A Field Guide to Alliterative Verse

By Paul D. Deane

Getting Oriented

So. You found this site while surfing the net; you poked around a bit, and here you are. Perhaps you are an accomplished (or aspiring) poet looking for pointers. Perhaps you just love poetry and want to learn. Perhaps you are just curious.

In any case. Pull up your sleeves and get ready to dig deep: this is a tour through the nether reaches of the language. Or to mix metaphors: get out your wrenches. This guide is all about the nuts and bolts of alliterative poetry for those who like to tinker. To be precise: this is a field guide to alliterative poetry. When you are done reading it you will have a much clearer idea what alliterative poetry is, how it compares to other types of poetry, how it was done long ago in such poems as Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and (most important of all) how to write it yourself.

But why, you may ask, should I write poetry in some strange, unusual style? What is the benefit to me as a poet, or to those who read it? That is the first topic I will cover.

The Lay of the Land

There are two major approaches to poetry in English: **traditional**, and **modernist**:

- Traditional poetry carefully regulates the rhythm of its language, and feels free to use rhyme schemes and other formal devices. A traditional poem could never be mistaken for prose. Its structured form sets it apart from ordinary writing or spoken conversation. The sonnet, the ballad, iambic pentameter -- these are the molds into which language and experience are poured.
- Modernist poetry (and by this I include a very wide range of styles and schools) tries to get very close to the natural sound of the speaking voice. It eschews any obvious use of rhyme, is careful to avoid what it considers over-regularity of rhythm, and avoids "poetic language" like the plague. Its trademark is a concern with authentically presenting the poet's inner experiences as directly as possible.

Two examples, both well known poems, might help to pin down the difference. Consider William Blake's "Tyger":

Tyger, tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thy eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder and what art
Could twist the sinews of the heart?
And, when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand and what dread feet?

What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?

What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?

Tyger, tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Now, contrast the opening lines of William Carlos Williams' "The Mental Hospital Garden" --

It is far to Assisi,
but not too far:
Over this garden,
brooding over this garden,
there is a kindly spirit,
brother to the poor
and who is poorer than he
who is in love
when birds are nesting
in the spring of the year?
They came
to eat from his hand
who had nothing
and yet
from his plenty
he fed them all.

This is free verse, and it is marked by an absence of rhyme, a rhythm so flexible that it threatens to disappear, and a very straightforward voice, a voice you could easily imagine hearing whispering in the back of your mind ... *One could say that the difference between formal and free verse, at its most extreme, is the difference between incantation and meditation.*

Arguments between proponents of free verse and formal verse usually focus around issues like the following:

- Proponents of free verse argue that formal verse tends to constrain the phrasing in ways that make it unnatural and artificial; that overuse of mechanisms like rhyme and regular rhythm makes for verse but not for true poetry. Ultimately, formal verse simply seems overly artificial, a game as it were, to those who favor "freer" uses of language.
- Proponents of formal verse, on the other hand, argue that the discipline of writing within a form improves the poem, by forcing much greater care in the choice of words; they celebrate the texture of rhyme and rhythm, the way the careful organization of sound and sense strikes the ear. For them, the apparent loss of freedom in word choice is overbalanced by the beauty of rhyme and rhythm and the subtle effects of carefully structured artistry.

Now, if I had to choose, I would side with the formal poets. I have little sympathy with the modernist aversion to artifice and structure. And yet ... the wholesale abandonment of traditional poetic form reflects something more than a fashion, in my view. It is as if there were a dissatisfaction with the traditional rhythms, and a groping toward something different. Some of the rhythms that work well in the best free verse poems would be hard to achieve in traditional iambic pentameter.

This is where alliterative verse comes in. Alliterative verse is poetry which uses alliteration -- repetition of consonant sounds (or more precisely, syllable onsets, since vowels alliterate with vowels) -- as its primary organizing principal. It is the style of much older poetry, from the Middle Ages back. There has been a small revival of interest in alliterative verse in the past century, but most people do not even know what it is, much less appreciate its potential. Alliterative verse, done well, offers much of the rhythmic freedom of free verse (without dissolving into prose as free verse tends to do) and yet it is a strict form, offering pleasure to the ear and pattern for the poet to exploit for effect.

The following example illustrates what I mean. It is from C.S. Lewis' poem, "The Nameless Isle":

... ahead, far on
Like floor unflawed, the flood, moon-bright
Stretched forth the twinkling streets of ocean
To the rim of the world. No ripple at all
Nor foam was found, save the furrow we made,
The stir at our stern, and the strong cleaving
Of the throbbing prow. We thrust so swift,
Moved with magic, that a mighty curve
Upward arching from either bow
Rose, all rainbowed; as a rampart stood
Bright about us. As the book tells us,
Walls of water, and a way between
Were reared and rose at the Red Sea ford,
On either hand, when Israel came
Out of Egypt to their own country.

This is verse; it has a powerful, beating rhythm; yet the rhythm is amazingly flexible. We have lines that can be read as a simple one-two beat:

like FLOOR unFLAWED the FLOOD moon BRIGHT

and lines that switch rhythm halfway through:

MOVED with MAGic, that a MIGHTy CURVE

and lines with what is called clashing stress - two strong stressed syllables in a row, something that is generally avoided in traditional English poetry.

the STIR at our STERN, and the STRONG CLEAVing

And this flexibility means a lot: it means that the poet can stay close to natural rhythms, and natural phrasings, without drifting into prose.

In other words, it's potentially the best of both worlds: a form of poetry that is unmistakeably verse, rhythmic, a music in the ear, yet which has much of the flexibility of free verse. In what follows, I will try to explain in detail what alliterative verse is, and how to write it.

Building Poetry with Phrases

Most poetic how-to manuals start with syllables and feet and tell you how to write a line of verse. But in the kind of poetry we are exploring, neither syllables nor lines are basic. What really matter

are phrases: a special kind of phrase containing two natural heavy beats. In poems like Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, every line contains two of them; so they are often called half-lines or (more technically) hemistiches. But all they are, really, are phrases: ordinary phrases of the kind we use in conversation all the time. The best poetry always builds from simple, familiar language, and so it is here.

Consider the opening lines from my translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:

> *The siege and assault having ceased at Troy*
> *as its blazing battlements blackened to ash,*
> *the man who had planned and plotted that treason*
> *had trial enough for the truest traitor!*
> *Then Aeneas the prince and his honored line*
> *plundered provinces and held in their power*
> *nearly all the wealth of the western isles.*

Each of these lines naturally falls into two halves:

> *The siege and assault*
> > *having ceased at Troy*
> *as its blazing battlements*
> > *blackened to ash,*
> *the man who had planned*
> > *and plotted that treason*
> *had trial enough*
> > *for the truest traitor!*
> *Then Aeneas the prince*
> > *and his honored line*
> *plundered provinces*
> > *and held in their power*
> *nearly all the wealth*
> > *of the western isles.*

These phrases, or half-lines are fundamental to alliterative poetry. They are the basic building blocks. The very first thing you must do when writing this sort of poem is to learn to think in phrases. Later I will go into more detail about how such phrases are built. (Not just any phrase will do.) For now, just notice how these phrases, or half-lines, always seem to have two strong beats in them, though the number of syllables and the exact rhythm varies quite a bit.

Using phrases as its basic building block is something alliterative verse has in common with many kinds of free verse. If there is an advantage in building from organic units of meaning – and such phrases are by definition – then alliterative verse has that advantage.

Alliteration: Linking Half-Lines Together
Let's take two random half lines, and just stick them together, like this:

> *an army was fleeing into deep jungle*

Two such half-lines, as they stand, are almost indistinguishable from prose. If we were writing free verse, that would not, perhaps, matter too much. But what we are discussing is structured verse, not free verse, and it needs to have a clearly measured rhythm, and a pattern which creates a kind of momentum as the poem is read aloud. And alliteration is the device used to measure out this rhythm.

What is alliteration? Essentially, alliteration is repetition of sounds that start important syllables -- typically, consonants. For example, we could change the first half line above to make it alliterate, like this:

> *an army was driven into deep jungle*

The alliterating consonant is D. The repetition of this consonant at the start of driven and deep ties the two half lines together, increases emphasis on these two key words, and builds a stronger rhythm.

By the way, we would still get alliteration if we did it like this:

> *an army was driven into the Outback*

In this case, 'army' and 'outback' are the important alliterating words. They alliterate precisely because they both start with vowels.

Rules for Alliteration

But it's very important to be clear what counts as alliteration and what does not. There are several common misconceptions. So let's clear them up and add a few other important facts.

