Locksley Hall, my grandson, here the lion-guarded gate.
> Not to-night in Locksley Hall – to-morrow – you, you come so late.
>
> Wreck'd – your train – or all but wreck'd? a shatter'd wheel? a vicious boy!
> Good, this forward, you that preach it, is it well to wish you joy?
>
> Is it well that while we range with Science, glorying in the Time,
> City children soak and blacken soul and sense in city slime?
>
> There among the glooming alleys Progress halts on palsied feet,
> Crime and hunger cast our maidens by the thousand on the street.

Here self-interruption and repair produce some of the free effects of a Browning monologue. 'Wreck'd – your train – or all but wrecked?' could be pronounced and stressed in many different ways. And the tendency of the fifteen-syllable line to split into two four-beat trochaic lines, the second catalectic, is denied by the strange break at 'to' in the word 'tomorrow', which gets broken into two. The effect is that of a stutter, as the speaker diagnoses some kind of *essential* breach between today and tomorrow, telling his interlocutor that he has come too late, the once aggressive train now wrecked and shattered, and Progress itself 'halting'. And in the second couplet, the vigorous travelling metre never quite gets going: the heavy consonants of 'range' and 'science', the late caesuara in line one, and the alliterative consonants in line two, produce a heavy, serious long line, one that seems on the verge of devolving into prose.

Figure 1

Envy wears the mask of Love, and, laughing sober fact to scorn,
Cries to Weakest as to Strongest, 'Ye are equals, equal-born.'

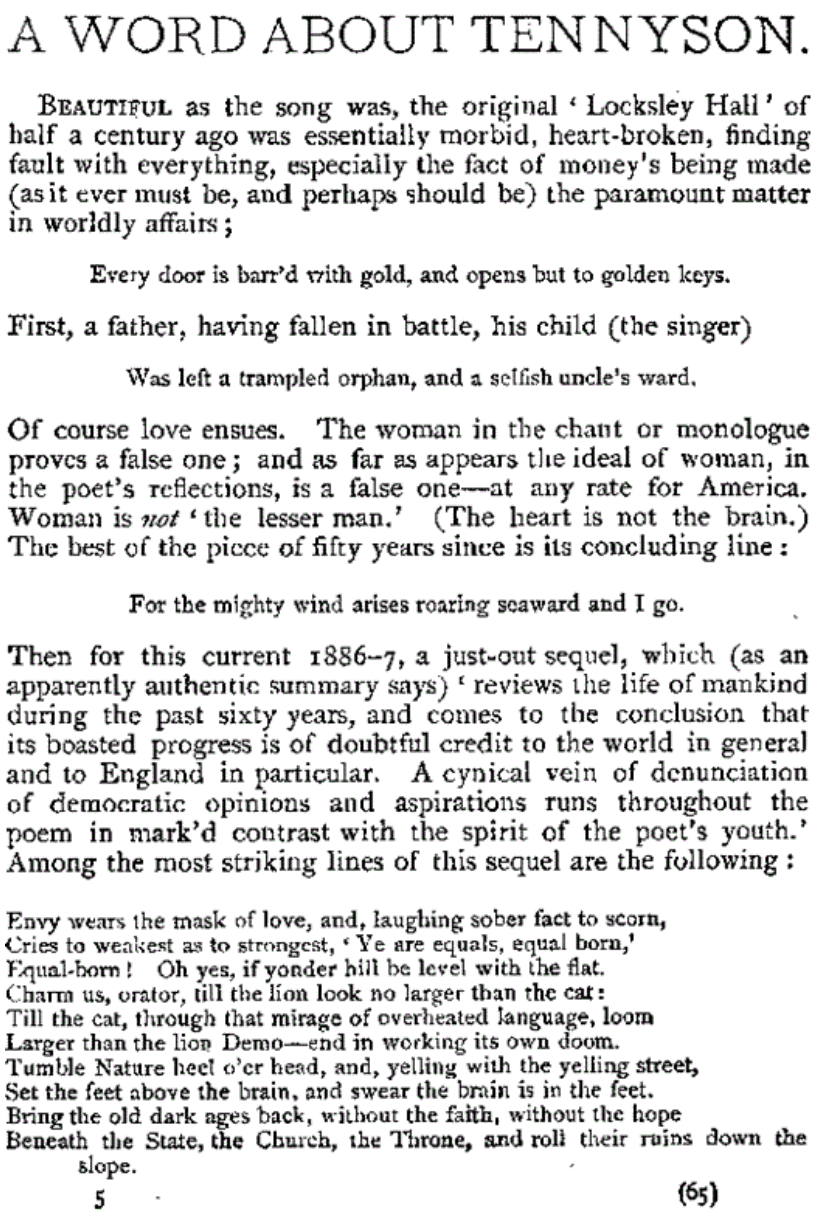
Equal-born? O yes, if yonder hill be level with the flat.
Charm us, Orator, till the Lion look no larger than the Cat.

