



# The Prose-Poetry Controversy

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**Abstract :-** The Imagist Movement in English poetry provided a new face to poetry from the point of view of form and style. It brought the vogue of vers libre in the realm of English poetry. The movement saw a significant debate on the question of the nature of prose and poetry. This article aims at presenting the basic elements of the discourse.

**Keywords :-** Imagism, Vers Libre, Prose-Poetry, T.S. Eliot.

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The Imagist Movement, with a number of other contentions, brought forward the ancient controversy over the distinction between prose and poetry. Several critics raised the point in their reaction to imagism. Among them, notably, professor John Livingston Lowes made some poems out of the prose work of George Meredith and turned some poems by Amy Lowell into prose and then tossed the crucial question about prose and poetry. It is very interesting to mark that the same critic went further to study the same problem in his book **Convention and Revolt in Poetry**.<sup>1</sup> At a juncture he asks a question, “What is free verse?” and then he comments that “Miss Lowell has been at more pains than anybody else to define and explain it.” He culls a number of statements from the articles of Amy Lowell to present her theories, and uses them for his own arguments regarding the prose-poetry distinction. He quotes several lines directly from the articles of Miss Lowell;

“The definition of vers libre is a verse form based on cadence.

To understand vers libre, one must abandon all desires to find in it ‘the even rhythm of metrical feet. One must allow the lines to flow as they will when read aloud by an intelligent reader.

Free verse within its own law of cadence has no absolute rules; it would not be ‘free’ if it had.

The unit of vers libre is not the foot, the number of the syllables, the quantity, or the line. The unit is the strophe, which may be the whole poem, or may be only a part,. Each strophe is a complete circle.”<sup>2</sup>

He judiciously considers these and the related statements in detail and after applying them to specimens of prose and free verse, Professor Lowes concludes that there is reason in Miss Lowell’s arguments, in spite of the fact that the rhythms of vers libre in English are to a great extent the rhythms of a certain type of modern prose. In nutshell, free verse is not prose because:

“There are differences which set the one off from the other. The prose from which I have culled my excerpts does not maintain unbrokenly, the rhythms which I have shown it to possess. If it did, we should certainly hesitate to call it prose. The best free verse poems, on the other hand do maintain these rhythms consistently. And that is an important difference: the rhythms which are occasional in one are persistent in the other.”<sup>3</sup>

After accepting the existence of the form of poetry, he warns the practitioners that they are treading a dangerous ground, and that sooner or later they will have to provide sharper definitions for this type of poetry. As they are the travelers of the borderland between verse and prose, exploring in the 'no man's land', they are "open to fire from two sides at once." He finds free verse a medium of not yet fully developed possibilities. The dangers are always present in its liberty, yet the form is gradually being perfected as an instrument of delicate precision and rare flexibility for recording the impressions of observed phenomena.

Thus, the controversy over prose-poetry issue between Lowes and Lowell ended at a compromising point. Free verse was legitimized as somewhat immature but none the less hopeful offspring of poetry and prose. It was a logical and acceptable conclusion of the controversy in America.

But on the other side of the Atlantic, the same question was being pondered upon, and the controversy of verse form developed in England in a very different manner. The question on the validity and existence of the free verse was raised by the major modern poet T. S. Eliot. His classicist temperament showed itself forcefully in his comment on vers libre. His article appeared in **The New Statesman**, London on March 3, 1917. Later the article appeared in his **Selected Prose** edited by Frank Kermode. He stands in his characteristic manner with his questioning of the fundamentals;

"It is assumed that vers libre exists. It is assumed that vers libre is a school; that it consists of certain theories; that its group or groups of theorists will either revolutionize or demoralize poetry if their attack upon iambic pentameter meets with any success. Vers libre does not exist, and it is time that this preposterous fiction followed the elan vital and the eighty thousand Russians into oblivion."<sup>4</sup>

T. S. Eliot's views on vers libre were startling to a reader, and deeply shocking to an imagist. He further asserts in the same write up;

"Vers libre has not even the excuse of a polemic; it is a battle cry of freedom, and there is no freedom in art. And as the so called vers libre which is good is anything but free, it can better be defended under some other label."<sup>5</sup>

T.S. Eliot seems to be presuming in his classical mode of thinking that any genuine verse form must possess a positive definition and this, in his view, free verse lacked. Most of the good so called free verse, according to him, secures charm by "the constant suggestion and skillful evasion of iambic pentameter." He then calls John Webster as a master of the technique, and remarks on Webster's similarity to certain modern poets. He very carefully distinguishes between Webster's merely careless lines and his premeditated irregularities. At last he concludes;

"We may therefore formulate as follows: the ghost of some simple meter should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse. Or freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation."<sup>6</sup>

Finally, he goes passing a great blow, "Vers libr does not exist, for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos."<sup>7</sup>

A sharp reply was made by from the imagist side by John Gould Fletcher, and it was very natural because at that time the imagists were busy trying to convince the public of the validity of their verse form. The letter of John Gould Fletcher addressed to the editor of **The New Statesman** was published on March 24, 1917. In his reply he states;

"It is very well for Mr. Eliot to declare that the same thing has been done already by Webster, Blake and Matthew Arnold, and that nothing was said about vers libre by these men. Does that affect the

fact that once a thing deliberately and constantly practiced a new name has to be found for it? Can Mr. Eliot suggest a more appropriate name than vers libre.”<sup>8</sup>

Then Fletcher denies T.S. Eliot’s assertion that iambic pentameter is the only basis for vers libre.

