



Forgotten Ground Regained

A Journal of Alliterative Verse

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Masthead

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Contributors

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Rahul Gupta, “..the most accomplished, imaginative, and technically-correct exponent of alliterative verse since Tolkien” (Tom Shippey), PhD Ebor. on alliterative poetics, has published poems, prose, and verse-translations in journals such as *Agenda*, *Long Poem Magazine*, *Temenos*, *Spectral Realms*, *Society of Classical Poets*, and anthologies including *Speculative Poetry and the Modern Alliterative Revival* (Fairleigh

Dickinson, 2023) alongside C. S. Lewis and Auden. His main work is an *Arthuriad* in Old English- and Norse versifications.

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Michael Helsem writes, "Blurbwise I usually go with: "M.H. was born in Dallas in 1958. Shortly thereafter, fish fell from the sky." He is author of *Raps Clack Calcspar*, *Woofus Takes*, and *Palestinian Penalties*.

Kathryn Ann Hill is a copyeditor and a writer of Christian verse with a focus on the Incarnation and the Sacraments. She has published over ninety poems in various publications and eight books of verse, five of those containing (mostly) alliterative verse on Biblical themes: *The Song of Joseph and Selected Poems*, *The Song of Daniel and Selected Poems*, *Tree of Life: Sixty Poems from Twelve Years*, *A Verse Vigil and Selected Poems*, and *Now God Is Flesh: Poems and Pictures for Christmastide*.

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Alex Rettie writes from Calgary, Alberta. He has poems in or forthcoming from *Passengers Journal*, *SoFloPoJo*, *The Rush*, *New Verse Review*, and *The Borough*.

¹ Note: Editors usually mark the caesura, or break between half-lines, by adding extra space. However, in the Old English manuscripts the caesura (when marked) was indicated by a small, raised dot, or *conus*. Therefore, in

poems where the poet chose to mark the caesura, I prefer to use the *conus* where no other punctuation is present, unless the form of the poem makes another format more effective, or the author specifically directed otherwise.

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

Jeff Sypeck is a medievalist, writer, and translator. His works include *Becoming Charlemagne: Europe, Baghdad, and the Empires of A.D. 800* and a translation of *The Tale of Charlemagne and Ralph the Collier*.

Thaliarchus is the pen name of a British scholar of Middle English. His major poetic project is a mecha space opera/epic poem, *Cosmic Warlord Kin-Bright*, published on the gaming site, itch.io. It is primarily in blank verse, but characters from one of the cultures in conflict in his epic sometimes speak in alliterative verse [it forms their highest register]. He also posts occasional experiments in alliterative verse to his cohort site

Martin Kennedy Yates was born on Merseyside and raised in the Black Country region of the English Midlands. He is an emerging poet who has had work in recent editions of *The Rialto*, *Stand*, *Poetry Wales*, *Butcher's Dog*, *Anthropocene*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *The Storms*, *Finished Creatures*, *The Alchemy Spoon*, *The Madrigal*, and *Magma*.

INTRODUCTION

In my call for submissions, I told interested poets that I wanted to see poems that explored themes of love, devotion, and desire. I got quite a bit that fit that description, but few of them were unalloyed love poems. Most had negative undertones — grief, regret, fear ... Maybe I should have expected that — after all, country songs are like that, too. But I was, nonetheless, surprised to discover so many poems that fit right into the conversation started by such Old English poems as ‘*Wolf and Eadwacer*’ and ‘*The Wife's Lament*’. And in fact, the first poem in the set, Maryann Corbett’s “*The Translator, Working Late*” directly addresses the wife of “*The Wife's Lament*”, saying “I get you, girl.”

The more-or-less-but-not-quite love poems include Michael Helsem’s “*Iftar*”, which reads like an elegy for the moment in which people do not quite connect, Alex Rettie’s “*The Future*”, in which the lovers seem intent on preserving a *memento mori* instead of a selfie, Ian Holt’s “*Mild Soul of Mine*”, which captures a lover’s grief in an alliterative translation of a Camoes sonnet, Kathryn Ann Hill’s “*Elizabeth and Darcy*”, with a rhetorical question for Jae Austen’s “*Gentle Reader*”, Cassidy McFadzean’s Old English style riddle, “*Love her and she swells*”, an excerpt from my “*Redemption of Daeron*”, and Jeff Sypeck’s “*Entreating a Sick Kitten*”.

I also reprint J.D. Harlock’s alliterative free verse poem “*To Consecrate our Calamities, to Commemorate This Carnage*”, which coming from a Lebanese/Syrian/Palestinian writer in this current age of conflict places a dark underline beneath the more personal pains of romantic love, and to present a revised and expanded excerpt from the Autumn sequence in Rahul Gupta’s ongoing *Arthuriad*.

Then we have Martin Kennedy Yates’ love song to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in the form of an article on that poem’s alliterative meter and four alliterative poems set in an invented Midlands dialect, and an article I have written, presenting the medievalist scholar Geoffrey Russom’s theory of alliterative meter, and developing its implications for modern English alliterative verse. Enjoy!

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
<u>Maryann Corbett,</u> <u><i>The Translator, Working Late</i></u>	3
<u>Michael Helsem, <i>Iftar</i></u>	3
<u>Alex Rettie, <i>The Future</i></u>	3
<u>Kathryn Ann Hill, <i>Elizabeth and Darcy</i></u>	3
<u>Thaliarchus, <i>Farewell</i></u>	4
<u>Paul D. Deane,</u> <u><i>Excerpt from Redemption of Daeron</i></u>	4
<u>Jeff Sypeck, <i>Entreating a Sick Kitten</i></u>	5
<u>Ian Holt,</u> <u><i>Mild Soul of Mine [After Camoes]</i></u>	5
<u>Cassidy McFadzean,</u> <u><i>Leave her and She Swells</i></u>	5
<u>J.D. Harlock,</u> <u><i>To Consecrate Our Calamities,</i></u> <u><i>To Commemorate This Carnage</i></u>	6
<u>Martin Kennedy Yates,</u> <u><i>What Causes Sir Gawain to Go at a Gallop</i></u>	6
<u><i>Tha Spawnen a Scousenlish</i></u>	9
<u><i>Scousenlish a-singen</i></u>	13
<u><i>Scousenlish a-fallan lufen</i></u>	14
<u><i>Scousenlish an Scarren Yaweth</i></u>	14
<u>Paul D. Deane,</u> <u><i>Varieties of Alliterative Meter</i></u>	15
<u>Poetry and Book Links Added</u>	18
<u>Links to Online</u> <u>Performances/Translations</u>	19
<u>Links to Alliterative Verse in Blogs</u>	19
<u>Call for Submissions</u>	20
<u>Rahul Gupta,</u> <u><i>Spawn of the Lightning: An Army</i></u> <u><i>of Hallowe'en Toadstools</i></u>	21

Maryann Corbett

The Translator, Working Late

A woman tackles “The Wife’s Lament”

Oh girl, I get you. Grief: the gulf of it.
Those -ceare compounds. Uhtceare², for instance,
where you lie limp · in the earliest light,
knowing nothing, numb with the miserable
memory of a love · that crumpled to malice.
The story stumbles— I understand that.
Maybe there are muffling · layers of myth
earthing you in. I’m aiming under,
to mine that woe, the marrow of that wailing.

He ran, to start with. His reasons are a riddle,
a fumble. You followed, flogged by the gossip
of þæs monnes magas³: his people, mewling
rumors (oh honey, I can hear their whispers
hiss through the aeons), hammering the wedge
that split you, spitting · suspicions. What were they,
those muttered evils? Whose feuds? Whose hatred?

Your wrung-out spirit · can’t spell it simply;
it dumps torn details · in disarray.
(Girl, I get you. I know how it goes:
in the throes of suffering · you lose the thread.)
The first forevers, the fervent pledge
that nothing can part you · nemne deað ana⁴,
and then the lurch, the lunge into horror.
His mouth, smiling, but morþor⁵ on his mind.

And now where are you? Nothing’s straightforward,
except that you’re wretched. Are you sleeping rough?
In a cave? Confined · in a kind of convent,
as Raffel tells it? Or railing from the tomb?
Your pain alone · is pure; it has painted
even the landscape · as loathesome, hostile.
It scratches at memory · like a wound’s scab.

I’m torn. I’m trapped · in a scholarly tangle
that jumbles Germanic · with jarring folktales.
The one clear sound · is your sorrow, clawing
through stories buried · in this barrow of song
with too many clues · in its clot of consonants.

It’s three a.m. My brain’s throttled
with its own griefs; its gears have ground
to a stall tonight. But this much I’ll stick with:
I’ll never hold · that you ended with “wisdom,”
with gnomish mouthings · on mankind’s lot,
because I get it: how sadness gathers
to a cry. And curdles. And turns to a curse.

² uhtceare: care that comes in the morning

³ þæs monnes magas: the man’s kinsmen

⁴ nemne deað ana: except death alone

⁵ morþor: murder, mortal sin, grievous injury

Michael Helsem

Iftar⁶

From my tendered touch
you take no comfort,
as if swapped fugazi⁷
you’ve sworn not to fall for.
This mis’rable mood —
a mourning sans rungs,
a sky of scathe
I scuttle under,
like you yearning
for its gray to yield —
I call shared shambles
we have shelter for an hour in.
An hour is all.
anyone now waits.
If we can’t be kind
to each other & care
for the neighbor nearest
in need, who can we?

Alex Rettie

The Future

We found it like tourists find
fossils:

A little skull, covered in
concrete.

We were laughing, half in love,
or lust.

You in a blue bikini,
bursting

with clinical calm, aimed the
camera.

Like they say, we may look back
and laugh.

Kathryn Ann Hill

Elizabeth and Darcy

Pride and prejudice and later passion—
these two were feeling a fixed attraction
while struggling to save a wayward sister
and feeling mortified by a foolish mother.
True love was the gift lavished on this pair—
O gentle reader, why is it so rare?