- Proper alliteration is NOT a repetition of letters, it is a repetition of sounds. For example, *fish* and *physics* alliterate because they begin with the same consonant sound (*f*) - even though the initial letters are different. Conversely, *tin* and *thin* do not alliterate, because they begin with different consonant sounds, even though they start with the same letter.
- Alliteration is **NOT** just repeating consonant sounds at the beginning of words. What matters is the strongest, stressed syllable of a word. The only consonant which counts is the one that starts the syllable with strongest stress. For example, *below the belt* is **NOT** a good alliteration, because stress naturally falls on the second syllable of *below*, so you would have to alliterate on *l* not on *b*. On the other hand, *above the belt* **is** a good alliteration, because the stressed syllables both start with <u>b</u>.
- Vowels alliterate with other vowels. For example, a phrase like *ultimate evil* alliterates because both stressed syllables start with a vowel.

Some special cases:

- In the best usage, the consant **s** (when followed immediately by a vowel) does **NOT** alliterate with the consonant clusters *sp*, *st*, or *sk*, or with similar but distinct sounds like *sh*.
- In some older forms of alliterative poetry, words starting with *h* alliterate with words starting with a vowel. This doesn't work in my dialect of English, which never drops an *h*. You will need to judge this point for yourself.

Rhythm: Lifts and Dips

So far we have not talked about rhythm. But alliterative verse has its own characteristic rhythm, perhaps even (depending how you define such terms) its own meter.

In traditional formal poetry, we analyse the rhythm and meter by marking accented and unaccented syllables, like this:

> / x / x x / x / x /
> *let me not to the marriage of true minds*

> x /x /x / / x / x
> *admit impediments. Love is not love*

> x / x / x / x / x /
> *that alters when it alteration finds ...*

What matters in traditional formal verse is the alternation between (relatively) weak and (relatively) strong syllables. These famous lines of Shakespeare's illustrate how it works:

Accent is purely relative. Syllables like "let", "not", and "of" are very weak, but they count as accents when the syllables around them are even weaker. Conversely, "true" is a strongly stressed syllable, but it counts as unaccented because the next syllable, "minds", is even stronger.

The arrangement of accented and unaccented syllables falls into a regular pattern, with only occasional exceptions. In this case the pattern is what in traditional poetry is called iambic: an even alternation of one unaccented followed by one accented syllable. Moreover, the number of accents stays the same from line to line: in this case, there are five accents per line, so that the meter is what is traditionally called iambic pentameter.

The usual way of analysing traditional metrical poetry is to divide the line into feet which mark the regular alternation of accented and unaccented syllables. For example, the first line of the quote from Shakespeare can be divided into five feet, like this:

let me | not to | the mar- | riage of | true minds

Alliterative verse has rhythmic patterns too, but they are fundamentally different in nature. Consider the following (hypothetical) line of alliterative verse:

He was hard-hearted, both hateful and cruel.

We have here two half lines:

he was hard-hearted,
both hateful and cruel

Moreover, we can identify strong and weak portions of each half line:

(weak) (strong) (strong) (weak)
he was HARD HEART – ed

(weak) (strong) (weak) (strong)
both   HATE - ful and CRUEL.

Notice at once several things which distinguish alliterative verse from traditional metrical verse:

We do not have a regular alternation between accented and unaccented syllables. The strong syllables can appear back to back, or separated by one, two or (potentially) even more weak syllables. The number and arrangement of weak syllables is variable (though not arbitrary, as we shall see.) But the basic pattern of alliterative verse is associate with the strong syllables:

- The strong syllables are naturally strong syllables; the weak syllables are naturally weak syllables. We do not as a general rule see weak words like "of" or "to" treated as if they bore emphasis.
- The number of strong syllables per half line is strictly regulated: in general, as in this case, there are two.
- The pattern of alliteration only applies to the strong syllables.

We need terms for the strong and weak elements in alliterative verse so we will not confuse them with the accented and unaccented elements in traditional metrical verse. So let us adopt the following terms (traditionally used in some scholarly circles) --

- a **lift** is one of the strongly stressed parts of an alliterative line, whilea **dip** is one of the weak parts of an alliterative line.

So we can divide each half line into lifts and dips; for example:

> *(dip) (lift)   (lift) (dip)*
> *he was | hard | heart | -ed*

> *(dip) (lift) (dip)   (lift)*
> *both | hate | -ful and | cruel*

All the rules for alliterative verse are rules for lifts, dips, and how they can be arranged. In sections to follow we will explore some of these rules.

- **Note:** Some scholars use "thesis" instead of "lift" and "arsis" instead of "dip", especially when talking about Anglo-Saxon poems like Beowulf. I will restrict myself to "lift" and "dip" except when discussing Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, which has its own special rules.

What Makes a Strong Stress

I said in the last section that the lifts and dips of alliterative verse consisted of syllables that were naturally   or weak. Now we need to explain what that means. First, and most important, we need to consider three sources of emphasis:

- Word-internal Prominence
- Grammatical prominence
- Rhythmic prominence
- Word-internal Prominence

Every English word of two or more syllables has what is called a *primary lexical stress* - a syllable that is naturally the loudest and most prominent within the word. For example, the capitalized syllables in the following words all bear primary lexical stress:

- *deSTROY*
- *CAPtain*
- *CAPital*
- *recapITulate*
- *STANDardize*

The first rule is obvious enough:

- *Prefer to make a syllable a lift if it is either a single syllable contnet word, like "man" or "dog", or else bears primary lexical stress.*

However, other degrees of stress within a word play a role. At least four distinguishable levels of stress can be identified within a word. Take, for example, a word like *faintheartedness*. The strongest stress is on *faint*, the next strongest is on *heart*, then there is very weak stress on *-ness*, while *-ed* is completely unstressed. The strongest stress is traditionally called **primary stress**, the second level is generally called **secondary stress**, while the weakest degree of stressing is sometimes called **tertiary stress** (or else lumped together with secondary stress.)

Secondary stress is the stress you get on the second word of a compound, e.g., the stress on *bird* in *blackbird*, or on *heart* in *fainthearted*. For some purposes we can group together primary and secondary stress as **root stress** -- the basic stress that goes on root words, in contrast to the lighter stresses that go on prefixes and suffixes. In other words, fainthearted has two root stresses, while polysyllabicity has but one.

While the primary stress is usually the one that becomes a lift, other stresses cannot be ignored.

Grammatical Prominence

While many monosyllables can be lifts, not all can. Some of them, such as "of" or "the" can never be lifts. They are always part of a dip. That is because the following rule applies:

- *Prefer to make a syllable a lift if the word that contains it is grammatically important.*

Grammatical importance only really attaches to stresses on the roots of grammatically important words. These root stresses are in many ways the anchors around which alliterative meter is organized.

In practice, this means that we have to pay attention to the parts of speech. The grammatically important words are the content words. Nouns and adjectives tend to be the most important; verbs and adverbs can also play a key role. On the other hand, the least important words are the little ones, the so-called function words, such as articles (*a, the*) -- conjunctions (*and, or*) -- and prepositions (*of, on, for*). Function words are almost never used alone; they function to introduce or modify the main content words of the sentence and have little force or emphasis by themselves. The following pattern results:

- The primary lexical stress of nouns and adjectives almost always count as lifts (the same with one-syllable nouns and adjectives (in Old English the adjectivals include participles and infinitive forms of verbs).
- The primary lexical stress (or the single stressed syllable) of verbs and adverbs will count as lifts if there is no stronger stress right next to them.
- Some function words – primarily pronouns – can be stressed for special emphasis and are lifts when so stressed.
- Other function words, including articles, possessive adjectives, auxiliary verbs, and most prepositions, can hardly ever be lifts, but must be part of a dip (except for a few special patterns where nothing else is available with stronger stress.)

Rhythmic prominence

Finally, the actual rhythm is important. Words and syllables fall naturally into rhythms in which some elements are stronger, or more prominent, than others. Poetry organizes the rhythms, but the rhythms themselves are based on the natural flow of speech.

At the lowest level, we can observe a rise and fall of accent every few syllables, and we can group the syllables based on that alternation. We call the rises accents or on-beats; the weaker syllables are the off-beats. The first sentence in this paragraph illustrates this natural rhythm:

> *AT the LOWest LEvel, WE can obSERVE a RISE and FALL of AC- cent EV- ery FEW SYLlables, and WE can GROUP the SYL- lables BASED on that ALter- NAtion.*

Even though this isn't poetry, we can easily hear the on-beats and the off-beats, and it is almost as easy to group the syllables into feet (an on-beat paired with one or two off-beats.)

But the organization of rhythm doesn't end there. All of the syllables in a sentence tend to group into small phrases, about the length of a long word. Some of them are words, others are a cluster of words that can be pronounced together as if they were a single word. Linguists term these *prosodic words*. Each prosodic word has a single strong stress, plus weaker accents and unaccented syllables grouped around it. We can divide a sentence into prosodic words like this:

> *at the LOWest*
> *Level*
> *we can ob SERVE*
> *a RISE*
> *and FALL*
> *of Accent*

> *every few SYLlables*
> *and we can GROUP*
> *the SYLlables*
> *BASED on*
> *that ALternation*

The strongest stress in a prosodic word is sometimes called the **head stress**.