Till the Cat thro' that mirage of overheated language loom
Larger than the Lion,—Demos end in working its own doom.

Russia bursts our Indian barrier, shall we fight her? shall we yield?
Pause, before you sound the trumpet, hear the voices from the field.

Taken from the first edition of *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, Etc*.

Figure 2



A WORD ABOUT TENNYSON.

BEAUTIFUL as the song was, the original 'Locksley Hall' of half a century ago was essentially morbid, heart-broken, finding fault with everything, especially the fact of money's being made (as it ever must be, and perhaps should be) the paramount matter in worldly affairs;

Every door is barr'd with gold, and opens but to golden keys.

First, a father, having fallen in battle, his child (the singer)

Was left a trampled orphan, and a selfish uncle's ward.

Of course love ensues. The woman in the chant or monologue proves a false one; and as far as appears the ideal of woman, in the poet's reflections, is a false one—at any rate for America. Woman is *not* 'the lesser man.' (The heart is not the brain.) The best of the piece of fifty years since is its concluding line:

For the mighty wind arises roaring seaward and I go.

Then for this current 1886–7, a just-out sequel, which (as an apparently authentic summary says) 'reviews the life of mankind during the past sixty years, and comes to the conclusion that its boasted progress is of doubtful credit to the world in general and to England in particular. A cynical vein of denunciation of democratic opinions and aspirations runs throughout the poem in mark'd contrast with the spirit of the poet's youth.' Among the most striking lines of this sequel are the following:

Envy wears the mask of love, and, laughing sober fact to scorn,
Cries to weakest as to strongest, 'Ye are equals, equal born,'
Equal-born! Oh yes, if yonder hill be level with the flat.
Charm us, orator, till the lion look no larger than the cat:
Till the cat, through that mirage of overheated language, loom
Larger than the lion Demo—end in working its own doom.
Tumble Nature heel o'er head, and, yelling with the yelling street,
Set the feet above the brain, and swear the brain is in the feet.
Bring the old dark ages back, without the faith, without the hope
Beneath the State, the Church, the Throne, and roll their ruins down the slope.

5 (65)

Walt Whitman's quotation from 'among the most striking lines of this sequel'

In fact, as Whitman recognized, this long-line poem sounds—via a different means—quite a lot like Whitman. The two poets are not usually grouped together, and Whitman's comment about 'finest verbalism' is usually understood to be disparaging. Significantly, it was made in a short, largely approving chapter written in response to this poem. 'Beautiful as the song was, the original "Locksley Hall" of half a century ago was essentially morbid, heart-broken, finding fault with everything'.[35] And then, after quoting ten lines from the just-out sequel, he moves on to the topic of Tennyson's conservatism: 'He shows how
p. 114 one can be a royal laureate, quite elegant and "aristocratic", and a little queer and affected, and at the ↳

p. 115 ↳

p. 116 ↳

same time perfectly manly and natural. As to his non-democracy, it fits him well, and I like him the better for it.' At first sight, Tennyson and Whitman are ideological opposites, a conservative and a progressive but,

in the more complex hinterland of form and the ideologies it inscribes, they seem to have shared similar instincts. To the question—how to get modernity into poetry?—they offer the same answer: by going long.