⁶ Iftar: The evening meal that breaks the daily fast during
Ramadan

⁷ fugazi: a fake diamond

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

Thaliarchus
Farewell

Catch-pair at bus stop · kiss with abandon,
two youths parting · though yearning for longer
in bold-clutch to abide. Now bites clock-hand:
bus must go faring, bearing to hamlet,
to countryside halls, county's shoppers,
shunted by weekend. Now short grows queue,
woeful the love-pair. Winters not many
spot-sporting bucks (now spinning close)
together can muster. For them gapes week-span,
seven-days solo. They see not the griefs
of the brim-years ahead: break-ups stormy,
lust-links competing, loneliness tangled,
sorrow not little. Sink not to laughter,
for life is lent · leaf-short and waning:
queue questions us— all quail answering—
in blinking years · did we bliss grapple,
taking our timings · like these teens wit-wise?

Paul D. Deane
Excerpt from The Redemption of Daeron

Slowly she stepped back, broke
His arms' encirclement, raised both wrists
To hold her hair back from her face.
'Alas, my lord, my tale is not full told;
Nor have I named my folly fully
Yet:
-- I dare to dream again, you see, --
-- And now my heart is set --
On thee.'

'How can I help myself, silence
My heart? How then deny what now
Pulls me apart? Pity me, pardon me,
Call me half-crazed: dazed or a dreamer,
I plead no defense!
-- Either fate made me love you, --
-- Or lack of sense!' --

'I have sense though to see your courage to care!
For where would I be now if grief and despair
Were as strong in your soul as they seem in your words?
How can I help that my heartstrings are stirred
Like a harp in your hand, like the wind of your voice?
How can I stand
-- What a heart strung with steel --
-- could hardly withstand?' --

'How long, my lord, will dreams be your drink,
Your food a fantasy of love, your life
An echo of passions past?
I am, I live, I love! Touch me, I tremble!
Speak, and I hear!
-- Forsake the dark waters! --
-- Leave Death on her bier!' --

He stood as still as absence. Over them
The moments moved like sails against the sun
Where red horizons run past solemn seas.
Her face before him oval might have veiled
The moon, or mirrored in his eyes
Become a pale yet perfect star.
Time changed: his fingers framed her cheeks,
His lips burned lightly on her brow
And head,
-- and all else stopped --
-- until he said: --

'Nèhaléni, no: you ask too much
.Is there love after Lúthien? I cannot stretch so far
Past hurt with a heart so scarred, and numb.
Perhaps - perhaps - yet I stumble on old griefs,
Pick my way past painful reefs of memory
And find myself a stranger to the scenery of joy.
Passionate, compassionate, beautiful, brave,
Thou art these and more. If only --
No, Nèhaléni! Raise your child,
May life and laughter piled together
Be your blessing whether I am far
Or near -- enough, I cannot face farewells.
Take this, for thou wilt keep it well,
For mirth, for merriment, for celebration
While healing years and seasons turn,
-- and then, perhaps, --
-- my heart return,' --

She felt his hand upon hers, felt
Something light, metallic slide there
As she blinked back tears. He turned:
She stared irresolute.
-- He was gone, so she stood there, --
-- And cradled his flute. --

New Series 4, Fall, 2024:

Jeff Sypeck
Entreating a Sick Kitten

I was maybe eleven, a little like you are,
Slight, apprehensive, and slow to catch on,
When I pestered the lady who lived at the corner.
Her husky stayed leashed in its hutch around back.
She was portly and balding, and patient the mornings
I crept to her stoop, to the creche where a cat
In the warm, earthen emptiness under the steps
Of her tidy blue porch had just pushed out a litter.
My change jar bought her a bag of kibble,
And I waited and watched when she went to her daughter's.
The paper reprinted my proud little letter;
It emphasized mercy for elders and strays.
Pretending they brightened the teardown next door
Where they gathered for Christmas, I gave them names,
Saintly demeanors, and simple ambitions,
Then I drew up their story all stapled and taped
In a book to present to my baffled parents,
My teacher's suggestion.

And just up the block
Were the scraps of a family. The father framed homes.
He returned every night to a timorous wife
In an overcome shack. Disheveled, their progeny
Roamed off the premises, ragged and vacant.
Not knowing who did it, the dog or the brothers,
I knew those four kittens, and knelt for a look:
A gray one, two tabbies, one tiny and black
With a fine white tuft at the top of his chest.
He looked like you. You look like him.
Their heads were off, or hanging by fur,
And their limbs were a mangle of leftover bones.
I rode my bike home and I wrote no more stories
And minded my summertime safely indoors.

We all want the refuge of eight idle weeks
But the lingering wastes us. Go lunge at your sister.
Explore past the kitchen and keep down your breakfast.
Abandon your box and go bat at a spider.
Be lighter of bowels, be bolder of purpose
And nod off in sunbeams, and never go out.
Let's work out your poem: You pick yourself up.

Your paws as you're trotting will trigger a meter,
Staggered and varied but steady of feet.
When I lift you a little to leap on your own,
We can look for deliverance in loftier matter
And end the turn on an easy landing,
No breathless inflection or flourish of rhyme,
Just a practical phrasing that promises more.
You hold the form. I'll fake the rest.

Ian Holt
Mild Soul of Mine [After Camoes]

Mild soul of mine who meekly went forth
Too soon from this world, full of sorrows,
Have your rest now in Heaven's haven,
While I wait on earth, weeping endlessly.
If on Heaven's throne whence you were hauled
A souvenir of this life be somehow vouchsafed,
Forget not that fire of love that fired so bright
Which you saw in my eyes shining so fiercely/
If you should see something of the sadness,
My longing and the lifelong grief of losing you
Merits mention or, perhaps, memory,
Pray to God who preyed on your poor life,
That he lift me from this life to look on you again.

Cassidy McFadzean
Leave her and she swells⁸

What maiden speaks · in murmurs, moans
as you hold her curved · round waist, salivates
as you caress her neck, clasping her buffed skin,
filling her drawn lips? Leave her and she swells.
She trembles and sighs · seething in slow suspense,
rumbling in fury and · raising hot breath.
She foams at the mouth, frothy, back arched
before squealing out, singing a sweet song,
heaving and gratified, full-fed, released.
But study her shape · and she shies, ceases
her cooing and calms, clearing like the sky
after a stormy fog, wavesilent, still.
Who is this creature? Call out her name.⁹

⁸ Originally published in Cassidy C. McFadzean (2012), *Riddlehoard* (M.A. thesis, University of Regina), <https://instrepo->

[prod7.cc.uregina.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/852525a6-2c99-4eb2-8dee-b879e5fdal62/content](https://instrepo-uregina.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/852525a6-2c99-4eb2-8dee-b879e5fdal62/content)

⁹ How would you answer this riddle? Does it refer to a woman in the throes of passion, or a teakettle boiling water?

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

J.D. Harlock

To Consecrate Our Calamities, To Commemorate This Carnage¹⁰

*Circling shifted soil, shamanesses sway, shapelessly,
in the sand—shrouded in scarred shadows*

*slowly, the silenced subjects of the state surround
this ceremony, this celebration realized through
the sacrifices of the shantytown shepherdesses, who
call for a revolt, a reckoning, a return to
the equity of Eutierria*

*for resettlements have been razed
reinstating the rule of ravagers, who
rely on, who
revel in*

*the spoils of savagery, the sacrilege of the sacred
that shall be reclaimed, that shall be requited*

*because the old world, that of spirit and soul, persists
in passion and pain,
leaving behind*

*strongholds, safeguards, stratagems—
remnants of the revelation reasoned
when we were wise and willful, sustained on
the sow of sanctified soil, under
the auspices of ageless ancestors, whose wisdom
we once availed ourselves of—only for
the wretched*

*with their wickedness
to waste the world.
and warp its wonder*

*with patience and prudence,
the shepherdesses shall retaliate,
and if pressed, shall reciprocate
until equilibrium is reestablished
and Eutierria is reenvisioned*

*on this night, however, the shamanesses shall sway,
shapelessly, in the sand, so that
one day*

*when our children ask us why,
why we choose to
consecrate our calamities, to
commemorate this carnage
wrought here
by these*

*insatiable cannibals,
who have culled us
like cattle*

*we shall hold our heads high
and respond:*

*“this barren land is now fertile grounds for
a revolution”*

Martin Kennedy Yates

What causes Sir Gawain to go at a gallop

*A practice-based study of accentual alliterative narrative
verse*

By the end of my first reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, in the Simon Armitage translation, I was enchanted. I was predisposed to connecting with this poem; my parents are North Staffordshire folk as were their predecessors going back several generations, and I have lived and worked in the North and West Midlands for most of my life.
but fear not, friends, for in time,

However, it wasn't primarily the location or even the tale that had enchanted me, so much as its telling – not its mythology, but its meter. My second encounter was in reading aloud the Middle English original, in Barron's edition. As I intoned it – in my West Midlands accent – I felt increasingly that I was riding the galloping steed of its rhythms and alliterations like some novice knight, clippetty-clopping and clunking and clanking in my shiny new armour, as yet unspurred, and yet spurred on by the fantastic hoofbeat of its verse.

My fascination grew as I discovered the elegance of Tolkien's translation, the measured music

¹⁰ Originally published in *The B'K* Vol. 15, Issue 3.
<https://www.talbot-heindl.com/the-bk-2024-issues>

of Borroff's, and the contemporary lyricism of O'Donoghue's. With each reading I knew that I must investigate the metrical, rhythmic and phonological delights of this poem and its oeuvre. In this relatively short practice-based study, I will focus closely on the nature of accentual alliterative narrative verse. More specifically, first in Gawain, then in my own verse, I am keen to explore the alliterative tetrameter – the metrical muscle of this majestic narrative poem.

My decision to take a practice-based approach is motivated by a desire to develop my own writing with a greater consciousness of tradition. T.S. Eliot appealed for writers and critics to do this:

This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.¹¹

As I embarked on my alliterative writing adventure, I began to research Gawain and Middle English verse to discover what lay behind the dynamism and energy of this poem that had so captivated me. As I read, I kept writing in the belief that my study would inspire my poetry and in turn that my poetry would inform my study.

