

THE NONSENSE ABOUT VERS LIBRE

Why not a little Free Prose, for a change?

By Aleister Crowley

"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 forcible 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 Shelly 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 Caine, 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 Night-ingale!" Even in so short a verse-form as the sonnet, one would hesitate to pick a perfect half-dozen. Even in so simple 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 catalectic tritreated parallelipipeds of a rhythmic—motjustiste—borboromic parapsodokian-aposeopsis, the flower of the Washington Square or Dutch Oven School of Literature; or perhaps it would be even 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.

THE WASHINGTON SQUARE PLAYERS

Their Second Season at the Bandbox Theatre

By Philip Moeller

LAST February the Washington Square Players, an organization of amateur actors, playwrights and producers with all the dauntless impetuosity of youth and all the irresistible *elan* of inexperience, had the unheard of temerity to step bravely forward on a professional basis of fifty cents a seat, and face without a tremor that most difficult, most sophisticated and most blasé, of audiences, the theatr-loving public of New York. The ubiquitous maiden aunt who perpetually preaches that throttling adage: "Look before you leap"—as if anyone who ever looked would have the nerve to leap—was fortunately an unknown personage in that high-pitched down-town atmosphere where this hope was brewed; and having the future to gain and all of fifty dollars to lose, this crowd of thoughtless enthusiasts took the leap and landed—where? At the present writing the answer is at least as far as the inception of a second successful season.

The venture was the result of an enthusiasm concerning new problems and possibilities in

the theater, emanating from that mysterious vicinity known as Greenwich Village, the Quartier Latin—minus the Latin—of New York which is bounded, let us say, on the north by infinite aspiration and on the south by inevitable disillusionment. The match to the flame was an improvised performance of a play done in the Washington Square Book Shop at ten minutes notice with the space in front of a folding door as a stage and a property list of eight old bottles and the broken end of a candle.

To the audience of exactly three people who witnessed this spontaneous production, the success of the venture was assured, and the next day the crowd breathlessly hunted for a place in the neighborhood, and the next week, a little disillusionized, faced the dull truth of insurmountable requirements from such unmentionable authorities as the Fire and Building Departments. The committee was hopelessly depressed, and then the news came of the possibility of renting the Bandbox Theater in East Fifty-seventh Street for two nights a

week. A little money was pledged, about enough for a month or two, and the next few weeks were spent in reading countless manuscripts, disappointing a dozen Duses and showing the door to a bevy of Booths. February nineteenth was the first performance and the next morning the Washington Square Players awoke like so many young Byrons to read the sympathetic notices of the press and to realize that a possible public was ready to come and see what they were trying to do.

PEOPLE liked the plays on the first program and the way they were done; and when the future bills were announced, subscriptions began coming in, the two performances a week were modestly increased to three and later to four, and when the first season closed at the end of May, the Washington Square Players, a hitherto absolutely unknown organization, had to their credit the record of having produced fourteen new plays by American writers and three plays by prominent foreign authors,

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