“What then becomes of the heptameters of Blake or the rough hexameter of Whitman? .... Mr. Eliot should remember that it is only in the last few years that any considerable body of poets have attempted to write in vers libre at all.”<sup>9</sup>

But T.S. Eliot was not satisfied by the reply of John Gould Fletcher and he put forward the same question in a different manner two months later in **the New Statesman** for 19.05. 1917. This time the title of his article was “**The Borderline of Prose**” and it enveloped another medium of communication in literature, that is prose poem. Thus he added a new dimension to the discussion on the modern versification. He writes about the growing popularity of prose poem and describes its French origin. According to him no one had come forward, up to that time, with any theory to disapprove that the only distinction between poetry and prose is that “poetry is written in verse and prose is written in prose, or in other words, that there is prose rhythm and verse rhythm.”

As a critic, T.S. Eliot has his objection on the nomenclature of vers libre. He considers Richard Aldington as an interesting case for his further formulations. According to him Richard Aldington has written neither in prose nor in poetry. He has produced his poems in a form which is wrongly called vers libre. For him Richard Aldington is a poet who has produced prose-poems.

Conspicuously, Aldington tried to defend his conception of prose-poem as something independent and valid in its own way. Then, he was pressed to present a definition of his poetic creation. He presented his definition of prose-poem as a poetic content expressed in prose form.

Eliot points that the distinction between verse and prose is clear, and the distinction between poetry and prose is very obscure. He discusses to some length the kind of prose which is called poetic. For example the prose of Sir Thomas Browne. He also reminds us that in many long poems where intensity is not maintained throughout the poem, there is much which is prosaic. Because of this, he says, some writers [Poe etc.], declared that all poems ought to be short. But he finds no reason for not admitting short prose as we go on accepting long poems. And here he comes to his important assertion that, “the short poem is, I believe, what most people have in mind when they speak of poems in prose. Taking strong objections to the phrase ‘prose-poetry’ he carries on his argument;

“I object to the term ‘prose-poetry’ because it seems to imply a sharp distinction between ‘poetry’ and ‘prose’ which I do not admit, and if it does not imply this distinction the term is meaningless and otiose, as there can be no combination of what is not distinguished.”<sup>10</sup>

T.S. Eliot warns us to remember that verse is always struggling, while remaining verse, to take up to itself more and more of what is prose, to take something more from life and turn it into ‘play’ and on the other hand, prose not being cut off by the barrier of verse which must at the same time be affirmed and diminished, can transmute life in its own way by raising it to the condition of ‘play,’ precisely because it is not verse. And at this point he concludes;

“We must be very tolerant of any attempt in verse that appears to trespass upon prose, or any attempt in prose that appears to strive toward the condition of poetry.”<sup>11</sup>

In English poetry, tracing their own tradition, the imagists consider Dryden, Milton, Matthew Arnold and Hanley as fellow vers librist. They complain that public object the name vers libre and not the poems because the name is new.

Herbert Read, a close observer of imagist poetry and other contemporary poetic movements, writes about the distinction between prose and poetry in his celebrated book **English Prose Style**. He remarks that verse is not necessarily poetry and asserts that there is not, and never can be, any formal distinction between poetry and prose. Classification of any kind regarding meter, theories of cadence, quantity etc. cannot give us any appropriate definition of poetry. The reason is that it is psychological. Poetry is a creative expression, and prose is a constructive one. Thus, the difference is that of the forms of mental activities.

How can poetry be recognized? Read answers that it is an instinctive matter, and inevitably, an individual matter. If a majority of people cannot recognize art, we cannot help it. "All art is difficult, remote and subtle..."<sup>12</sup>

The debate on vers libre in the imagist discourse is not conclusive as is expected by a common reader. But the writers certainly underlined various aspects of the form. The distinction between prose and poetry is never categorical as it depends on the content of poetry. This debate was to take place in the literature written in various languages. Thus, the nature of this debate in the imagist school was of seminal significance for the poetry to come.

## Notes

1. John Livingston Lowes; *Convention and Revolt in Poetry*, [Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 1919].
2. *ibid*, p. 257.
3. Glen Hughes; *Imagism and Imagists*, [Biblio and Tannen, New York, 1972] p.276.
4. T.S. Eliot; *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode, [Faber & Faber, London, 1975] p.31.
5. *ibid*, p. 32.
6. *ibid*, p. 34.
7. *ibid*, p. 36.
8. Glen Hughes; *Imagism and Imagists*, [Biblio and Tannen, New York, 1972] p.274.
9. *ibid*, p. 273.
10. T.S. Eliot ; 1917 'The Borderline of prose' *The New Statesman* 9 (19 May): p.157.
11. *ibid*, p.159.
12. Herbert Read; *English Prose Style*, [G. Bell and Sons Ltd, London, 1928] p.XII.