Through this simultaneous process, I began to perceive what it was about the meter and rhythm that had taken me on that galloping adventure. First, it was simply the rejection of end-rhyme and the embracing of alliteration. The force and flow of Middle English alliterative verse is hugely enhanced by its non-rhyming nature and the ease with which the telling of the tale can gallop on from one line into the next unhindered by the phonological hurdle of a rhyme scheme. Marie Borroff sees it as a straight swap: 'Both Old French and accentual Latin verse are of course characterised by end-rhyme, which corresponds as a formal constituent to alliteration in Old English verse.'¹²

I began to understand that it was the muscularity of the accentual alliterative verse that had carried me along so powerfully. In comparison, I was beginning to feel that end-rhyme could seem

rather ineffectual, especially when telling a tale. If alliteration with its varying degrees of accentuated stress is muscular and sinuous, then end-rhyme is somewhat decorative and cosmetic. Alliteration works constantly within the line, dynamic and integral, running through the poem manipulating its movement. Whereas end-rhyme seems passive and peripheral, sitting at the end of the line, waiting, always confined to the poem's outer edge.

However, there wasn't just muscularity – there was flexibility – because whilst the accented syllables were counted there remained a lack of restriction on the numbers of unaccented syllables. This allowance, in the long line of alliterative poetry, offers a variety of metrical possibilities and of line-lengths, enabling the poet to alter the pace and rhythm of the gallop and to slow it to a canter or trot at any given point. This is especially important in a poem of over 2,500 lines in order to 'prevent the verse from falling into a monotonous "dog-trot" rhythm'¹³ or conversely, to prevent it from galloping on when it doesn't suit the nature of the narrative.

This discovery revived my interest in Hopkins's notion of 'sprung rhythm' which had derived at least in part from Medieval verse. Re-reading *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, and a selection of his lyric poems, reminded me of the dynamism made possible when we reject the strictures of syllable-counting in favour of a measured accentual form that is sensitive to the patterns of speech.

However, I was soon to make a further discovery that would transform my appreciation of accentual alliterative verse and my efforts to write it. In Borroff's 1962 study of the meter and style of Gawain, and in the appendix that follows her 1967 translation, she explains further variations and irregularities in the metrical pattern: 'I have spoken of four "clearly predominant" stresses as constituting the basic form of the line. There are many lines, however, which contain stressed syllables above and beyond the basic four.'¹⁴ Borroff's approach to the meter of Sir Gawain recognizes a subtlety of sound-patterning that allows for varying degrees of weight or stress on some syllables that are neither fully stressed, nor completely unstressed. It is for this reason that Borroff, in her metrical analysis of

¹¹ T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Egoist*, September 1919.
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>

¹² Marie Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 145.

¹³ Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study*, 144.

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

Gawain, replaces the conventional terms ‘accented’ and ‘unaccented’ – or ‘stressed/unstressed’ – in favour of ‘chief’ and ‘intermediate’ syllables.

My research, and with it my writing, was discovering an agility in the meter of Gawain to go with its muscularity and flexibility. This subtlety of accent and emphasis affects the rhythm of the whole poem. Quite appropriately, the meter of Gawain evokes a ride over rough terrain. We are crossing rivers and ridges and rocky outcrops, leaping hedges and ditches, negotiating a moral and metaphysical mire. As the hoofbeat of the tetrameter drums on, the inflections and irregularities create a suitably uneven rhythm – a metrical adventure more like Coleridge’s undulating ramble ‘over uneven ground...breaking through the struggling branches of a copse-wood’ than Wordsworth’s civilized gait ‘up and down a straight gravel-walk... where the continuity of his verse met no collateral interruption.’¹⁴

There is much else that my research into the form and style of this poem has uncovered which would take us beyond the constraints of this study: the bi-partite line structure, the bob-and-wheel sections, the accentuation of initial syllables, the poetic use of archaic lexis, the regional vernacular of its diction, and more besides. Yet we must leave all that now and move on to explore how reading and research have inspired and informed my practice.

I knew that the success of my own accentual alliterative verse would be in the weaving together of metrical, alliterative and other phonological features. This was what would give my poetry the kind of muscularity, flexibility and agility I had discovered in Gawain. None of these devices would be working in isolation, but all aspects of the sonic physiology of the poem must be flexing and stretching, and pushing and pulling together. I knew that if I was to attempt a long narrative poem I would need everything working in synchronicity.

In addition, I had felt from early on that the unfamiliarity of the language in Gawain had, somewhat paradoxically, enhanced my enjoyment of the verse. My detachment at times from the semantics of the language freed me to feel and appreciate the soundscapes of the poem in their own right. This suggested to me that I might attempt to write in an invented language similar enough to

contemporary English to be understood, yet sufficiently different and detached to enable the reader to be carried along by its rhythms and other phonological effects.

In particular, I was fascinated by what I began to see as a combination of the visceral with the vernacular. The oral and aural effects of its somewhat Germanic diction, with its characteristically glottal and guttural register, had resonated with me as I had read the original text out loud. I was keen to emulate the Anglo-Saxon quality of the poem’s phonology. Just as Simon Armitage ‘detects an echo of his own speech rhythms within the original’¹⁵, I likewise recognize something of the accents and dialects of my own region of the Black Country and further north into Staffordshire.

It was an existing interest in the vernacular that had attracted me to the varied and natural metrical patterns of the verse. As a poet, I am very aware of the native, and dialectal, intonations of the voice and like to play them up a little, rather than suppress them. I like my poems to have a performative or declaratory aspect, which is clearly heard in Gawain, and other alliterative poetry, and in the sprung rhythms of Hopkins, too. I had also been impressed by distinctive voices in other reading, such as Ted Hughes’s *Crow*, and Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* – and I’m satisfied that these influences can be heard in the poem that I’ve begun to write and am about to share. *Tha Spawnen a Scousenlish* is the first section of a semi-autobiographical, semi-mythological narrative poem; its title and opening lines are references to my place-of-birth.

Poems, perhaps narrative ones especially, are to be spoken and heard – and heeded. As a poet and teacher I am often conscious, like the Gawain-Poet, of addressing an audience who must be reminded to listen:

If 3e wyl lysten þis laye bot on littel quile, I
schal telle hit... (lines 30-1)¹⁶

Note: Please read the poem below, aloud. In verse, the realizing of sounds often accompanies the recognizing of meanings. In addition, you will find it helpful to listen to the rhythms and intonations in my reading of the poem:

¹⁴ from William Hazlitt’s biography of Coleridge, quoted in: Marc Shell, *Talking the Walk & Walking the Talk: A Rhetoric of Rhythm* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), Chapter 1, Kindle.

¹⁵ Simon, Armitage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), vii.

¹⁶ W.R.J. Barron, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), 32

<https://soundcloud.com/user-902768106/tha-spawnen-a-scousenlish-part-1>

Tha Spawnen a Scousenlish¹⁷

*A wa bornt on tha browen banken ov a browen rivern
 where tyd im turnen an curven lyk turd
 as im slyden slownish owt ta sea an wherevern /
 Tha fust nyt wa frittful fistyt an curl-clenchen
 slep badlish in watty bed ov bent reeden
 dremt badlish dreamen of badden diayen to cummen /
 Wen a woken a wa chimdley-choken an chuffin
 in smokelish stench ov chemic-clouden
 tha cud stunt an stilt th shapin ov tung
 an lungen an a lossen langwij anaull /
 A cunner lern no worden jus chirp lyk bird
 mewlen lyk gull on miserish mornen
 howlen an honken lyk ferry in hawfog /
 Wen a tryd ta spake a cryd lyk crake
 ka-ka Kaa ka-ka Kee a screechen ka-ka Ky
 an a flappen ma fledglish armen frantik as fuken
 on tha browen banken downen by tha wattern
 wer tha sky surgen an tha salt-sea swellen /
 An ooh tha fust feel on ma feet o tha watter
 a winch an a wep as them waven wasshen over
 an em slobbern an sucken so am sinken in mudlish /
 Slownish an shurlish am slidden enta shinglen
 deeplisher downen to myn ankl n ma neezen
 ma thyzen /
 then tha cold kynda cauten me
 im tek me by suppryzen /
 an tha salt-watter tauten me
 im opn myn eyzen //*

In the metrical and phonological analysis that follows, I will be exploring in the context of my own practice the kind of muscle, flex and agility that I had been learning from Gawain.

I am working through *Tha Spawnen a Scousenlish* in complete units of meaning – rather than considering lines in isolation. This allows the natural intonation of speech to be considered across whole sentences. These sentences, or utterances to be precise, are delineated in the poem by forward-slashes rather than full stops and there is no other punctuation or demarcation. This requires the reader to use line-

breaks, meter, alliteration and the natural patterns of speech to regulate and phrase their reading and voicing of the poem.

Each section of the poem is accompanied by metrical notation in the style of Marie Borroff, rather than in traditional feet, for reasons already discussed.

<p>Title:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">- C - - C - c</p> <p>Tha Spawnen a Scousenlish</p>	<p>Key:</p> <p>C = Chief stressed syllable</p> <p>c = Intermediate syllable</p> <p>- = Unstressed syllable</p>
--	---

Immediately, the title, of the poem confronts the reader – or listener – with its odd language, and the somewhat Germanic nature of its phonology. Straightaway there is a favouring of harsh consonants, short vowels, and phonemes such as ‘-en’ and ‘-lish’. Already, there is a distance between sound and meaning; we are being drawn into the poem’s Anglo-Saxon sound-world. The two alliterated beats set up the relationship between the alliteration and meter of the poem. Its four sibilant consonants, two stressed and two unstressed, spit the poem into life.