Prosodic words can be grouped in turn into larger units, **prosodic phrases** defined by rhythm not strictly by grammar. Prosodic phrases generally contain two or three prosodic words, like this:

> *at the lowest level*
> *we can observe*
> *a rise and fall of accent*
> *every few syllables*
> *and we can group the syllables*
> *based on that alternation*

Alliterative verse is based very closely on the prosodic word and the prosodic phrase. The basic relationship is fairly obvious:

- A half-line of alliterative verse must be a prosodic phrase.
- The strong, alliterating stresses of alliterative verse must be the strong, central stress around which a prosodic word is built.

Putting the various constraints together, we can define strong stresses as used in alliterative verse in the following way:

A strong stress is a syllable which meets the following description:

- *It is the primary stress of a polysyllable, or a stressed monosyllable.*
- *It is the root stress of a content word, typically a noun or adjective.*
- *It is the head stress of a prosodic word.*

Strong stresses have to be lifts, and typically alliterate. Not all lifts in a line of alliterative verse will be strong stresses, but the strong stresses are critical -- they are like the pivots around which the line is built.

We shall see shortly how these rules are applied. But some other subjects must be addressed first, in particular the concept of *resolution*.

Syllable Weight and Resolution

When we talk about lifts, just about everything that affects the perceived strength of a syllable matters. Even alliteration can be described as a way to add emphasis to the lifts in a half-line. For this reason, the structure of the syllable also matters. In particular, in English (and other stress-based languages) there is a very strong connection between stress and the structure of syllables. A simple way to illustrate the fact is to take a long word like confidentiality and break it up into syllables:

> *con fi den ti al i ty*

Three syllables are **closed** (i.e., they end with a consonant): *con*, *den*, and *al*; four syllables are *open* (i.e., they end at the vowel): *fi*, *ti*, *i*, and *ty*. It is no accident that the three closed syllables are more strongly stressed than the open syllables. The "heavier" a syllable is (i.e., the more there is in the syllable after the vowel) the more prominent it seems, and the more likely it is to attract stress.

We can set up a scale, from the lightest to the heaviest types of syllables, as follows:

(lightest)
- Open syllables (syllables ending in a simple vowel): *pa, huh*.
- Closed syllables (syllables ending with a single consonant): *hat, bag*.
- Open syllables with a diphthong (historically, long vowels and diphthongs): *boy, how*.
- Heavy syllables: syllables ending with diphthong plus consonant or more than one consonant: house, *noise, horse, bold, band, bank*
(heaviest)

Given the way English works, there is a very strong tendency for lifts to be heavy (or at least closed) syllables. And there are some special things that happen with stressed, open syllables. Consider the following examples:

> *He is a big man.*
> *He is a little man.*

The word little consists of a stressed, open syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. And it practically trips off the tongue: rhythmically, it takes about the same amount of time to say "big man" as it does to say "little man". What this means is that rhythmically, we can treat words like little or sudden as the equivalent of a single heavy syllable. Take a pair of hypothetical half lines like the following:

> *one who lives by the sword*
> *will meet swift death*

Notice how the lifts are all closed or heavy syllables: lives, sword, meet, swift. But in terms of Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter, the following pair of half lines are rhythmically equivalent:

> *one who lives as a savage*
> *will meet sudden death*

In short, a lift doesn't have to be a single syllable. It can also be a two-syllable combination like sudden or savage, where the first syllable is open and stressed, and the second syllable is unstressed. This is called *resolution* since the pair of syllables are resolved or treated as if they were a single heavy syllable.

In Anglo-Saxon, where there was a distinction between long and short syllables, long syllables could not be resolved; long vowels behaved just like diphthongs. In modern English, the notion of vowel length doesn't make any sense (though syllable heaviness does.) So it's a practical question whether resolution is a real phenomenon in modern English. In my own writing of alliterative poetry, I started without any sense that resolution was possible, but over time I have begun to feel its effects, and have gradually concluded that resolution is a real rhythmic pattern. Sequences like *savage, sudden, little* ... these seem to have a special rhythmic quality. But we can wait till we analyse real examples of alliterative poetry to worry about it. For now, we should simply add the concepts of heavy syllable and resolution to our list of concepts. Both will be useful later.

Secondary Stress; Strong and Weak Dips

At this point we have almost finished pulling together a list of the major elements of alliterative poetry - the pieces out of which patterns are built. We have a fairly clear idea of what makes a lift; it now remains to draw some distinctions among dips. There is a widespread impression that in alliterative poetry the dips do not matter, that any number and arrangement of unaccented syllables may be placed between the strong stresses in the line. That does not appear to have been true at all -- there are rules about the content and placement of unaccented syllables.

Or to put it another way: not all dips are created equal. The following hypothetical pairs of half-lines will help make my point clearer:

> *harm followed horror;*
> > *after heartbreak, war;*
>
> *for the king was killed*
> > *and his crown broken*

The half-lines may be analysed as follows:

> *(lift)   (dip)   (lift)   (dip)*
> *HARM | followed | HORR | or,*

> *(dip)   (lift)   (dip)   (lift)*
> *after | HEART | break, | WAR;*

> *(dip)   (lift)   (dip) (lift)*
> *for the | KING | was KILLED*

> *(dip)   (lift)   (lift)   (dip)*
> *and his | CROWN | BROK- | en*

The difference between the dips should be almost palpable. The one-syllable dips are hardly audible. The two-syllable dips give the rhythm a swing; and the presence of secondary stress, as in "followed" and "break", has a slowing, retarding effect.

   Let us adopt the following terms:

- **a weak dip** -- a dip containing exactly one unstressed syllable(*was* in *was killed*, *-en in broken*)
- **a long dip** -- a dip containing two or more syllables(*for the*, *and his*, *followed*, *after*)
- **a strong (or heavy) dip** -- a dip containing a potential lift (i.e., a heavy syllable or else a lighter syllable with primary lexical stress.)(*followed*, *break*)

The concepts of long, strong, and weak dip are common in scholarly discussions of alliterative poetry, though the distinction between long and strong dips is not always strictly maintained, mostly because in Old and Middle English, strong dips are generally long. Dips that are both long and heavy (i.e., multiple-syllable dips containing a secondary stress) are important in Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse. What is not so clear is whether one syllable heavy dips have any independent role. I think they do and will explain how in later installments.

In any case, though, we now have all the tools we need to analyse the rhythm and sound structure of alliterative verse. Alliterative poems are not all alike: different rhythms are possible, and different ways to measure out the rhythm. So let us now examine some of the ways that verse can be built around strong stresses.

Alliterative Meters: Historical and Modern

   At this point I have to set out some important caveats. My primary expertise, both as a poet and a linguist, concerns modern English. I do not consider myself a specialist in older forms of English. And indeed, my interest in alliterative verse focuses on the possibility of writing alliterative poetry in modern English, not in establishing the precise details of older forms of English (or any other language.) I think I have gotten a fairly accurate picture of alliterative verse from my reading in the scholarly literature. But I will leave detailed explanations of exactly how medieval poetry worked to the specialists. What follows

is intended first and foremost as a poet's guide to writing similar verse in modern English. That means that much of what I say in following sections has to be read in a double light. I will try, as much as possible, to make what I say applicable to the older, medieval forms. But I will feel free to offer my opinion about points of detail based upon my assessment of what works for a poet writing at the turn of the second millenium.

In other words: what follows is my best personal summary of how medieval alliterative poets would have composed their poems if they were writing in English right now.

As part of that process I will evaluate various poets who have imitated alliterative verse or claimed it as an inspiration. It turns out only a few of the poets who have attempted modern alliterative verse have come close to the classic medieval forms. Much of the work that claims to be inspired by Anglo-Saxon or medieval alliterative verse is a very loose imitation indeed. But more of that anon.

Being Like Beowulf: the Sievers Types

When people talk about alliterative verse, they usually mean Beowulf. It is the most familiar piece of alliterative poetry, at least for speakers of English, who often encounter it in school (at least for a week or so during a quick survey of British literature.) So that is what we will start with.

A 19th Century scholar, Eduard Sievers, came up with the classical description of the rhythm of Beowulf and other Anglo-Saxon poems. He observed that the half-lines of Old English poetry come in five basic rhythms. The following proverb-like little poem illustrates the five types:

Pride and anger brought pain and loss, and hate festered. Hell's masterpiece overwhelmed all.