Notice that this act of misprision in quoting does three things: it gets rid of the allegorizing capitals, it moves the word 'Demos' to the other side of the en dash, as 'Demo', thus implicitly and bizarrely *naming* the lion, and, most importantly, it prints the rhyming couplets as continuous verse. These lines are also heavy in internal anaphora and parallelism—two of Whitman's own favourite techniques for holding long lines together. Whitman's reprinting is, in one sense, of course, an aggressive act of reformatting; any format he read the poem in would have maintained, on the page, the blank spaces between the couplets. But it is also an acknowledgment of a curious formal and syntactic kinship. Tennyson's views on social progress are very pessimistic, but his container-like, overlong poem, is also in instinct restitutive: it shows us what society, and poetry, have been omitting to notice.

The tendency to agglutinate unstressed syllables, and the willingness to craft longer lines with medial polysyllables, are both ways of allowing poetry to do *more*, to contain more (Tennyson's city children soak *and* blacken soul *and* sense). In *Leaves of Grass*, the lines' propensity to 'ride over' and their over-length is, even more obviously, a problem of describing the excess of modern city life:

> I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused or following …
> … The heave'e'yo of stevedores unlading ships by the wharves, the refrain of the anchor-lifters,
> The ring of alarm-bells, the cry of fire, the whirr of swift-streaking engines and hose-carts with premonitory tinkles and color'd lights,
> The steam-whistle, the solid roll of the train of approaching cars …[36]

Pound's strategies for Imagism, formulated in 1912, are in a perverse way an attempt to address the same problem: by refusing to admit superfluous adjectives or to follow the beat of the metronome, and by insisting on condensed focus on 'the thing', he was also calling for a poetry that could do more with the line length that it had, allowing for superpositions of unlike things, and for syntactical relations that are less predictable than those encouraged by traditional form.[38]

We can see some of the same formal strategies operating in the prose of the period, and this leads to my final 'new form' for the period 1880-1920: rhythmical prose, or the prose poem. In 1912, George Saintsbury published *A History of English Prose Rhythm* as a companion to his history of prosody. It begins by explaining
p. 117 the ↳ classical idea that good prose is well-written *as* prose precisely because it avoids 'poetic' rhythms (the hexameter ending, a dactyl and a spondee, being one).[37] In the same year, Pound 'invented' Imagism: 'Don't think any intelligent person is going to be deceived when you try to shirk all the difficulties of the unspeakably difficult art of good prose by chopping your composition into line lengths.'37 What is he saying here? His useful suggestion is that unrhythmical prose chopped into arbitrary 'lines' is nothing at all—neither good prose nor good poetry; all good writing, for Pound, involves artifice and stylization. The common definition of free verse as 'nonmetrical, nonrhyming lines that closely follow the natural rhythms of speech' might in fact be regarded as the antithesis of many of Joyce's sentences in *Ulysses*, which are metrically analyzable, not 'natural', and yet not printed in lines. (And this is studied: we know that Joyce relied on Saintsbury's history of prose rhythms in writing *Oxen of the Sun*.)

The notebooks for Ulysses, which contain a semantically puzzling collection of rather ordinary phrases, are in fact rhythmically quite predictable: Joyce prized falling rhythms, both disyllabic (yahoo, bludgeon, Cusack, carcinoma—on a random page of the *Cyclops* notesheet) and trisyllabic ('good as gold', 'those things that', 'cuckoo clock', 'he is gone').[39] He also noted down phrases combining these two rhythms: 'Me have a nice pace' (in Milly's letter) 'hyacinth perfume', 'Bacon & Essex' in *Nausicaa*. This particular rhythm is as close an imitation as one can get in English of the hexameter ending that Saintsbury, in *his* study, tells us that classical prose avoided. Plugged into the final text, they produce sentences like these, neither of

which can intelligently be described as ‘free’ from rhythmic, alliterative, or even rhyming constraints: ‘Hyacinth perfume made of oil of ether or something. Muskrat.’