<p>Lines 1 to 3:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">- - C - - C - C - - - C c -</p> <p><i>A wa bornt on the browen banken ov a brown rivern</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">c - - C - C - - C - c C</p> <p><i>downen where tyd im turnen an curven lyk turd</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">- - C - C - c - C - - C -</p> <p><i>as im slyden slownish owt ta sea an wherevern</i></p>

The four heavy plosives of first line pick up the rhythm. The weighting of these heavy ‘b’ consonants reduces the stress of ‘rivern’ to a slightly subordinate position as the cadence falls at the end of the line. The disyllabic representation of ‘browen’ comes straight from Black Country and other Midland dialect forms. In the second line the alliteration is more nuanced by its interplay with various aural effects. The echo of ‘tyd turnen’ in ‘lyk turd’ suggests the ebb of the tide in the estuary setting of the poem. This musicality is supported by the assonance of the ‘ur’ vowel, in ‘turnen’, ‘curven’ and ‘turd’ which slides fluidly through the line between the sharper

¹⁷ “Tha Spawnen a Scousenlish” was first published in *Butcher’s Dog*, issue 17, Sept 2022.

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

consonants of these words. The onomatopoeic effect of these long slow vowels is supplemented by the watery sibilance of 'slyden slownish' in line 3.

Lines 4 to 6:

c C c - - C - c C - - C c
Tha fust nyt a wa frittful curl-clenchen my fiss-tyt
 c C - - C - C - C c -
slep badlish in watty bed ov bent reeden
 c C - C - - C - C - - c -
dremt badlish dreamen of badden diayen to cummen /

The second grammatical unit of the poem begins in line 4 with a more disturbed meter and phonological pattern. The sense of agitation is evoked, quite appropriately, by a lot of stress; there are as many as four intermediate stresses in this line, along with the four chiefs. The anxious alliteration here is created by the fricatives of 'fust', 'frittful' and 'fistyt', along with an equally uncomfortable alliterative effect embedded with 'curlclenchen'. The discomfort and discordance of the night continues through lines 5 and 6 with the heavy consonantal drumbeat of 'b' and 'd' alliteration and the insistent assonance of 'a', 'e' and 'ee' vowels.

Lines 7 to 10:

c - C . . C - C - - C -
wen a woken a wa chimdley-choken an chuffin
 - C - C - C - C -
in smokelish stench ov chemic-clouden
 - - C - C - C - - C
tha cud stunt an stilt th shapin ov tung
 - C - - C - C - - C
an lungen an lossen langwij anaull /

In lines 7 to 10, the alliterative pattern is simpler and quicker with virtually no intermediate stresses to complicate the flow. Here, appropriately, the poem wakes up with a number of lively internal rhymes within lines and between lines, too: 'woken' and 'choken' in line 7 connect with 'smokelish' in line 8; 'tung' in line 9 links up with 'lungen' in line 10; and there is an onomatopoeic cough running through 'chimdleychoken', to 'chuffin', and on to 'chemic-clouden'. This enjambment, enhanced by a layering of phonological effects, energises these lines as the four-beat time-signature begins to pick up pace.

Lines 11 to 13:

- c - C - C - - C c C
A cunner lern no worden just chirp lyk bird
 C - - C - C - - C -
mewlen lyk gull on miserish mornen
 C - - C - c C - - C c
howlen an honken lyk ferry in hawfogg /

This pace continues into line 11, as the use of assonance rather than consonance creates a comparative lightness. Like the Gawain-Poet's use of regional diction, line 11 features the Potteries' 'cunner' for 'couldn't'. This line illustrates well the importance of performative considerations in our reading of a narrative poem where the telling is crucial. In my notation 'cunner' is subordinated in favour of the assonantal weight of 'lern'. A different reading might swap these stresses to make 'cunner' feel more frustrated and emphatic. Alternatively, we might give this line five chief stresses – making it iambic – but, for me, losing some of the performative impact of varying the stress. In lines 12 and 13, the alliteration is made flexible by the sinew of unstressed alliterative effects: in line 12 three 'l' consonants limber up in the first three syllables of the line; and in line 13, the onomatopoeic alliterations of 'howl', 'honk' and 'haw' are complemented at the end of the line by the more rasping fricatives of 'ferry' and 'fog'. The accentuation of 'Hawfog' also has performative value – its onomatopoeia offers a sonic correlative of 'fog-horn'

Lines 14 to 18:

- - C - C - C - C
wen a tried ta spake a cryd lyk crake
 - - C - - C - C - - C
ka-ka Kaa ka-ka Kee a screechen ka Ky
 - - C - - C - c - C - - c -
an a flappen ma fledglish armen frantik as fuken
 - - C - C - C - - - C -
on tha browen banken downen by tha wattern
 - - C C - - - C c C -
wer tha sky surgen an tha salt-sea swellen /

The varied intonation of this next sentence is evoked by a range of accents and stresses, and illustrates the importance of unstressed syllables in varying pace. Supporting the need for a more precise way of accounting for meter than a somewhat binary,

stressed/unstressed approach will allow. For instance, in line 14, 'lyk' is clearly to be accented more than some of the unstressed syllables, but is not as heavily accented at the 'chief' stresses. This is also true of the previous uses of 'lyk' in lines 2 and 11. However, here 'lyk' is given a little more accentual weight by its assonantal connection to 'tryd' and 'cryd'. Furthermore, line 15 illustrates the way in which accentual stress can be governed by the syllable length: 'Kaa', 'Kee' and 'Ky' are naturally accented by the length of their vowels in comparison with the shorter ones in 'ka-ka'. Of course, some of the additional emphatic weight also derives from the performative value of these sounds – they are being screeched. A further element musicality is created as Scousenlish's repeated attempts to find a voice are suggested by the echoes and repetitions in these lines: in line 14 'tryd ta spake' is echoed by 'cryd lyk crake'.

Lines 19 to 21:

- c - C C - - C - - C -
An oh tha fust feel on ma feet o tha watter
- - C - - C - - C - C - c -
An em winch an a weep as them waven wasshen over
- - C - - C - - - C - - C -
An em slobbern an succken so am sinken in mudlish /

In lines 19 to 21, the undulating musicality of the rhythm is increased by the simplified tetrameter with its lack of intermediate syllables. As elsewhere, the number of unstressed syllables – often two or three between the chiefs – gives the verse its pace, its canter or gallop. The alliterating sounds in this section are distinctly onomatopoeic, and increasingly sensuous, too. The 'w', 's' and 'sh' consonants, combined with the wave-like rhythm evoke the ebb and flow of the sea: the watery w's of lines 19 and 20, are overwhelmed by the incoming tide of surging sibilances in lines 21, which continues into the following sentence, too.

Lines 22 to 28

C - - C - - C - c - C -
Slownish an shurlish am slidden enta shinglen
C c - C - - c C - - C -
deeplicher down to myn ankln ma neezen
c C -
na thyzen /
- - C c - C - -
then tha cold kynda cauten me
- C - - c C -
im tek me by suppryzen /
- - C c - C - c
an tha salt-watter tauten me
- C - c C -
im open myn eyezen //

* * * *

My title being a dependent clause, not a question, meant this was always an enquiry not an inquiry. In this practice-based piece, the poetry and analysis are both the outworking and outcome of my research – the knowing and the knowledge.

This creative critical journey will continue with further work to complete further alliterative poems, with a sustained focus on meter, intonation and phonological effects. Alongside this, having paddled in the shallows of cognitive poetics, I intend to explore more deeply and extensively aspects of rhythm, musicality and performance in our writing and reading of poetry.

I have begun to ride the rhythms of Gawain's galloping Gringolet, and as I close I'm wading with Scousenlish deeper into the eye-opening waters of accentual alliterative narrative verse. Scousenlish's adventures have only just begun, more poems will follow, as I continue this mytho-poetic journey to its, as yet unknown, conclusion.¹⁸

Martin Yates, May 2020.

¹⁸ Footnote: True to his final paragraph, the poet went on to explore Scousenlish's adventures in three further alliterative poems, which are printed below. He assures us that there is more of Scousenlish to come; with a fifth poem in the pipeline and

plans for this to be an ongoing project resulting in a set of around twenty pieces – all in the same accentual-alliterative, Gawain-inspired form – over the next few years.

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

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- Martin Kennedy Yates
Scousenlish a-singen¹⁹
*At firss ma voiss wa fritful flatlish -
al chit an coff lyk crake an chuff
an choakt wit thorn-beak an thinny throat -
but slownish an shurlish a starten singen /
A fownt ma voiss in storms full forcen
an a formt it from fins flex an flit of feathern /
Sol for shurlish a-singen in stormlish
an wit al the woilden ov wind-wet weathern /
Hou high a wa hangen in tha howl ov a hooly
an lollop ina lowlish loop ov longen-waven /*

¹⁹ "Scousenlish a-singen" was first published in *The Rialto*, issue 90, June 2021.