- **Type A: Lift-Dip, Lift-Dip**
  For example: *pride and anger*
- **Type B: Dip-Lift, Dip-Lift**
  For example: *brought pain and loss,*
- **Type C: Dip-Lift, Lift-Dip**
  For example: *and hate festered.*
- **Type D: Lift, Lift-Dip, Dip (with a secondary stress distinguishing the first dip from the second)**
  For example: *Hell's masterpiece*
- **Type E: Lift-Dip-Dip-Lift (with a secondary stress distinguising the first dip from the second)**
  For example: *overwhelmed all.*

Note that types D and E are analyzed as having two dips in sequence, NOT as having one long dip. There are many reasons for this that I can't go into here, but basically, each Old English half line MUST have four syllables, two stressed (to fill the lift positions) and two unstressed or weakly stressed (to fill the dip positions) In types D and E, the only way we know the two syllables are filling different metrical positions, is if one of the is unstressed, and the other one carries secondary stress.

These are the basic rhythms; there are variations on them, but nearly every line of Beowulf fits into these five types and a small set of normal variations.

The Meter of Beowulf: Variants of the Five Types

While there are five basic types in Sievers' description of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, that is not the end of the story. There are quite a few variations allowed. We will talk about the principles which allow (or disallow) the variation later; first we need to know what patterns are possible. I will provide both modern English and Old English examples (using bolding to represent lifts and acute accents to represent syllable length, since HTML does not yet support the normal representation of long vowels.)

Sievers numbers the types, as follows:

Type A (lift-dip-lift-dip)

- **A1 (PROUD and PASSIONate, SUDDENly SINGing, PROUDer than a PEAcock etc.)**

This is the standard A type of half-line. The lifts can be single long stressed syllables, or they can be resolved, as in most of the half-line types listed here. The first dip can be strong; the second dip must be a single unaccented syllable.
　　Old English examples:
　　gomban gylden
　　wéox under wolcnum
　　wonsceaft wera
　　sceaþena þréatum
　　fréowine folca

- **A2 (neither AGE nor WISdom, if HEARTS are HARDened, nor SEEK after FORtune, etc.)**

This is an extended type. The presence of an extra one or two syllables before the first lift is termed anacrusis, so this is "type A with anacrusis". In Anglo-Saxon, type A2 is very limited -- most of the extra syllables are grammatically required prefixes like ge- or be- or enclitics like negative ne. In a modern imitation of Anglo-Saxon verse, type A2 should (in my opinion) be avoided like the plague, as too many A2 lines fundamentally change the meter, and make it sound like iambic verse. In general, anacrusis works best in the first half line, where the extra syllables start the line.
　　Old English examples:
　　gehéde under heofenum
　　gewát þá ofer wæ'gholm
　　ongeat þá se góda
　　ne gewéox hé him tó willan

- **A3 (SO that he will SEE us, BUT not in WINTer, etc.)**

This variant is a source of controversy. The modern consensus is that type A3 only has one lift, preceded by a long string of weak syllables, typically grammatical function words. Sievers treated the initial word as stressed: SO that he will SEE us, BUT not in WINTer. But alliteration falls on the strong stress; the initial weak syllable need not alliterate.
　　　Old English examples:
　　þæt hé þone bréostwylm
　　ðá wæs on burgum
　　nó ðý æ'r hé þone healsbéah

Type B (dip-lift-dip-lift)
　　(brought PAIN and LOSS, was GIVEN much GRACE,
　　neither TIME nor TIDE etc.)
　　Standard type B, with or without resolution. The first dip can be strong; the second must be a single unaccented syllable.
　　　Old English examples:
　　　on sídne sæ'
　　　thurh sídne sefan
　　　siþðan grimme gripe

þenden *wordum wéold*

Type C (dip-lift-lift-dip)

- **C1 (they were FAINT-HEARTed, were MADE CAPTive, this SUDDEN IMpulse, after HARD LABOR, etc.)**

Standard type C, with or without resolution. The first dip can be strong; the second must be a single unaccented syllable.

Old English examples:

þá wiþ *Gode wunn*on
mid *scíp-herg*e
over *hron-rád*e
gyf him *ed-wend*en

- **C2 (a DARK PREsence, his HEART BItter, what they SEEK EVer, etc.)**

This variant involves what is technically called suspension of resolution. Normally, a word like presence or bitter would be resolved and treated as a lift. But in this case, the short stressed syllable counts as the lift, the syllable after it, as the final dip. As before, the first dip may be either weak or strong.

Old English examples:

druncon *wín wer*as
in *gear-dag*um
þæt wæs *gód cyn*ing

Type D (lift-lift-dip-dip)

- **D1 (SAD SONGwriters, HALF-SKILLfully etc.)**

This is standard type D. The dip must contain a secondary stress; in this variant, it is the first element in the dip.

Old English examples:

*wís wélþ*ungen
*heall heor*udréore
*betst bead*orinca
*lindhæbb*ende
*gúðfrem*mendra
*andswar*ode

- **D2 (BOLD BREADwinners, etc.)**

The secondary stress in the dip is a single short accented syllable, with suspension of resolution.

Old English examples:

*stéap stán*hliðo
*léof land*fruma

- **D3 (HALF-WILLingly, etc.)**

As in C2, the second lift is a single short accented syllable, with suspension of resolution.
Old English examples:
þéodcyninga
eorðcyninges

- **D4 (DARK DREARiness, SAVAGE SENTiments, FAINTHEARTedness, etc.)**

This is the second common variant of type D, along with D1. The dip must contain a secondary stress; in this variant, it is the last element in the dip.
Old English examples:
bád bolgenmód
eal inneweard
micel morgenswég
hár hilderinc
bát bánlocan

- **D5 (EVil ELements, SOOTHing CERTainties, ANGry ATtitudes etc.)**

Like types D1 or D4, with the addition of an extra syllable between the two lifts.
Old English Examples:
réþe renweardas
burston bánlocan
síde sæ'næssas

Type E (lift-dip-dip-lift)

- **E1 (SONGwriters SING, HARD-hearted MEN, etc.)**

This is standard type E, with a secondary stress in the dip.
Old English Examples:
féascaftum men
folcwaldan sunu
wlitebeorhtne wang
mancynne fram
heteníðas wæg

- **E2 (LEARN ever LESS, THOUGHTfully SANG, etc.)**

The secondary stress is a single short accented syllable, with suspension of resolution.
Old English examples:
Súð-Dena folc
láðlicu lác

As this list illustrates, Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse allows a very wide range of rhythms indeed. But not just any rhythm. To write a modern analog of Anglo-Saxon verse, it's important to understand the principles that govern it. And so that is what we will look at next.

The Meter of Beowulf: A Framework

By this time you may be thinking that all of this is hopelessly complicated. Yet, like many other things, the complications are superficial, and there is a clear pattern underneath.

There is hardly space here to go through all the philological theories, and many of them are of little use to the practicing poet, so I will present a framework partly derived from scholarly views, partly based upon theories I have developed to guide my own composition. If you want to explore the academic literature, some of the best-known modern accounts are those of Thomas Cable and Geoffrey Russom.

It should be fairly obvious that Anglo-Saxon poets did not learn complicated scholarly theories when they learned to produce alliterative verse. They must have learned a few simple rules, then picked up the details the way poets do today: by example, by ear, by learning what works and what does not. That means, in turn, that most of the complications in alliterative verse have to be complications in the way rhythm works, and not complications in the rules that poets consciously followed when they put their verses together.

It is easy to imagine someone learning the following rules:

A line of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse is metrically correct if it meets the following constraints:

- *Each line contains two half-lines. Each half line must be a prosodic phrase containing one or more strong stresses (as defined in an earlier section of this manual.)*
- *Only strong stresses can bear (metrically relevant) alliteration.*
- *The first strong stress in the first half-line must alliterate with the first strong stress in the second half-line.*
- *Let us use the word pivot for one of the strong stresses that satisfy the metrical requirements for alliteration. The pivots must be more prominent rhythmically than any non-pivot syllables in the line.*
- *The final foot of the line cannot contain an alliterating strong stress.*

Almost any theory of alliterative verse will contain something very close to this list of rules. But in my view, they tell us practically everything that an Anglo-Saxon poet needed to know. All the details, such as Sievers' Five Types and their variations, follow directly from the natural rhythms of Old English. To see how, though, we need to take an excursion into the theory of speech rhythm.

A Prosodic Primer

This page is something of a fast course in the theory of linguistic rhythm. Note that I said linguistic rhythm, not poetic rhythm: this is the kind of rhythm you find in any kind of language, not just poetry. We will go into more detail than earlier; once we have built up an understanding of the basic concepts, we will return to poetry, metrics, and Anglo-Saxon verse. The theory presented here is a somewhat generic version of modern linguistic accounts. It is phrased to apply specifically to modern English; the rules for Old English are similar, but differ in points of detail.

Syllables, Beats and Off-beats

At the lowest level, we can divide a word, phrase, sentence, or line of verse into syllables. For instance, we can count 14 syllables in the following sentence from a nursery rhyme:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7   8
The king is in his counting-house,

9 10 11 12 13 14
counting out his money.