In English literature of this period there are far fewer attempts than in French to write *actual* prose poems, labelled as such—but some survive, mostly by Americans. Examples include Carl Sandburg’s 1916 *Chicago Poems* (full of Whitmanian anaphora, as Michael Delville’s useful study shows), Sherwood Anderson’s *Mid-American Chants*, and Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. T. S. Eliot’s ‘Hysteria’ is the lone example in *Prufrock and Other Observations*; I have seen students sometimes quote this *as* a poem, with the arbitrary last words of the lines preserved. Within the context of the original volume, and within a culture that regards Eliot’s poems as ‘free’, and ‘free verse’ as no more than chopped-up prose, much about this mistake is forgivable. But it is also a mistake that *exactly* fails to see what is experimental about Eliot’s account of an infectious, embarrassing moment of sexual panic, where ‘her teeth were only accidental stars [iambic pentameter] with a talent for squad-drill’ and ‘the shaking of her breasts’ refuses to be stopped. The banality of
p. 118 repetition as the ↳ waiter invites the couple ‘to take their tea in the garden’, the nervous attempts at mastery of the situation by a simple ‘I’ speaker, and the uncontrolled engulfment of the hysteria itself are all enhanced by the careful formal choice. In the final poem of the volume, an antithetical situation—a melancholy hypothetical mood, regret for what wasn’t—is weighed up in mournfully self-aware rhymes:

> I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
> Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
> The troubled midnight and the noon’s repose.

Here Eliot is writing in iambic pentameter, and he does so with a degree of indebted virtuosity (his feel for Tennysonian vowel sounds; the elegant variation of the end-stoppped line and the syntactically enjambed one). What is new here is not a negative freedom from form, an absence of form, but the positive freedom to select critically from the prosody handbook, manipulating old forms for new ends.

Further Reading

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Notes

1 Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 6.

2 Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.

3 Robert Bernard Hass, '(Re)Reading Bergson: Frost, Pound, and the Legacy of Modern Poetry', *Journal of Modern Literature* 29/1 (2005), 55–75, 67.

4 Ezra Pound, *The Pisan Cantos, The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1975), 553.

5 Chris Beyers opens his study *A History of Free Verse* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2001) by quoting T. V. F. Brogan, 'Useful … so long as one does not enquire further into what it means', 13.

6 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, ed. Sculley Bradley et al., 3 vols (New York: New York University Press, 1980), I, 12.

7 See particularly the letter from Adams to Jefferson of 15 November 1813, in Lester J. Cappon (ed.), *The Adams–Jefferson Letters* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 400.

8 The first statement is introduced as a remark made twenty-five years ago in 'The Music of Poetry', in T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 26–38, 36; the second is from the 1917 essay 'Vers Libre', *The New Statesman*

8/204 (3 March 1917), 518 –19.

9 Pound originally made this misquotation in his review of *Prufrock and Other Observations, Poetry* (August 1917), though it continued to be ascribed to Eliot in Pound's essay, 'T. S. Eliot', in Eliot's own edition: *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1954), 418–23, 421.

10 T. S. Eliot, introduction to Charlotte Eliot's *Savonarola: A Dramatic Poem* (London: Cobden Sanderson, 1926), xi.

11 T. S. Eliot, 'Poetry and Drama', *On Poetry and Poets*, 72–88, 80.

12 Edmund Gosse distinguishes between Keats's couplets and those of classical versifiers as follows: 'the romantic class is of a loose and elastic kind, full of these successive overflows, while the classical is closely confined to the use of distich', *From Shakespeare to Pope: An Inquiry into the Causes and Phenomena of the Rise of Classical Poetry in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885), 6.