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

Twa wen a flappen for fuden in fishboat waken
an diven deep into death-black wattern
that a fownen ma voiss an ma voiss fownt me /
Nowen a loven ta loop longen an lowlish
an singen ower seashor and cityschapen /
A charmen tha childen wi ma cheersom chirpen -
an tha wimmen wit wunder an wisht a-waillen -
an tha menfoulk al miserish wit melancolen
 uplooke hiyen
an them a-wistful gazen
enta steelish skyen -
as am softlish serenaden
them a-weplish cryen /

Martin Kennedy Yates
Scousenlish a-fallan lufen²⁰

Twa wen a wa stel wit and yunlish an ween
a sen yun shegul sa shapplish an sheen
tha ma eyen bemakken al majik a-mistlish
ana cummen al colt an shivrish an keen /
aber shen na shone na seemen mish a-sen
jas flute ova faslish al fin an nofa fren /
an a gazzen an ganden agen an agen
aber shen neva shote na cummen a-shorlish /
twa munnen a-lattern a mussen a-makken
a-flyt ta hooly ile an farren oota farnenilen
wer puffen em nessen an nurt em yunnen
wer graet norta-sean im grim an gra na grun
an beg skyz a bruden browen na blu /
an her-agen a senn sam shegul wit snolish
gannen an gullamot an garralisher kittawakken
aber shen wa bessen byfarren al blakk an bute /
a kenn twa ha wit nek sa curven an lank
an ha grennen eyen glinten al garnlish an gelt
an ha wingen wa wundfallen al widden an welt /
an shem a-singen sonnen al soflish an shiff
fa yunnen im nessen al nakken and nulish /
am axen sam gannen a-tellen ha nammen
aber wen im spokken ma lufen ist baddlish a-bruzzen
an ma beatter hart en ma bress ist brutish a-brokken /
ma dera hoppen ist dullish an dashen dedlish
ana feelt ma fevrish eyen full a-fillen
 as im spokken
mish al mystrish an mum
ha namm ist Quen Trute

an shen al hautish a-cum
fra scandan a-jute /

Martin Kennedy Yates
Scousenlish an Scarren Yaweth

Twa diayen-enden an droppen dusklish
an wester winden a-whippen wintrish
wen Yaweth cum yellaping outtha wylder yonden /
Im cum loopin and lankin lyk sum lunic gullyas /
A firss a dinna fix na full-ken im from flokken
then a sen tha spec ov dart in tha spart
ov yolker yellor ov them gollten eyen /
Then a sen im fixen fast on ma fin an formen
an a tink ta tek flit an tilt fa hommen
bu tha na scapen na scarpen fra Scarren Yaweth /
Them wikren wingen wa wyd as woilden
an rappen rount al reppern an unrestlish /
Wen im tek ma tynish form in them terron talonnen
a fillt ma fearen full-fattal as im full-fallon /
An downen wem fallen, downen im draggen
ta tha browen wattern, wer a wa bornt an brokken /
On an downen im draggen undern dedlish wattern
deepern an darkren lyk im tenden mich ta drownen /
It cum coltern and coalish an a cunner callen
a cunner scape na scrapp na shift na shivern even /
As shur as shitten am shurlish dyen / A shuttem eyen
wen deth cum dark an devlish a-dreamen
al hadish an hellish halff-liffen halff-dethlish /
A see-n-herren a hundren thousen halffen-humman
lyk halffen-fishen, halff-foulsh, halff-besstlish
an al wa fieress a-fighten al frantik an fritlish
al beatten an brokken al battern a-bloddish /
An wyrdlish a wokken al watt an weplish
bent an bruzen on banken ov tha browen rivern
wit ma bekk al blodden an ma hedd a-drummen
 eyen a-stingen
badlish brokken wingen
ma leggen a-cum humman /
An wit tha wylder winden
coltern a-krulish cummen //

²⁰ "Scousenlish a-fallan lufen" was first published in Poetry Wales, issue 58/3, March 2023.

Paul D. Deane

Varieties of Alliterative Meter

I recently read Geoffrey Russom's book, *The Evolution of Verse Structure in Old and Middle English Poetry: From the Earliest Alliterative Poems to Iambic Pentameter*. It is a technical work, and you need a decent background in linguistics and medieval literature to follow its arguments easily. But it is an important work and has significant implications for poets who want to write alliterative verse. Russom has also written an article, "Poetic Form", which presents the outlines of his theory in a more accessible form. While his isn't the only theory of how poetic meter works (that is, after all, a whole field of study in its own right), Russom's theory offers the most convincing explanation I have ever read about why alliterative verse died out in the fifteenth century. And that, in turn, provides insights into what is going on in the work of modern poets who have chosen to write in alliterative forms. So I am going to take the time to sketch how Russom's theory makes sense of the history of alliterative meter and use it to explain some of the variations in alliterative structure that we see among modern-day poets.

Classical Head-Stave Meter

Before I dive into the details it will be useful to review the distinctive characteristics of Germanic alliterative verse, the kind that shows up in Old English poems like *Beowulf* or the Old Norse *Poetic Edda*. The only native accounts of alliterative meter we have — accounts written by practicing alliterative poets — are provided in the first instance by Snorri Sturluson's *Hattatal* (Gade, 2017), and developed further by poets and scholars in Iceland, the only country where Germanic alliterative verse has survived as a continuous literary tradition. (Adalsteinsson, 2014, provides a fairly exhaustive list of references.)

The native Norse/Icelandic tradition describes alliterative verse as being organized around 'staves' (stressed, alliterating syllables) that create what modern scholars call the alliterative 'long line'. Each long line consists of two short lines, or 'half-lines'. Each half-line contains two (occasionally, three) strongly stressed syllables, or *lifts*, and sequences of unstressed syllables, or *dips*. The first half-line in each pair (termed the a-verse by modern scholars) can have either one or two alliterating stresses. The first stress in the second half-line (termed the b-verse

by modern scholars) **must** alliterate. The final stress in the b-verse must **never** alliterate. Thaliarchus' poem 'Farewell', printed earlier in this issue, provides a straightforward illustration. Here are three lines from this poem:

A-Verse	B-Verse
<u>Catch</u> -pair at <u>bus</u> stop	<u>kiss</u> with <u>ab</u> andon,
two <u>youths</u> <u>part</u> ing	though <u>yearning</u> for <u>longer</u>
in <u>bold</u> -clutch to <u>abide</u> .	Now <u>bites</u> <u>clock</u> -hand:

I have underlined the strongly stressed syllables and bolded the alliterations required by the meter. In the native alliterative tradition, the alliterating stave in the b-verse is called the *head-stave* because it is the key to the alliterative structure of the line. Everything leads up to the head stave. The alliterating stress(es) in the a-verse are considered '*props*' that function to support the head-stave.

There is a lot more to be said about traditional alliterative meter, but for present purposes, I will highlight two: (i) In the older Germanic languages, primary stress almost always falls on the first syllable of a word. That is, of course, where the alliteration goes. (ii) While it has plenty of rhythmic flexibility, older Germanic poetry tends toward a *falling* rhythm (strong-weak) rather than a *rising* rhythm (weak-strong). For example, in Old English alliterative verse, the most common half-line rhythm is what German scholar Eduard Sievers (Sievers, 1885) termed 'Type A' (strong-weak-strong-weak). The Norse/Icelandic alliterative tradition records a similar intuition. In traditional Icelandic metrical analysis, each line is divided into feet. Odd-numbered feet are considered 'heavy' and even-numbered feet are considered 'light', and there is a strong preference to anchor alliteration on heavy rather than light feet (Jónsson, 1892, as explained by Ringler, 1996). Russom argues that the linguistic characteristics of old Germanic languages make word-initial alliteration prominent and favor a falling rhythm. Which means that all an alliterative poet really needed to know was to use alliteration to join the most prominent words in the two halves of the line. The metrical patterns that resulted fell naturally out of the normal rhythms of the language.

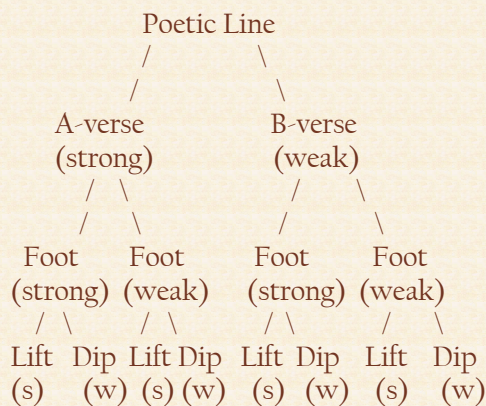
Russom's Theory of Poetic Meter

Russom starts with the assumption that poetic patterns are based on linguistic patterns. Certain things are naturally prominent – sentence, phrase,

word, and syllable edges, stressed syllables, and repeated sounds. Russom argues that *poetic* units correspond naturally to *linguistic* units that organize these patterns of prominence. Poetic beats prototypically correspond to syllables, poetic feet, to words, half-lines, to phrases, and lines, to clauses or sentences. The idea is that the most natural poetic patterns align with the most common, natural patterns in the language.

In Russom's account, the prototypical Old English half-line was a phrase prototypically composed of two (inflected) words. Because English words were almost always stressed on the first syllable, and the end of the word was an unstressed inflectional ending, the default rhythm of the half line was therefore a falling rhythm (Type A). This falling pattern was reinforced by the fact that Old English sentences typically ended with a verb, which received weaker emphasis than subject or object nouns. So the end of the Old English or Old Norse line was the place that naturally got the weakest stress. And alliteration only works rhythmically if you alliterate on the most strongly stressed syllables.

In short, Russom's theory claims that the typical Old English alliteration pattern (aa / ax) followed from typical Old English rhythms. We can describe the default poetic rhythm in the following diagram:



In this kind of theory, deviations from the basic pattern are possible so long as they are not too great. Poets found it easy enough to use words with different rhythms in many of the feet. But alliterating on the final stress would suggest a rising rhythm for the entire line.

As I understand Russom's theory, that is why the head-stave was so important. Alliterating on the head-stave, and not on the final stress, maintained a sense of falling rhythm from one line to the next.

Of course, Modern English is very different from Old English. A rather large chunk of the Modern English vocabulary consists of words borrowed from French, Latin, and Greek, where the stress falls toward the end of the word. English has lost most of its inflectional endings (which came at the end of the word) in favor of using grammatical function words – mostly articles and prepositions, which are usually placed before the content word they modify. And English clauses have shifted almost entirely to Subject-Verb-Object word order, which places the natural emphasis at sentence end. All of these factors militate toward rising rather falling rhythm (think: iambs and anapests instead of dactyls and trochees.)

This is why Russom thinks alliterative verse died during the fifteenth century. Head-stave meter only makes sense if the underlying rhythm is a falling one. But the modern English poet has to work hard to keep a falling rhythm going. Thaliarchus' poem, earlier in this volume, illustrates some of the techniques that poets can use to do so.

To begin with, Thaliarchus' poem contains a lot of compound nouns, many of them original — *catch-pair*, *bus stop*, *bold-clutch*, *clock-hand*, *love-pair*, etc. Compound nouns have a falling rhythm, with the added bonus that Old English poets used them to create kennings, giving the poem a distinctively Old English feel.