But not all syllables are the same. Some syllables are heavy, and stressed; others are light, and unstressed, and there is a strong tendency to alternate between the two. This alternation can be analysed as a sequence of beats and off-beats. The heavier, more strongly stressed syllables become beats: the lighter, less stressed syllables become off-beats. In our nursery rhyme example, there is an almost exactly even pattern of beats and offbeats, though some of the beats are far stronger than others:

> The **king** is **in** his **count**ing **house**, **count**ing **out** his **mon**ey.

Beat and off-beat is essentially what is measured in accentual-syllabic verse. But there are several layers of rhythmic organization above it.

Degrees of Stress

Linguistically, we have to distinguish four levels of stress: primary stress, secondary stress, tertiary stress, and lack of stress. These four levels are not an absolute degree of loudness; they simply measure a scale from the strongest stresses to the weakest unstressed syllables. Let us use S to mark primary stress, s to mark secondary stress, W to mark tertiary stress, and w to mark lack of stress. Then our nursery rhyme example would be marked:

> W S w W w   S w   s
> *The king is in his counting-house,*

> S w W w S w
> *counting out his money.*

The following rules apply:
- Use S to mark the root syllables of content words.
- Use s to mark (a) secondary stress of content words, and (b) primary stress of function words.
- Use W to mark an unstressed syllable that is heavier than its neighbors. (I.e., a heavy syllable like out is stronger than the closed syllables ing and his.)
- Also use W to mark an unstressed syllable that is slightly more strongly stressed than its neighbors
- Use w for everything else.

Following these rules, the first sentences of this page would be marked as follows:

> w S w S   w W w S S
> *This page is something of a fast course*

> W w   S w W w S w S w
> *in the theory of linguistic rhythm*

> S   w w S w S w S w
> *Note that I said linguistic rhythm,*

> W w S w S w
> *not poetic rhythm:*

> W w w S w S w w S
> *this is the kind of rhythm you find*

w s w S   w   S   w   W w   S w W
in any kind of language, not just po e try.

 W w   S s w W   S w
We will go into more detail

  W   S w w
than earli er;

W   w w   S W w s w S w
once we have built up an understanding

w w S w S   w
of the basic concepts

 W w   w S   w S w   W S w
we will return to po e try, metrics,

w   S   w s w   S
and Anglo-Saxon verse.

Clashing Stress

There is a strong tendency not to allow syllables of equal stress to appear next to each other. When they do, something happens to relieve the clash. Sometimes the stress pattern changes. For instance, *thirteen* has stress on the second syllable, but *thirteen men* is pronounced with stress on the first syllable of *thirteen*. Other times, one of the stresses is elevated, or a slight pause is introduced between the two stresses. We will look at this in more detail below.

Rhythmic Feet

The next level of organization involves the concept of the rhythmic foot. A rhythmic foot is not quite the same thing as a poetic foot, but it is a unit of about the same size and method of organization: a beat paired with an off-beat. A foot may be iambic (offbeat plus beat), or trochaic (beat plus off-beat). If a beat or off-beat cannot be paired with another syllable, it makes a (single-syllable) foot by itself.

Feet also tend to alternate between weak and strong elements. A strong foot is a foot that contains a strong stress (S). All other feet are weak.

The following rules for constructing feet apply in Modern English, and generalize fairly well to the rhythm of Old English:

- *Prefer to put two syllables together to make a foot if they belong to the same word.*
- *Prefer to put two syllables together to make a foot if the first syllable is stronger than the second.*
- *Prefer to make feet of two syllables (monosyllabic feet are allowed.)*
- *A foot is strong if it contains a strong stress, weak otherwise.*
- *Unstressed syllables can be monosyllabic feet only if they are also independent words.*

If we use F for strong feet, f for weaker feet, we get groupings like the following:

```
   F   f   F     f  F   F
  / \  |  / \   /\  |   |
  w  S  w  S   w  W w  S   S
```
This page is something of a fast course

```
  ƒ    F   ƒ    F    F
 / \     /\  /\   /\   /\
 W  w  S w W w  S w  S w
```
in the theory of linguistic rhythm

Note the clashing stress, "fast course", which has to be resolved either by stressing fast, making it stronger than course, or vice versa. Also note that the rhythmic feet are not consistently iambic or trochaic; they are constructed to show the local rhythm within the word, then in the immediate context of the word.

Prosodic Words

The next layer of rhythmic organization is the prosodic word, typically two rhythmic feet, one weak, one strong. The basic rules for putting together a prosodic word are as follows:

- *Prefer to combine two feet that belong (or contain syllables from) the same word.*
- *Prefer to combine two feet that have the same rhythm (iambic or trochaic)*
- *Prefer to combine a strong foot (F) with a following weak foot (ƒ)*
- *Otherwise, prefer to combine a weak foot (ƒ) with a following strong foot (F).*
- *Otherwise, prefer prosodic words with two feet, both weak or both strong.*
- *Any feet that cannot be combined in this fashion are prosodic words on their own.*

So, applying these rules to the same sentence, we get:

```
   WD        WD     WD
  /  \      /    \  /\
  F  ƒ    F    ƒ F  F
 / \  |  / \    /\ |  |
 w  S w S   w  W w S  S
```
This page is something of a fast course

```
   WD        WD     WD
  /  \      /   \    |
  ƒ   F   ƒ   F    F
 / \  /\  /\   /\    /\
 W  w  S w W w  S w  S w
```
in the theory of linguistic rhythm

Rhythmic Phrases (Breath Groups)

The highest level of rhythmic organization in language is probably the rhythmic phrase -- what has sometimes been called a breath group in some theories of poetic meter. This is a unit roughly the same length as a short clause or long phrase in grammar, and encompasses two to three prosodic words. As a general rule, the component parts of a rhythmic phrase are grammatically related, corresponding to such units as simple clauses, prepositional phrases, and the like. In the example we have been working through, there are two rhythmic phrases:

- *This page is something of a fast course*
- *in the theory of linguistic rhythm.*

Rhythmic Prominence

Grouping is only one part of rhythm. The other part is the relative prominence of the individual syllables. But prominence and grouping are related: the strongest syllable in a rhythmic group has to be more prominent than any other element. In addition, prominence tends toward an alternating pattern: an

alternation of strong and weak elements is most natural, and if two adjacent elements are equally strong (as in clashing stress) something usually gives to create an alternating pattern.

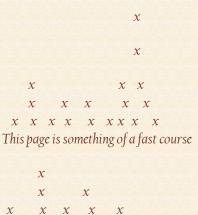One way to represent this is to build what some theorists call a rhythmic grid, adding an extra level of prominence to each syllable based on its strength in the overall pattern. We construct such a grid by following these rules:

- Put an x over each syllable, an extra x over each beat.
- Two beats are adjacent if they are separated by no more than one unstressed beat. If two beats are adjacent, and one is stronger (i.e., S and s, S and W, or s and W) then add an extra mark over the stronger of the two.
- Two beats clash if they have are immediately next to each other and are the same or almost the same stress level (i.e., they have the same number of x's, or differ by one.) Prefer an analysis of the rhythm that avoids stress clash. But if it occurs, put extra marks over one the two clashing stresses to eliminate the clash. (Which one depends on various factors, including emphasis; the default in modern English is generally the second.)

Applying these rules to our example, this is what we get:

```
                      x

                      x


        x                   x   x
        x       x   x       x   x
     x  x  x  x    x  x  x  x    x
```
This page is something of a fast course

```
        x
        x           x
     x      x   x   x       x
     x  x    x  x  x  x  x  x    x
```
in the theory of linguistic rhythm

This represents the natural, neutral way to say the sentence, without any special emphasis added. Notice that the most prominent beats are those which clearly dominate another beat, which means (in turn) that they usually belong to "heavy" prosodic words -- units which contain more than one stress.

And this leads to a final definition: prominent stresses. As I will use the term, a prominent stress has two closely related characteristics: (1) it dominates an adjacent beat (which means in turn that it has three or more x's, not the two associated with a lighter stress; (2) it is the strongest beat in its prosodic word. So in our example, the prominent stresses are *some* in *something*, *course*, the first syllable of *theory*, and the second syllable of *linguistic*. The stressed syllables in *page* and r*hythm* are strong stresses, but not prominent stresses. The beats on *of*, *in*, and *of* are neither prominent stresses nor strong stresses.

Notice, by the way, that the rhythms I have described are in some sense defaults; they can change considerably if a word gets special emphasis -- what is sometimes called rhetorical stress. We can easily give page or rhythm stronger emphasis than the naturally prominent stresses, but this isn't the same as the built-in, natural prominence of the stresses that really have to be stronger because of their position in the rhythm of word and phrase.