13 Sarah Davison, 'Pound's Esteem for Edmund Waller: A New Source for Hugh Selwyn Mauberley', *Review of English Studies* 60/247 (2009), 785–800.

14 John Stuart Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties', *Dissertations and Discussions: Political, Philosophical, and Historical*, 4 vols (London: J. W. Parker, 1859), I, 63–94, 85.

15 This important point is given attention by Scott Brewster in *Lyric* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), and in Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 177–8.

16 Marion Thain, 'Victorian Lyric Pathology and Phenomenology', in Thain (ed.), *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 156–76.

17 Mark Jeffreys, 'Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (*PMLA*) 110/2 (1995), 196–205, 200.

18 One of the most 'irregular' poems is CLII, 'Auld Robin Gray', attributed to Lady A. Lindsay. But even this poem is in quatrains rhyming *aabb*, with four stresses per line and a variable number of unstressed syllables. Francis Turner Palgrave, *The Golden Treasury of English Lyrical Poems and Songs* (London: R. Clay, 1861), 149–50.

19 George Saintsbury, *The Historical Character of English Lyric* (London: British Academy, 1912), 5.

20 The influential argument made in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

21 See Robert Adams Day, 'The Villanelle Perplex: Reading Joyce', *James Joyce Quarterly* 25/1 (1987), 69–85, 71.

22 Paul Kiparsky cites Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: Random House, 1965), noting that the comment is withdrawn in the second edition. See 'Sprung rhythm' in Paul Kiparsky and Gilbert Youmans (eds), *Phonetics and Phonology, Volume 1: Rhythm and Meter* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1989), 305–40, 306.

23 Peter L. Groves opens his discussion of Hopkins's metre by noting that the diacritics with which he peppered his poems have puzzled and even 'irritated' readers. See '" "Opening the Pentameter": Hopkins's Metrical Experimentation', *Victorian Poetry* 49/2 (2011), 93–110, 93.

24 For another version of this argument, see Elizabeth W. Schneider, *The Dragon in the Gate: Studies in the Poetry of G. M. Hopkins* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 42–82. Paul Kiparsky notes that the standard assumption is that sprung rhythm is purely accentual, but that it has also been compared to spondaic verse (Fussell) and trisyllabic verse (Schneider).

25 Meredith Martin, 'Hopkins's Prosody', *Victorian Poetry* 49/2 (2011), 1–30, 9.

26 Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Author's Preface', in Robert Bridges (ed.), *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918).

27 The first two lines (minus diacritics) of "'Spring and Fall", in Robert Bridges (ed.), *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 50.

28 Second and last stanza of "Heaven-Haven", in Robert Bridges (ed.), *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 8.

29 Dryden, however, is said sometimes to neglect this rule. See Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, 4 vols (London: C. Bathurst et al., 1781), II, 192.

30 John Picker calls this an 'ambiguous' appeal to technological innovation, in *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 110.

31 Arthur Symons, 'Grey Hours: Naples', dated 1897 in *Poems: Vol. 3* (London: Martin Secker, 1924), 39.

32 Entry for 'heptameter' in J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory*, 5th edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 327.

33 The opening of Alfred Lord Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall', first published in *Poems, Vol. 2* (London: Edward Moxon, 1842), 92–111.

34 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, Etc.* (London: Macmillan, 1886).

35 Whitman, *November Boughs* (Philadelphia, PA: David McKay, 1888), 65.

36 Whitman, 'Song of Myself', *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum*, I, 36.

38 Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', *Poetry* (March 1913).

37 Saintsbury, *A History of English Prose Rhythm* (London: Macmillan, 1912).

39 Examples chosen almost at random from Philip Herring's *James Joyce's Ulysses Notesheets in the British Museum* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1972), 110, 131–2.