Thaliarchus' poem also takes advantage of (often archaic) patterns of grammatical inversion, which again create falling stress patterns:

"in bold clutch to abide"
 "now bites clock-hand"
 "now short grows queue"
 "woeful the love pair"
 "winters not many"
 "together can muster"
 "for them gapes week-span"
 "break-ups stormy"
 "sorrow not little"
 "did we bliss grapple"

Not coincidentally, many of these inversions are necessary to get an aa/ax alliteration pattern. The poem also suppresses function words (especially articles) where it would be more natural to include them (e.g., one would normally say "a" or "the" clock-hand), also making it easier to keep a falling rhythm.

Notice also that in this poem, no sentence ever ends at the end of the line. Ending sentences

between half-lines is normal enough in Old English, but in modern English it has the added benefit of putting the naturally strongest sentence-final stress in the a-verse. The overall effect of these stylistic choices is purposely archaic. It produces the rhythm and feel of Old English poetry in a modern English setting. But as such, it is not likely to be adopted by poets who favor a more contemporary style.

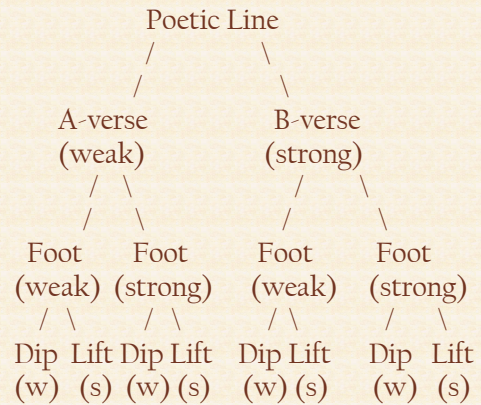
In his book, Russom argues that in Middle English (which had transitioned partially to modern English patterns), these kinds of archaisms played an important role in maintaining the traditional head-stave alliteration pattern. But the literature on Middle English alliterative verse also suggests that there were rather strict constraints on the b-verse that (I believe) had the effect of keeping stronger emphasis on the head-stave and keeping a sense of falling rhythm at the end of the line. There could be at most one “long” (multiple-syllable) dip in the Middle English b-verse, and it had to appear either before or after the head-stave (Duggan, 1986; Inoui & Stokes, 2012). And the final foot nearly always had a falling rhythm — typically, a final -e that was no longer pronounced by the end of the fifteenth century (Duggan, 1988).

I have found in my own witting that it is much easier to make an a(a)/ax alliteration pattern sound natural if an iambic pattern is avoided and the head stave is reinforced by a long (or secondarily stressed) dip. One can also maintain the rhythm that head-stave meter requires by carefully controlling sentence length, structure, and punctuation. The excerpt from Rahul Gupta’s *Arthuriad* which comes at the end of this issue is a case in point – the way Gupta organizes his sentences to create an incantatory effect also makes the endings of lines much less prominent to the ear. However, Russom’s theory has further implications for modern English alliterative verse.

If Russom’s theory is correct, modern English has a natural predilection toward rising rhythms. Since alliterative verse places alliteration on the strongest stresses, and the final stress of the line is, by default, the naturally strongest stress in modern English, modern English rhythms should therefore predispose poets to adopt an alliterative meter in which alliteration falls obligatorily on the final stress.

Let us take the diagram I provided earlier, but invert the rhythm, so that weak precedes strong at every level of analysis. If we do that, the last stress in the b-verse – let us call it the **tail-stave** – should be

the most likely to alliterate. I contend that we see exactly this tendency in alliterative verse written by modern poets.



Alex Rettie’s poem “The Future” (published in this issue) is a clear example of pure tail-stave meter. Here is how I analyze it:

A-verse 1	A-verse 2	Head-Stave	Tail-Stave
We <u>found</u> it	like <u>tourists</u>	<u>find</u>	<u>fossils</u> :
a <u>little</u>	<u>Skull</u>	<u>covered</u> in	<u>Concrete</u>
We were <u>laughing</u>	<u>Half</u>	in <u>love</u> ,	or <u>lust</u> .
<u>You</u>	in a <u>blue</u>	<u>bikini</u> ,	<u>Bursting</u>
with <u>clinical</u>	<u>Calm</u> ,	<u>aimed</u> the	<u>Camera</u> .
<u>Like</u>	they <u>say</u> ,	we may <u>look</u>	<u>back</u> and <u>laugh</u> .

In this poem, the tail stave always alliterates, and there is always at least one matching prop in the a-verse. Perhaps in recognition of the tail-staves’ importance, Rettie has placed them in short lines of their own. The rhythm and syntax that result are entirely consistent with a colloquial, modern style.

My poem *Housebreaker* was my first experiment in writing in tail-stave meter:

Housebreaker

*I woke without light – I sensed, not alone;
 half-rose, reaching out, pulse rushing
 Through arteries and veins, but the room was empty.
 At the base of the stairs a creaking board
 halted me, but I heard nothing. Trust a housebreaker
 to tread softly, stand quiet when the household stirs!
 In the kitchen, a clatter: In flashlight-beam, a kitten,
 Reminding me that some murderers focus on mice.*

Again, I think tail-stave meter works well, producing natural modern English rhythms, though I am less sure about the lines where I alliterated the 1st stress with the 4th. Allowing two lifts between alliterating staves seems like a stretch, though Maryann Corbett does it, too, in lines like “*memory of a love · that crumpled to malice.*” It might be better to require no more than one non-alliterating lift between alliterating staves, much as in traditional Icelandic metrics.

In any case, it is also noteworthy how often modern English poets alliterate on the final stress even when they are working to create an Old English mood or responding to Old English material. Maryann Corbett’s poem in this issue is a case in point. By my count, 24 of 44 lines alliterate on the tail-stave. And there are many, many such examples among the modern English alliterative poems I have collected on alliteration.net.

We can sum up what I have found in this study as follows: While it is possible to write beautiful, effective alliterative verse in head-stave meter, the rhythms of the language may encourage modern English poets to adopt a different alliterative pattern, a tail-stave meter predicated on rising rather than falling rhythms.

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Poem & Book Links Added

- “When the hard-souled one ...”, “Borvi the Brazen ...”, and “All-Father Speaks”, by [K.M. Butler](#) in [The Viking and the Dove: A Novel of Viking Normandy](#)
- [The Lost Land](#) by [Anthony Etherin](#)
- [By His Own Arm](#) by [Kathryn Ann Hill](#)
- [The Lay of Baldor: A Play for Voices](#) by [John Houghton](#)
- Alliterative verse by [Walt Kelly](#) in [The Pogo Sunday Brunch](#), Simon & Schuster, 1959
- [Storm Borne](#) by [Cait O'Neill McCullagh](#) in [The Bone Folder](#).
- [Abel as Cain](#) by [Camille Ralphs](#) in [The London Magazine](#)
- “Softest, sweetest, fleeting songbird ...” by [Loretta Sue Ross](#) in [Death and the Viking's Daughter](#).
- “I live the last light ...”, “I banished the beast ...”, “Word-Weaver I am ...”, “I find you faulty ...”, “Of measured meter ...”, and “I defy you ...” by [Brandon Sanderson](#) in [The Frugal Wizard's Handbook for Surviving Medieval England](#)
- [Game Six](#), by [Thomas Sharp](#) in [Atticus Review](#)
- [Onslaught](#) By [Jill Scharr](#) in [The Grimoire Anthology, vol. 2](#)
- [Dworst](#), by [J.R.R. Tolkien](#)

Links to Online Performances and Translations

- Alliterative verse [Review of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight](#) (movie, 2021) by Robert Breedlove
- [Flatlands](#) (Song) by [Ryan Culwell](#)
- Translations from the Poetic Edda by Rosalind Kerven in [Viking Myths and Sagas](#)
- Translation of 'Song of the Rood' by Brendan King in the [St. Austin Review](#), March/April, 2021
- "Against a Wen" by [Maryann Corbett](#) in [Ars Medica](#)
- [Translation of 'Song of the Sun'](#) by [Nik Gunn](#) in [Ancient Exchanges](#)
- Translation of 'The Wanderer' by [J.Simon Harris](#)
- Translations from Old Norse/Icelandic skaldic verse by [Emily Osborne](#) in [Safety Razor](#): "Auðr Mourns her Dead Brother", "Loss of Sons", "Rune Carving", "Dying Well", "Áslaug's Three Sorrows", "Old Age", and "Verse Making"
- [Sable Star Saga](#) by Lord Roric Rainerson from [The Collected Works of Roric Rainerson](#)
- [A translation of 'The Seafarer'](#) and [a translation of "Caedmon's Hymn"](#) by Adam Roberts
- Translations of [Sir Gawain and the Green Knight](#), the [Alliterative Morte Arthur](#), and [The Romance of William and the Werewolf](#) by [Michael Smith](#)
- [The Search for Mabon](#) by Gwen verch David
- [V for Vendetta](#) (speech from the movie)

Links to Alliterative Verse in Blogs & Social Media

- "[Fierce sea-steeds ...](#)" by [Alex](#)
- "[Hard to haggle ..](#)" by [Todd Anderson](#)
- "[All still and stately ...](#)" and "[Ere being drew breath](#)" by [Ender Smith](#)
- [Bringing down the Berlin Wall](#) by [Ysabeth Barrette](#)
- [A little asian: part 1](#) by [@destinykrainbow](#)
- [Forest of Possibilities](#) by [Elizabeth](#)
- [Forpfæderas](#) by [Tim Fellows](#)
- "[Baudelaire: Plumes et pluies](#)", "[Vladborn vale ...](#)", "[Fearless squirrel ...](#)", "[unruly witness](#)", "[astral parking lot](#)", "[riddle not to be solved](#)", "[the dying kept at a distance ...](#)", "[all day yesterday I was convinced it was Tuesday](#)", "[holiday but not for me ...](#)", "[down among the nature fakery ...](#)", "[pergola](#)", "[werewolfportal-pilled](#)", "[the hostile](#)