How these rules apply

At this point the application of these concepts to alliterative verse should be fairly obvious: strong stresses are the syllables we have been marking S, and which function as the chief stresses in prosodic words. Only strong stresses matter for alliteration. And the pivots, or chief alliterating stresses

of the half-line, must be prominent stresses, the strongest element in their prosodic phrase. long dips matter because their extra syllable count will necessarily contain a very light stress; thus, a prominent stress next to a long dip will dominate that weak beat and have the added prominence necessary for it to function as an alliterating strong-stress pivot. In other words, the special rhythmical role of strong stresses as lifts, and of long or heavy dips, follows rhythmically from the requirement that alliteration be placed on the most prominent stress in the prosodic phrase that constitutes a half-line. For instance, if we have the half-line:

> *as he spoke to me*

the long dip "as he" forms a foot with weak stress on as. Since the next syllable is the intrinsically strong-stress syllable *spoke*, they combine to form a prosodic word, with spoke dominating the weaker stress in the word. The final stress on *me*, since it is neither an intrinsically strong stress, nor a stress that dominates another stress, is also subordinated to the strong stress on *spoke*. Thus the only possible pivot syllable on this half-line is *spoke*. Or to take another example, a different Sievers type, consider the phrase:

> *hard-hearted men*

Here, there is intrinsic stress on *hard*, *heart*, and *men*. However, h*ard* has the primary stress in the compound word *hard-hearted*, and so it is both (a) a strong stress, and (b) it dominates another stress, the secondary stress on *heart*. It is therefore a stronger stress than the intrinsic strong stress on *men*, which does not dominate another stressed syllable, so *hard* is the only possible pivot syllable in the half-line.

    This story is complicated for Old English, where resolution must be kept in mind (i.e., Old English treats a long stressed syllable as equivalent to the combination of a short stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable) and by various other facts about Old English as a language. But the basic analysis does, I believe, apply fairly generally.

Doing Old English Alliterative Verse

    I am not going to take the time in this section to provide a detailed application of the concepts I have just sketched to Old English verse proper. To do that, I would have to provide an exhaustive tour through rather complex facts about Old English as a language, and there is an ample scholarly literature on the subject (see the Bibliography of Germanic Alliterative Metrics for details or some of the books on my Alliterative Metrics page.)

    Instead, I am going to sketch how the concepts I have outlined thus far can be used to mimic Old English verse forms in Modern English. While it is impossible to capture exactly the Old English form, one can manage a very close approximation. The key is to capture the rhythmic essentials of the form while keeping the close connection between alliteration and rhythm on which that form depends.

    So then, taking the rules already outlined above, let us take a quick look at what it takes to write alliterative verse in modern English. But first, a couple of caveats and general suggestions.

Excess Alliteration

    The classic form only has one pivot (obligatorily alliterated syllable) per half-line. In the Anglo-Saxon form, an extra alliteration can be put into first half-line, but is not necessary; and if it is overdone the effect can be far too strong.

End-Stopping

    lPeople used to rhyming verse of the usual English type will be strongly tempted to end clauses and sentences at the end of an alliterative line. That's actually to be avoided. The Anglo-Saxon form works better if sentences do NOT line up neatly with the ends of lines.

Rhythmic Ambiguities

    One of the difficulties of imitating the Anglo-Saxon meter in modern English is that modern English typically involves rising rhythm in which the second of two nearby stresses is stronger than the first. Old English typically illustrates a falling rhythm in which the first of two adjacent stresses is

stronger. This can cause problems, especially in half-lines with iambic rhythm: it is natural to read the second stress as stronger, but since the form requires alliteration on the first stress, the metrical rhythm indicates that the first beat is the stronger. Either way of stressing the phrase is possible, but the falling stress suggests emphasis. This can lead to unnatural-sounding phrases unless care is taken to structure the sentence so that the emphasis suggested by the alliteration is natural.

Kennings

Kennings are cunning little metaphors in which little phrases like "The Whale Road" is used to mean the sea. Classical Anglo-Saxon verse is full of kennings. Imitating this has its pitfalls, however, as modern audiences do not expect them and a high concentration of kennings can make for dense, almost unreadable verse. I tend to use them sparingly. With these caveats, let us take a quick look at one example in which poetry adhering very closely to the Anglo-Saxon style has succeeded in English: J.R.R. Tolkien's alliterative verse play, The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth. Consider the following lines:

> *To the left yonder.*
> *There's a shade creeping,*
> *   a shadow darker*
> *than the western sky,*
> *   there walking crouched!*
> *Two now together!*
> *   Troll-shapes, I guess,*
> *or hell-walkers.*
> *   They've a halting gait,*
> *groping groundwards*
> *   with grisly arms.*

The metrical rhythm can be diagrammed as follows; the alliterating pivot syllables are marked in all caps, and stress is marked both in terms of the grid (with x-marks) and in terms of the S s W w notation.

```
            x
              x     x
        x     x     x
        x  x  x     x  x
        To the LEFT yonder.
        W  w  S     W  w  [Type C]


            x
            x        x
      x        x     x
      x   x    x     x  x
      There's a SHADE creeping,
      W    w   S     S   w  [Type C]


             x
             x        x
       x    x  x   x x
       a SHADow darker
       w    S  w     S  w  [TypeC; "shadow" counts as a single resolved lift]
```

```
        x
        x       x
  x     x       x
  x  x  x  x  x
```
than the WESTern sky,
 W w S w S *[Type B]*

```
              x
              x           x
        x     x           x
        x  x  x           x
```
      there WALKing crouched! [TypeB]
       w   S   w   S

```
  x
  x       x
  x  x    x
  x  x  x x
```
TWO now together!
  S W w s w *[Type D; "gether" counts as a single resolved lift]*

```
        x
        x                 x
        x     x           x
        x     x    x  x
```
     TROLL-shapes, I guess,
     S   s   w S *[Type D]*

```
  x
  x     x
x x     x x
```
or HELL-walkers.
w S   s w *[Type C]*

```
              x
        x     x     x
        x  x x x  x
```
     They've a HALTing gait,
     W   w S   w   S *[Type B]*

```
        x
  x     x
  x     x  x
  x  x  x  x
```
GROPing groundwards
  S w   S   W *[Type A]*

```
          x
          x       x
     x   x x   x
     with GRISly arms.
     w     S w   S  [Type B]
```

Notice what Tolkien has done with these lines:
- He has been sparing with the alliteration, allowing double alliteration only in the last line quoted.
- He mixes end-stopped lines with lines where the sentence break is in the middle of the line.
- In iambic half-lines (*a shadow darker, there walking crouched, with grisly arms*) the emphasis implied by alliteration on the first stress makes sense in terms of the overall rhythm of the sentence.
- He does not follow the Anglo-Saxon tendency toward filling the verse as full of kennings as a fruitcake. (No doubt medievalists will shudder when I put it like this. But kennings worked in Old English because the audience already knew most of them and were likely to admire a poet who came up with a particularly clever new one. Without that kind of audience, kennings make alliterative poetry much less accessible).
- While his lines all fit strictly into one of the five Sievers types, he's reinforced most of the pivot stresses with long or strong dips, which helps get the intended rhythm, which I've shown above. One of the risks of using the traditional alliteration pattern in modern English is that default English rhythms place the strongest stress at the end of the phrase/clause, but in Old (and Middle English alliterative verse, the final stress of the second half-line (sometimes called the b-verse or off-verse) IS NOT SUPPOSED TO ALLITERATE. Modern English poets are therefore strongly tempted to alliterate on the last strong stress of the line. Even Tolkien has sort of done that, in one line in this passage. The line "two now together: Troll shapes I guess" only fits Old English meter if we treat both "two" and now" as taking strong stress. It would be equally natural to read the line line like this:

```
                                        x
                      x            x         x
           x      x      x    x        x
           x  x   x  x  x    x      x    x   x
           Two now together: Troll shapes I guess
```

On this reading, the pivots would be "guess" and the "ge" in "together" and the line wold alliterate on "g". That's clearly NOT Tolkien's intention, but this particular rhythm is really easy to fall into writing a modern English alliterative line. Just be aware that this kind of rhythm, alliterating on the even-numbered lifts, isn't going to sound like Old English. Tolkien gets away with it because stress on "two" the more sensible speech rhythm, which makes both half-lines type D, as shown above, and makes the alliteration on "g" purely decorative. In the context of the whole poem, the first stress of almost everyhalf line is naturally read as the strongest, which is what is needed if the rhythm is to sound like Old English.

One note, however. Tolkien's usage tends strongly towards two strong stresses per half-line. While this is common in Anglo-Saxon verse, it is not strictly necessary. A single four-syllable word, with one strong stress and one secondary stress, makes a perfectly good Anglo-Saxon half-line. Comparably, in modern English, words like half-heartedly or unworthiness are also entirely acceptable as half-lines, creating potential for much more rhythmic lightness and flexibility than is typically allowed for the form. Thus, lines like the following are perfectly metrical:

```
    x
    x    x
    x    x    x
    x    x   x x
HALFheartedly
  S    S   w W
                x
                x        x
          x   x    x   x
          he HELD his tongue,
          w   S      w   S

    x
    x        x
 x  x    x  x
aWARE of his
w S   w  W
                x
                x      x
          x    x     x x
          unWORTHiness.
          w   S    w W
```

In general, the key to making alliterative verse work well is keeping the rhythm natural and unforced, and making sure that the alliterating words which function metrically as pivots can bear the natural emphasis.

Alliterative Meter versus Accentual Tetrameter
        This is a good point to deal with a common opinion about alliterative verse, one which is repeated quite a lot, but is not truly accurate in my opinion. This is the idea that the defining characteristic of alliterative verse is that it contains four strong stresses, and that the placement of unaccented syllables is pretty much free. It is possible to write such accentual verse, and to use alliteration in it frequently, but it is not true -- as is sometimes argued -- that THAT is the definition of alliterative verse. I do not think it is, for reasons that the preceding pages of this guide should make clear. It is an entirely different form of poetry, with separate strengths and weaknesses.
        The Sullivan and Murphy translations from Beowulf on this site is an excellent example of accentual tetrameter. And if we try to analyse it using the tools developed thus far we get a fundamentally different picture than we get from the verses by Tolkien. Consider the following lines from their translation:

Fingers fractured.
        The fiend spun round;
the soldier stepped closer.
        Grendel sought
somehow to slip that grasp
        and escape,
flee to the fens;
        but his fingers were caught

in too fierce a grip.
      His foray had failed;

Here is what the analysis would look like, using all-caps to mark syllables alliterating within the same line:

  x
  x
  x   *x*
  x *x*   *x* *x*
FINGers FRACtured.
  S *w* *S* *w*

```
                    x
          x                   x
          x         x    x
        x   x       x   x
        the FIEND spun round
        w   S       S   w


                        x
    x                   x
    x           x       x
  x   x   x   x       x x
  the SOLdier stepped closer.
  w S   w S       S w


                    x
          x         x
          x   x   x
          Grendel SOUGHT
          S   w   S


  x
  x               x
  x     x         x
  x       x   x   x
SOMEhow to SLIP
S     W   w   S


                        x
            x           x
            x   x       x
          x   x   x   x x
          that grasp and escape,
          w   S   W   w S


  x
  x           x
  x x   x x
FLEE to the FENS;
  S   w w   S


                x
        x     x               x
        x   x   x   x     x   x
        but his FINGers were caught
        W   w   S   w   w       S
```

```
        x
        x          x
        x  x        x
    x   x  x  x    x
His FORay had FAILED;
    w  S  W  w   S
```

The striking thing to note is that there is no consistent connection between the peak stresses in each half-line and the placement of alliteration. Some lines (i.e., 1, and 4) fit the rhythmic pattern of alliterative verse. But lines 2 and 3 fail to match up: in (2), the alliterating stresses are not those most naturally used as pivots; in (3) there is no alliteration on the second half-line, unless the sc- of escape is counted; but if so, alliteration on the last stress, like the alliteration on the last stress of (5), runs against the basic Anglo-Saxon pattern.

In short, the translation does not consistently link rhythm to alliteration, nor is it intended to. The correct way to analyse such verse is in terms of poetic feet (trochees, iambs, anapests, dactyls, etc.) and not in terms of half-lines. In those terms, this verse is utterly regular: four feet per line, but accentual as there is no consistent choice of type of foot. Using / for the main beat in each foot, x for unaccented syllables, and | to separate feet, the analysis looks something like the following:

```
  /   x  |   /  x
Fingers | fractured.
```

```
      x  /  |   x    /
    The fiend | spun round;
```

```
  x  /  x |   x     /  x
the soldier | stepped closer.
```

```
       /   x  |   /
    Grendel | sought
```

```
  /    x  |  x  /
somehow | to slip
```

```
       x    /  |  x  x  /
    that grasp | and escape,
```

```
   / x |   x  /
flee to | the fens;
```

```
       x  x  /  |  x  x      /
    but his fing | ers were caught
```

```
 x   x  /  |  x   /
in too fierce | a grip.
```

```
        X  /  x  |  x    /
    His foray | had failed;
```

In this analysis, alliteration plays no structural role, and indeed the placement of alliteration in these lines is not dictated by rhythm. Four-stress accentual verse and Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse are very similar, in that the rhythm is not consistent with a single choice of foot; but there are key differences. In accentual verse, the number of strong stresses is critical and cannot be varied under any circumstances, as the stress-count is the only indicator of rhythm. Not all Anglo-Saxon half-lines clearly have two and only two stresses, as the number of stresses is not what governs the meter. In accentual verse, the placement of alliteration is fairly free; in Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse by contrast, it is strongly constrained by the rhythmic structure of the line and half-line.

      The contrast between Germanic alliterative verse and alliterating accentual verse becomes particularly stark when lightly accented syllables, such as pronouns and prepositions, are allowed to participate in the alliteration pattern. Consider, for example, the following poem, first in Icelandic, then in English accentual translation, from the <u>Jonas Halgrimsson website</u>. Metrical alliterations are bolded and underlined.

Íslands minni

By Jonas Hillgrimsson

Þið þekkið fold með **<u>b</u>**líðri **<u>b</u>**rá,
     og **<u>b</u>**láum tindi fjalla,
og **<u>s</u>**vanahljómi, **<u>s</u>**ilungsá,
     og **<u>s</u>**ælu blómi valla,
og **<u>b</u>**röttum fossi, **<u>b</u>**jörtum sjá
     og **<u>b</u>**reiðum jökulskalla —
<u>d</u>rjúpi' hana blessun **<u>d</u>**rottins á
     um **<u>d</u>**aga heimsins alla.

The indented lines are the Icelandic equivalent of the b-verses in Old or Middle English alliterative verse, in a rhyming form that is a descendant of Old Norse ljodahattr meter, which requires 4 stresses on odd numbered lines, 3 stresses on even numbered lines. The first stress in even-numbered lines is what is traditionally termed, following Snorri Sturlusson, the head-stave. It has to alliterate with two stresses in the preceding odd-numbered line. Notice that in Icelandic, the head-stave is naturally the strongest stress in its line.

      Now here is a translation of this poem into modern English. It follows the Icelandic rules for stresses and alliteation, but allows stresses on grammatical function words to count as the head-stave.

    A Toast to Iceland

Our **<u>l</u>**and of **<u>l</u>**akes forever fair
  be**<u>l</u>**ow blue mountain summits,
of **<u>s</u>**wans, of **<u>s</u>**almon leaping where
  the **<u>s</u>**ilver water plummets,
of glaciers swelling **<u>b</u>**road and **<u>b</u>**are
a**<u>b</u>**ove earth's fiery sinews —
the **<u>L</u>**ord pour out his **<u>l</u>**argess there
as **<u>l</u>**ong as earth continues!

To my ear, at least, the alliterations on "l" in *below* and "b" in *above* are very easy to miss, and even the alliteration on "l" in "as long as" seems very light. Only the third and fourth lines ("of swans, of salmon leaping where / the silver water plummets") have the same driving rhythm as the original Icelandic. Which is to say: the Icelandic poem is in Germanic alliterative meter, with the alliteration placed to link

the strongest stresses in the paired half-lines. The English translation is an accentual imitation of the original.

Both meters can be used to powerful effect. But they are not the same.

Doing Middle English Alliterative Verse

In this section, as before, I will not be directly describing the structure of the older alliterative form, in this case the form deployed in such works as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Instead, I will be describing how I personally believe that the Middle English form works but focusing as before on describing how to produce similar verse in Modern English.

Here, as before, I will not be presenting current scholarly theories of Middle English alliterative meter (though the account I will present has been heavily influenced, among others, by the work of Thomas Cable, Hoyt Duggan, and R.D. Fulk. The hypothesis I am going to present may be defensible with respect to Middle English, though I am not in a position to justify the argument technically in terms of the historical evidence of Middle English sound patterns, but it works extremely well in producing alliterative verse similar in sound and feel to the Middle English text, and was developed in large part to give me a rigorous metric during my ongoing work translating Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

I would contend that there is, essentially, one difference, and one difference only, between the Middle English and the Old English alliterative meters. In my view, in the Old English meter, double alliteration on the first half-line is purely optional, whereas in the Middle English meter, it is the metrical norm. Everything else follows from this one difference.

In the terminology I developed in the previous sections of this discussion, we could put the difference like this: all Old English half-lines contain one pivot, even if there is incidental alliteration on the second major stress in the first half line. In the Middle English form, the norm is two pivots in the first half-line, and one in the second. Consider, for instance, the first several lines of Beowulf. I have highlighted the pivots:

> *Hwæt! We Gar*dena
>   *in gear*dagum,
> *Þeod*cyninga,
>   *Þrym gefrunon,*
> *hu ða æÞel*ingas
>   *ellen fremedon.*
> *Oft Scyld Scefing*
>   *sceaÞena Þreatum,*

Only the fourth line has double alliteration in the first half-line. Of course, there are many, many, many lines in Beowulf where double alliteration is present, but the norm is that only one alliterating syllable is necessarily present, and thus that there is only one pivot. A consequence is that the rhythmic patterns of the Old-English half-line are very strongly constrained, for every other syllable in the half-line must be rhythmically subordinate to the pivot.