- "[half-masted ...](#)", "[selfcare falters ...](#)", "[rabbit-dusk ...](#)", "[pencil on good paper ...](#)", "[who would hear in the angel orders](#)", "[greenish ochre grokthward](#)", "[the dread-bundled dragnet](#)", "[snapshots of a snide continuance](#)", and "[multi-tier response](#)" by [Michael Helsem](#)
- "[The Silver Bough](#)" by "[Yendorcire](#)"
- "[The deep tracks ...](#)" by [Tom Holland](#)
- "[A Reprise](#)" by [Emyr Lewis](#)
- "[When winning in contests ...](#)" by [K.R.R. Lockhaven](#)
- Alliterative verse review of "The Green Knight" (movie, 2021) by [Hannibal Montana](#)
- "[When Luna spies ...](#)" by [Arum Natzorkhang](#)
- "[So came the clamor ...](#)" by [JT The Ninja](#)
- "[The Runic Edda](#)" by [D.C. Petterson](#)
- [The Visitation of Black Shuck](#) by [Ben Quant](#)
- [Ikornamal \("The Sayings of the Squirrel"\)](#) by [The Ratatoskian Rite](#)
- "[Raveshing Raven](#)" by [A.A. Rubin](#)
- "[Hound](#)" by [Sarah](#)
- "[A Ferskeytt Poem](#)" by [David ben Alexander](#)
- By [Michael Smith](#):
 - [Duffus Castle](#)
 - [Denbigh Castle](#)
 - [Castle Camps](#)
 - [To Dacre and Its Dark Four Bears](#)
 - [In Search of King Arthur in Sand-Swept Pennard](#)
 - [King Arthur Comes Alive with All His Knights](#)
 - [Brenton on Dartmoor on Foot and on High](#)
 - [A trip to Painscastle with Sir Gawain](#)
 - [The Viking Stones at Gosforth](#)
 - [Sir Gawain and Gringolet go to St Neot in Cornwall](#)
 - [Sir Gawain goes to Bygrave, an ancient settlement in aged fields](#)
 - [King Arthur's Hall; all roofless and wind-blown](#)
 - [Fettiplace lies by Lambourn's levels](#)
 - [A new translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight!](#)
 - [Into Laugharne in search of whispers](#)
 - [Fulk Nerra – the Butcher of Anjou](#)
 - [Swinside: Stone Sentinels of Past Centuries](#)
 - [The Cattie beneath the Ocean sits and sleeps](#)
 - [Iconography at Ickleton illuminates the passing of the hours](#)

Links to Alliterative Verse in Blogs & Social Media (Ctd.)

- More by [Michael Smith](#)
 - [In Devon banks down darkest lanes, bench ends beguiling](#)
 - [Castell Dinas Emrys – Ambrosius reborn](#)
 - [Lord Bardolph of Agincourt at Dennington](#)
 - [At the home of the juggled lintel: Conisborough Castle revisited](#)
- [Novena to St. Caedmon](#) by [St. Caedmon Studios](#)
- [The Fatal Fight](#) by [S. Baker](#)
- [“Hrafn Ytra, Feeder of Ravens”](#) by [The Tarnck](#)
- [A Sonnet for Earth, 2014](#), by [Tony Walsh](#)
- [“First Skaldic Musings”](#) by [Shena Willington](#)
- [The American Futharc](#), by [Eirik Westcoat](#)
- [Fragments of ‘Wires and Stars’](#) by [Alastair Zaraza](#)

Call for Submissions

The Winter, 2025 issue of *Forgotten Ground Regained* is open for submissions. I am especially interested in poetry that fits the theme, **“Mythic Tales and Sacred Truths”**. Submissions should be sent to Paul D. Deane at the following email address: pdeane@alliteration.net.

Requirements:

1. Submissions must be in modern English, but authors should feel free to submit poems that take advantage of the diction, rhythms, and syntax of particular language varieties and communities. I do not discriminate against Scots, Appalachian English, Black English Vernacular, Indian English, or any other language variety, though I do ask that authors be prepared to supply notes to explain any terms or expressions that outsiders to their communities may not readily understand.

2. Submissions should make skillful, **systematic** use of alliteration in ways that use alliteration to reinforce the rhythm and connect important ideas. Overall, I prefer poems that have a stronger impact on readers when they are read aloud. I therefore encourage authors to include links to audio or video versions of their poems in their submissions.

3. I would love to see people experimenting with modern English versions of Old and Middle English alliterative verse, with Old Norse forms like *ljóðahattr* and *drottkvætt* or modern Icelandic *rimur*, or with new alliterative forms designed to highlight modern English rhythms and speech patterns. While my first preference is what traditional scholarship calls alliterative-accentual verse, I am also open to alliterative free verse or to alliterative versions of traditional forms, such as the ballad, as long as the alliteration is clearly a structural rather than a decorative feature of the form.

4. I am open to work both by contemporary poets **and to projects that would normally be considered to fall outside the literary mainstream**, such as speculative poetry, SCA Bardic Arts projects, and fan fiction.

5. There is no hard upper length limit, though poems more than five to six pages in length are likely to be published separately on the website, with links provided from the Fall issue, rather than being included directly in the pdf magazine. Note that I love both the lyrical and the narrative turns in poetry, so longer narratives will be given careful consideration.

6. I will consider reprints, but am far more likely to link to them (if published online) or to publish them directly on the site than I am to publish them in one of the quarterly issues.

Submissions for the Winter Issue must be received by January 1, 2025

And, in honour of the season –

Rahul Gupta

**Spawn of the Lightning:
An Army of Hallowe'en Toadstools**

The Samhain-section from a seasonal interlude to an Arthurian epic-in-progress. In context, this episode from the narration of the Wheel of The Year in Arthur's Albion foreshadows the advent of Mordred.²¹

* * *

It is as if uneasily all is waiting.
A charge changes. Through the chafing airs
tension tingles, it tightens the wire:
a harpstring humming.
Above the haze-layers
the ether troubles. In eddying broils
slur the jetstreams, slewing vapours
—their vectors veer —vortex twisting—
amid cloud-clashes: cold, with sultry-
wet dogday warmth that wafts aloft
rising surges. The wreathing blasts'
currents of counter-winds cool the welter,
down-draughts whirling their drizzling chills
through shifts of airmass; shear-lines pilot
the turbid fronts.

Trance steals over
a world watchful of a wavering noon,
as if holding its breath. Hairs stand on end
from goose-prickles, the gathering pressure
brow-burdensome. In a brooding calm
midges are miming their mute rairdance.
The creeping scalp acrawl with sweat,
at the nape of the neck are knots bunching.
Bough-riding birds break the stillness
with piping cries. Poised in silence,
tree-tops are hushed. In the taut visage,
eyesockets ache. The aura bodes;
leers leadentinted: its livid aspect
warns with wanness.

At the weathergleam's verge
round the horizon racks are scudding
fogged with fallstreaks. Like the frown of dusk
the murk musters massed banks of cloud,
thronged thunderheads: their threat mounting
towers topheavily on the tempest's wings;
their blue-blackness blots out the light.
Swift-swarmed dark swallows up the sky;
unfurls its fume wherein fires smoulder
that catch and kindle: coruscations

²¹ An abridged version of an earlier draft of this passage from the *Arthuriad* was previously published in Dennis W. Wise's book, *Speculative Poetry and the Modern Alliterative Revival: A Critical Anthology*. Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2023.

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

shudder sheet-flickers in shroud-nimbus
as rumbles prowls.

With a roar and wuther
the flashpoint flares. Floodgates unsluice
slashing downpours of slanting rain
on galeforce gusts. Guns drums and bombs
—an astounding crash— and Storm explodes
as atmospheres, in avalanches
collapse like landslides. In the loud tumult
—blunderbuss boom, bang of ordnance,
hubbub and rumpus and hammer-battering,
the thudding thump of thundercracks—
lightningbolts launch from louring billows.
A fleeting glimpse like the face of the Moon:
the illumined landscape with its leaping skyline
brands bright its image in the backs of the eyes.

A late-summer storm

Zigzagging tines, zedshaped lightning's
pronged weapon impales the primy soil:
and we follow the flash, foin groundward with
pathfinding probes to pierce the turf.
Let the earth open. We enter inside.
Here levels below our living daylights
an otherworldly under-earthen
landscape layered below the surface
nests beneath us.

Follow the lightning into the earth: Katabasis

This unknown domain,
her roofs writhing with roots of trees,
is the nameless netherdepth, benighted regions
of an occult kingdom:

Necropolis grins
catacomb-sockets;
sarcophagi
decay in crypts,
caves inhuming
the putrid matter,
sepulchral swaddlings
wombed in warrenlike,
winding, myriad
charnel-chambers;
chimneys venting
fougous' fætor;
foul souterrains;
deep-delved dungeons:
dusky vaultage
—heaped headpieces—
—hoards of longbones—
of grave-galleries.
Groping steeply,
tombpassages twist
through turnagains
to undercrofts,

Necropolis of tombs

while oubliettes
fold fathoms downwards
to Filth's Mansion.
Pellmell we plunge:
in panoramas
horizons range,
as we reach deeper,
like tumbledown
topsy-turvy
sunken citadels,
a sewerscape
of tiers and wards
with terraced platforms;
doors downfallen
to dark culverts
their grille-gratings
green slime-curtained;
canted causeways
on the chasms' brink:
skewed screwthreading
escalier-spires
leaning, looming;
the labyrinthine
abyss beckons:
the bowels of the Earth.

Sewerage

Here are tribes of rats trapped by cave-ins,
wriggling rodents, their runs thwarted:
dead-ends their doom. Dens are shrinking,
their nests narrowing as numbers grow,
in blind alleyways and blocked cisterns,
to a mangy mass of mating bodies.
Like their neighbour vermin, knotting reptiles,
keystones crushing they are kittening yet
till the chambers choke to chink and cranny
with tangled tails. Teeth start to gnaw.