Now contrast the first four lines of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Once more the pivots (as I would analyse them) are highlighted:

> *SIÞEN þe sege and þe as saut*
>   *watz sesed at Troye,*
> *Þe bor3 brittened and brent*
>   *to bronde3 and askez,*
> *Þe tulk Þat Þe trammes*
>   *of tresoun Þer wro3t*

> *Watz **tried** for his **trich**erie,*
> > *Þe **trew**est on erÞe;*

All four lines have double alliteration in the first half-line, and while exceptions occur, the overall feel is very different. And it corresponds to a profound rhythmic difference, which can be measured simply by counting syllables. Only one of the first four initial half-lines of Beowulf has six syllables, and that is a line with resolution, whereas none of the first four initial half-lines of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has less than six syllables, no matter how one resolves various questions about the pronunciation of the Middle English. In the account I have developed on this website, there is a very simple explanation: if the Middle English form follows the norm that there are two pivots in the first half-line, there is considerably more room for rhythmic variation. Extra syllables can be included in the first half-line, as long as they are subordinate rhythmically to one or the other of the pivots, and as a result there is a considerably greater freedom of rhythms in the first half-line, whereas the second half-line, with only one pivot, much more closely resembles the Old English rhythm.

There is one other feature of Middle English alliterative verse that is very important in modern accounts of its metrics. That is the rule that the second half-line must contain a long dip (that is, a dip contains more than one syllable). In my theory, there is a very simple explanation for this rule, and that is the fact that traditional alliterative verse does not normally allow the final lift to alliterate. That rule applies to every form of traditional alliterative verse, from Beowulf to 16th Century poems like Scottish Field, though there are more exceptions to it in Middle English alliterative verse than in Old English or Norse. Not alliterating on the last stress is an easy and natural rule to follow in Old English or Norse, which have falling rhythm. The last stress in a line is not likely to be stronger than the one that came before it. But Middle English was moving toward the Modern English pattern of rising rhythm. In Middle English, and even more so in Modern English, the last stress of a line is very likely to take the strongest stress, which makes it much more tempting to alliterate on the final stress. To follow the rule that forbids alliterating on the final strong-stress syllable, the rhythm has to be structured to make the third strong stress more prominent. The easy way to do that is to include a long (multi-syllable) dip in the second half-line.

To illustrate, consider a line like the following (cribbing a bit on a little poem by George Johnston:

> *To skin a skunk,*
> > *you need some skill!*

This version breaks the rules for traditional alliterative verse because it puts the alliteration on the final stress of the line. But this way of expressing the idea is completely in line with normal Modern English syntax and rhythm. To get alliteration on the third instead of the fourth stress, George Johnston changed the syntax, and wrote:

> *To skin a skunk,*
>
> > *skill is needed.*

But by the normal rules for modern English intonation, there's still a problem. You have to read the sentence as having special emphasis on the word "skill". Without special emphasis, the strongest stress would still fall at the end – on "needed". There's only one way to guarantee that the strongest stress in the second half-line naturally falls on "skill", and that's to include a long dip. Something like this:

> *To skin a skunk,*
> > *skill is required.*

Now the metrical pattern is:

```
      x
      x        x
      x  x      x
      x  x   x  x x
```
skill is required

Now *skill* dominates the weak emphasis on *is* (which is stronger than *re-*, which which makes it, rather than the second syllable of required the naturally strongest stress in the second half-line). Of couse, in modern English, there's another easy way to get the same effect, which is to arrange for clashing stress, producing a strong one-syllable dip, like this:

> *To skin a skunk,*
> > *great skill is needed.*

All of this boils down to saying that Middle English alliterative poets were arranging the rhythmic structure of their verse to guarantee that there would be two alliterating pivots in the first half line, and only one – the first, not the final stress – in the second half line. Following these rules has worked well in my Sir Gawain translation, and also works well in various other poems I have tried to write in the Gawain form. For instance, in the fantasy novel I collaborated on with my late friend Kimbra Wilder Gish, there is an embedded bit of alliterative verse, in which the following lines appear:

> *Disease, plague and pestilence*
> > *are perils that fall*
> *like mist in the morning.*
> > *As the mourners dream,*
> *dawn creeps uncalled-for*
> > *over clammy cheeks,*
> *over face and forehead*
> > *freckled with sweat.*
> *Neither courage nor cowardice*
> > *count when such foes*
> *batter at bone*
> > *or at burning flesh.*

Notice how the first half-line can contain rather more than the second. For instance, the half-line *disease, plague and pestilence* has the rhythmic structure shown below:

```
        x        x
     x    x        x   x
   x  x   x    x    x  x x
```
disease, plague and pestilence

This line contains two heavy dips, which could never work in an Old English half-line, nor in the second half of a Middle English line, but is quite consistent with the very free metrical patterns of Middle English, which I would argue do not particularly care what arrangement of stresses occur in the first half-line as long as the two alliterated pivot syllables are metrically more prominent than everything else.

Note, by the way, one rather interesting implication: That it is somewhat artificial for modern English alliterative verse to forbid alliteration on the final lift. And in fact, a lot of people who write alliterative verse in modern English don't follow that rule. I would argue that that is no accident. Modern English, with its rising stresses, often puts strongest stress on the last lift of a line, unless you work very hard to avoid it.

Conclusion

At this point, I have given you about as complee a picture of how alliterative verse works as is possible without going to book length. I have just one more thing to add before we wrap things up: and that is to highlight how closely this analysis links alliterative verse to free verse. Roughly, I would argue, alliterative verse has much the same relationship to free verse (at least, to the most common forms of free verse) that stanzaic, rhyming poetry has to blank verse. Blank verse is organized into feet, following a specific meter. Stanzaic, rhyming poety uses rhymes to impose an additional layer of organization on that basic rhythmic structure. Much free verse (I will not say all, since free verse poets choose to vary) is organized in terms of prosodic phrases. That is, in a typical free verse composition, the line breaks divide the words of the poem up into natural units of thought *and breath* (or rhythm). Alliterative verse imposes an organization on that basic structure, using alliteration to link the half-lines (read: lines in a free verse sense) together.

One of the implications of this analysis is that there are *alliterative free verse poems* – that is, poems that are punctuated as free verse, and which use alliteration to link ideas within and across lines, but which do not rigidly follow the patterns of traditional alliterative verse, which constrains alliteration *only* to link the two halves of the same line. Consider, for instance, the following lines from Anne Carson's translation of Book 23 of Nonnus' Tales of Dionysus:

> Bloody naiad, bloody water, in she dove!
> Aeacus was beating the barbarians down the banks,
> while they kept thrashing their arms and legs to mimic swimmers,
> making the river a pudding of panic,
> flailing away at their fate, but down they went,
> fellow upon waterblown fellow afloat on a river-gritty grave.

It's easier to see what is going on if we put secondary line breaks at phrase boundaries and highlight the alliterating words:

> **Bloody** naiad,
>   **bloody** water,
>   **in** she dove!
> **Aeacus**
>   was **beating** the **barbarians**
>   down the **banks**,
> while they kept thrashing
>   their arms and legs
>   to **mimic** swimmers,
> **making** the river
>   a **pudding** of **panic**,
> **flailing away** at their **fate**,
>   but down they **went**,
> **fellow** upon **waterblown** fellow
>   **afloat** on a river-**gritty grave**.

Carson is definitely using strong-stress alliteration to link adjacent phrases and lines (*bloody ... bloody, in .. Aeacus, beating/barbarians .. banks, mimic ... making, away ... went ... waterblown, fellow/fellow ... afloat*). She is also using alliteration within the prosodic phrase for emphatic effect (*beating the barbarians, a pudding of panic, flailing away at their fate, a river-gritty grave*). What she ISN'T doing is regimenting the alliteration to create the steady rhythmic flow characteristic of the alliterative long line. Breaks in the alliteration slow the rhyth and have the rather ironic effect of creating a sinking sensation in the reader (*while they kept thrashing their arms and legs, but down they went.*) In some cases the alliterative links overlap (for instance, the f/w alliterations in the last few lines), creating even tighter links between ideas.

Is this Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse? No. Definitely not.

Is it alliterative verse? Most definitely.

A lot of modern poets do things like this, and when they do it as rigorously and systematically as Carson does, it is simply a different kind of alliterative verse, but one that produces its effects on exactly the same principles.

In short: there truly is a modern alliterative revival, not only because poets have self-consciously imitated the ancient form, but because free verse poets, looking for ways to connect and drive forward the rhythms of their poems, often end up reinventing it.