From the maze of tombs the morgue-ullage
and grave-gravy, gluey-curdled,
bleed to these bilges; their black vomits
milk out and merge, commingled blend
of what seeps from cellars with sordors leaching
to Earth's entrails. For from all the jakes'
clotted courses; through clogged spillducts,
dreckcrusted drains' downspout scuppers;
from every addlepool and each latrine,
ripe reredorter and reasty midden,
siegehouse and cess, in our sunlit world,
garderobe nightsoil of the gong-farmer,
loose cack of lasks, and laystall-slops
—helter-skelter, the whole system's
countless catchments of the accursèd share,
in a swilling swelchie —is swallowed down

Cloaca

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

by intestine-tunnels and towel-pipework
from the upper echelons to the enclaves beneath:
sickly surfeit of sewage-waste,
engulfed by gulches. The gurge of sludge
empties ordures to the uttermost sump
where lurks waiting, in a lake of slime,
a prodigious dungheap.

Dirts steam. Dritt of foxes,
deer-turds. Merd and fewmet,
scat, spraint; fiants, scumbered
skite of otter-crottels;
brock-muck. Brown waggings
brew, mix: sharn of vixen,
critters' crap, hare-buttons,
crudded spoor, boars' lesses

The Catalogue of the Excrements

in a cradling crucible.

The crawling lees
amalgamate, transmute fusing.
The realm of rottenness is rich with life.

From clouds to clods, cleaving lightning
wracks with raptures rainpuddled loam,
and by split seconds the expanse between
the Heavens on high and humble Earth
is bridged in brightness: embracing partners
space sprung apart espouse again.

Autumn Equinox

Ω

Once twins entwined, that twain sundered:
the husband halved from the whole forebear;
now sibling-father, and sister-wife
marry for a moment, to mate powers
high, dry and hot with the humid deep.
Attraction triggers the trident-bolt,
the warm wedding to wettish and cold,
the air to fire; earth to water:
as when Burn-the-Wind, at his blade-forging,
that the redshort rods are wrought to temper
steeps them in moistness —the steel is slaked,
amid sputtering fumes sparks light aflame,
in quenching oils, to quell its ardour
(and the venoms unveil viper-chevroned,
woven-welded, worm's-tongue markings)
—so the glowing glaive, in glutting thrusts
shooting downward, ensheathes his length.

Hicros gamos

Ground engulfs him. In her gravid belly
the charge is channelled; for change kindles
where his liquid lightnings enliven dust.
Behold the happenings of the hidden places;
witness wonders —from the worms' vantage.

Shocks shaking her, he sheds darting
fork-formed currents, forces spending
their virile virtue.

Lightning fecundates the Earth

Pervading the clays

are pores pooling with pregnant fluids.
Through dropsied ducts, drenched syrinx-glands
in coral clusters, course her issues,
unctions oozing, by ebbs and swells:
what subtle liquors seep and filter,
yeast-yielding brines with yolk-syrups
and saps surging, sift lispng through
fistule-fissures? Fertile venters
congest with juices like the jellied slobber
that showers downward from shooting stars
estranged to earth; the sticky chrisms
spill into spiracles; from sponge-bladders
limbeck-tinctures, elixirs stilling
hoarded honeydews, like the harvests culled
from the bread of bees, brood-comb drizzlings
—a moist motherlode milch with nectars.

The stagnant gulfs stretch out for leagues
under fens' fastness, fog-bound marshes,
mould-mildewed tarns, and misty fells:
like troves of ore, as treasure-laden
rills running through the rankling dung;
mine-wealthy malm. At the Moon's fullness
her beams are bathing foreboding depths:
the lodes ripen in the lunar rays,
and the mire is rife: with minimis thriving,
krill-creaturely kinds of plankton,
with embryonic animalcula
at their feast of filths; feeding, battenng.
Its sweats swelter, the swamp-mosshags
humming with humours; the heats brooding
in queachy quags quicken to frissoning
eggs underground. An urgent drive,
for a spell, spurs them.

Spores are stirring
awake to sprout in their weird springtide;
pollen pullulates to the pulse of the Moon:
cells seedbedded. These seminal motes,
cocooned kernels, chrysalises,
shake in their swaddlings: shoot spicules forth,
chaffhusks chinking as chits are hatching
from bulging orbs, with bats' squeakings,
in throbbing throes. Threadlets burgeon
to knosplike nebs, whose nipples spires
unfurl feelers with fanning strands
and barbs burrow from the umbilical stalk;
spikes spawn outwards, their spidery talons
sneaking snakewise.

Snail-horn probings
that creep and recoil then crawl anew
reach runners out with ramifying
antenna-twiglets that tillow again:

Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

look how alike the lightning-flash
to the pattern printed, its repeating figure
izzard-emblems in the angled forks
of vein-branches against the varves' blackness,
pairing, parting: puny scions
like marbling maggots, the murky clods
riddled with roothairs, wriggling vivers,
weevils delving worm-farm layers
and rifted vugs. The ravelled suckers
flex flossing wide, in flower-whorling
trees topdownward, their tufted plumes
glairy gauzes like gossamer skeins
of squirming thongs.

Squirreltail, thistledown-
filigree fibres are fronding tassels,
twisting, twining; the twirling bines
will splay and split, then splice oscules
as tentacular reticulating
chenille nervures. Thus the node-weaving
germs engender a giant ganglion
cat's-cradlewise, a mercurial web.
Lobe knits to lobe, as a loom shuttles
a weft-texture, the wiry members
tendrill-tissued: a teeming polyp,
quicksilver-quarl. By quetch and spasm
the molten mass is mapped in darkness;
leviathan-vast.

It is vivifying;
inhales and heaves: a heart panting,
a brain beating, or as breathing lungs
work the entrails; and wavering sobs
retch restlessly. With rippling surges
the sprawling globe spreads still farther
by ceaseless seethings, circulating
its lymphs and ichors; till in labour-pangs
its ballooning shape dilates warping;
the mesh morphing is transmogrified.
With thrilling shudders it thrusts aloft,
climbs in corkscrews up to the cloaking sward:
fat fruitbodies force through the turves.

From shaded taths shapes come pricking;
grope over grass. The growths teeming
are bald and gibbous; bulbs are swollen,
puffball-like pods whose pimpled membranes
are groined with gills: glabrous-wattled,
blanched blubberflesh, bloated organs,
limbs lepercankered, of lazar-scurfy
sepulchral pallor are poking upwards
from cadaverous depths

—Dead Men's Fingers;
Sickenning Milkgall,

New Series 4, Fall, 2024:

Sallow Puckfist,
Bearded Bellywark;
Bugs' Agaricus,
Dwarrow Dwalecup,
Dwimmer-Goblet;
Skewbald Hoodwink,
the Scaly Funnel;
Phantom Fangteeth,
Fool's Punktinder,
the lewd Stinkhorn,
Loathly Earthshank;
Coven's Cockleloaf;
Carrion-Parasol,
Wormy Skullcap,
Witches' Nipple,
Corpses' Candles,
Cowlswathed Deathshead,
the Charnel Bonnet;
Chilly Waxglove,
Squires-and-Beldames,
Squeamish Dungtuft—
squame-warted squabs squeeze in sending
stems stiffly out. Staves like truncheons
unsheathe their shafts to show helmets,
raise round bucklers with rimmed umbos;
espy their spears: a spectral levy
troops the gardens. Their targes serried,
they parade in rings, ranks of circled
midnight-mustering homunculi
corpse-coifed in hoods and clinging veils,
wan weaponedmen in winding-sheet
and coffin-costume accoutrements
lift lances high, lock the shieldwall—
earthborn armies. From under the ground
—the reek of decay— rotting scarecrows
advance in onslaught, an invading horde,
wraiths risen again arrayed for battle
in dark dreamings dawn breaks shattering
their feinted front fade, melt, blurring
to stipes like straw ...the stuff of shadows
that dwindles to dust. The day broadens
on wilting culms and caps withering
we can tell are but —toadstools.

Nekyia

Autumn Toadstools

It is the time of Samhain's
Cross-Quarter feast: Calends of Winter
and the season's end. From the Summer uplands
they drive the herds. Now the darker half
—the Sun's in Scorpion, sinking early—
of The Year opens, from Yule till Springtide's
Beltaine brightness, with the blossom of May;
and on this Day of the Dead, dolmens open



Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

ajar their jaws. On jambs like menhirs
—great grey longstones— of the greedy mouths
of the humped barrows hived with chambers,
on their sarsen kerbs, the silvered spirals
—sidewinding swirls, Sun’s wheel-annules,
chevron, lozenge— shine like snailtracks,
hoarfrost mirroring the Hunter’s Moon.
The King of Planets declines at twilight;
the Red Warrior roams the Goatfish.

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They set up the firedrill. Flame else is quenched.
On the day of Samhain the dawn sunbeam
shall pierce the portals. They prepare the wake.
Force-fires alight, with fumes they bless
the bairns and beasts, and the bright embers
hasten deasil to hearth and torch.
On window-ledge, west-facing door,
guard goggle-eyed gruesome baubles;
thresholds are thronged; enthroned on sills,
snubnosed or snout- or snaggle-toothed,
scalp scooped-empty scarecrow-faces,
hollow headpieces with hideous grins:
turnip-sconces. The tapers smile
in the carved grimace, candles making
glaring sockets glowing peepers.

Hallowe'en

With such punkie-lanterns, apparelled as ghosts,
or by feather-garments or in fishing-nets
both bare and clothed (to baffle the spirits),
gangs of guisers go dance their rounds
trick-or-treating, to try their luck
—skullfaced skeklers, skeleton-mummers—
from door to door, with doggerel catches
to the tongs and bones and the tabor-whistle
for fuel and food for the festal banquet
of apple-bobbing, auguries read
from hazel-nuts amid horns of mead;
and meat for the Manes: milk, grain and honey.
Reechy rushlights and roasting smells
herald them homeward to the hall of feasting;
but in the noman’s-lands —numb, footstepless
fence and carfax, crossroads and ford—
restless the wraiths may ride the winds,
hunt haunting the trees.

* * *