



Forgotten Ground Regained

A Journal of Alliterative Verse

New Series 1, Winter, 2024



## Masthead

Forgotten Ground Regained is owned and edited by Paul Douglas Deane in Lawrenceville, New Jersey and published at [alliteration.net](http://alliteration.net). Submissions in or about alliterative are welcome. To contact the editor, email [pdeane@alliteration.net](mailto:pdeane@alliteration.net).<sup>1</sup>

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## Contributors

### Ted Charnley

Ted Charnley's verse has appeared in multiple issues of such journals as *The Orchards*, *The Road Not Taken*, *Think*, *The Lyric and Slant*, and in anthologies. His first book, *An Invocation of Fragments*, was released by Kelsay Books in 2022, featuring two nominees for a Pushcart Prize and a finalist for the Frost Farm Prize. He lives with his wife in a 200-year-old farmhouse they restored in central Maryland.

Paul D. Deane Deane is a theoretical linguist by training, a computational linguist by vocation, and a poet by avocation. His work appears on *Forgotten Ground Regained* and in Dennis W. Wise's anthology.

### Rebecca Henry Lowndes

Rebecca Henry Lowndes writes in an accentual style with frequent alliteration reminiscent of Old English rhythm without following a strictly alliterative form. She has published a collection of her poetry, *Years and Other Leavings*.

### David Jalajel

David Jalajel's poetry publications include *Moon Ghazals*, *Cthulhu on Lesbos* and *Rhyme & Refrain*. His poetry has been published in a variety of online and print journals, including *Otoliths*, *Shampoo*, *experiential-experimental-literature*, *Recursive Angel*, *The New Post-Literate*, *Gulf Coast*, *Anti-*, *Lynx*, *Mizna*, *Eclectica*, and *Snapshots from the Ark*. His metrical work focuses on the ghazal, an Arabic stanza form. Collections include *Moon Ghazals*, and *Rhyme and Refrain*.

### Aaron Poochigian

Aaron Poochigian has a Ph.D. in Classics from the University of Minnesota and an MFA in Poetry from Columbia University. He has published several poetry collections (*American Divine*, winner of the Richard Wilbur award, *Manhattanite*, and *The Cosmic*) and has published in various literary journals, including *Poetry* and *The Paris Review*. In his recent novel-in-verse, *Mr. Either/Or: All the Rage*, Poochigian alternates between sections written in heroic couplets and sections written in Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter.

### Lancelot Schaubert

Lancelot Schaubert is a novelist, poet, essayist, and singer-storyteller. He has written two novels (*Bell Hammers* and *Tap and Die*), edited an anthology (*Of Gods and Globes*), published a variety of short stories and poems, and was the *2019 Artist in Residence* for [sparkandecho.org](http://sparkandecho.org), an organization dedicated to forming communities of artists who engage with and create in response to the Bible. He has also published two poetry collections: *Inconveniences Rightly Considered: Poems from My Twenties*, a collection of (mostly) alliterative poems on themes ranging from love and meaning to urban life, and *The Greenwood Poet*, a collection of (mostly) alliterative poems inspired by Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

### Steven Withrow

Steven Withrow has authored three chapbooks—*The Sun Ships*, *The Bedlam Philharmonic*, and *The Nothing Box*—and a collaborative collection, *The Exorcised Lyric*, with Frank Coffman. His speculative and dark fantasy poems have appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Spectral Realms*, *Space & Time*, and *Dreams & Nightmares*. He has been nominated for the Rhysling and Elgin awards and he wrote the libretto for a chamber opera based on a classic English ghost story. He lives on Cape Cod.

### Thaliarchus

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](http://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].

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The formats I have used for the poems in this issue follow the individual poets' preferences for the treatment of half-lines. Some preferred not to mark it at all, others to

mark it with extra space, and still others with a line break and an indentation.

# Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

## INTRODUCTION

THE IMAGE TO THE RIGHT anchored the home page on the original version of the Forgotten Ground Regained website, back in 1999. Now that I have relaunched the site, it seems appropriate to go one step further, and produce new issues in something closer to a magazine format, in the form of a pdf file that people can read more easily on a tablet or (let's go old school here!) print out and read at their leisure.

Forgotten Ground Regained (the website) is a resource for anyone interested in modern English alliterative verse. While my focus is on poetry that revives Germanic alliterative verse, in the tradition of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I am open to publishing practically any form of poetry that uses alliteration systematically, as an organizing principle. In the first issue in this new format, I highlight poets whose work highlights the creative potential of alliterative poetry when it is applied to contemporary topics and themes. Let's start (to our right) with a poem that celebrates alliterative poetry as sculptor's work, rather than the watercolor of free verse or the handcrafted iconography of traditional accentual-syllabic forms.

— Paul Douglas Deane, Editor

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### Why Alliterative? by Lance Schaubert

*There's nothing wrong with the ring of a line  
in free verse. Or the froward tones  
romantics mete by measure and rod—  
anapaestic pestle and mortar—  
that lead lovers to the lonesome old rhyme.  
There's nothing wasted in water colors,  
nothing lost in the nicking whittle  
of wood by syllabic means and ways.*

*It's just what's hard is healthy and better —  
graven imagined holiday grouse—  
the time of the shaving of travertine,  
the sanding of white limestone  
(or cream-colored or rust creases),  
the danger of veins that vertically sheer  
a nose from a face— these need be the risks.  
Alliterative meter is like this.*

*It is taking forth the travertine  
of English as it's spoken. It earmarks its cadence.  
For a spic and span space is natural.  
A black and blue bursa pains.  
To be in for a dime is to be in for a dollar.  
We talk in this way without terrible fretting,  
but ignore our English when inspiration  
takes our pens. But this is poetry's  
desperate call: to spend hours  
trying to catch a turkey plume —  
a feather fall — with furtive clinging,  
with a Webber grill lid waving,  
with nets and desk lids and a gnarly mob,  
only to panic and collapse on the paver stones  
and in a desperate gasp to sob our grief  
suck in the feather in our sound hole.*

**Downstairs, Upstairs**  
*(Or the Writer Unblocked)*  
By Ted Charnley

Each step down and your drought will ease.  
It's tread by tread to tap what is lower,  
grabbing your glass as the cravings increase.  
If you're drained and blocked above in your bower,  
give way to the wanton, wordless plunge  
straight to your font, flowing like springs.  
Now drink in these drafts! It's drought you expunge  
by the spout of the sink; your thirst for these things  
pours out a portion.

Replenish your glass,  
it's time to ascend the same set of stairs  
while paying each riser a ransom to pass.  
Carefully climb, carrying prayers;  
look above and not back, or certainly slip  
from grace with the glass, forgetting the script.

**As He Is to Us**  
By Ted Charnley

Wiry and worn, well-tanned from the task,  
the gravedigger goes to his goodly works  
with a practiced pace, pick and spade.  
On a slope commanding a modest meadow,  
he's put in a potter's field of his pets;  
a flock with fates more fleeting than his,  
ones at his mercy, his will and mood.

Rocks and roots must be cleared from the clay,  
so he digs deeper, then dutifully fills  
with the burden he buries, barrow he tamps.  
What's hard on the hands frees up the head;  
prayers need replies, regrets must be purged  
by he who decides when suffering stops.  
Aloft or aground, God is alone.

First published in *Blue Unicorn*, republished in *An Invocation of Fragments* (Kelsay Books, 2022).  
Nominated for a 2021 Pushcart Prize.

**What Builds a Bridge**  
By Ted Charnley

Since a spring  
behind my home  
has carved out a creek  
with its careless scour,  
flux and flow  
have divided my fields  
with banks all too steep  
to step or straddle.  
What courses for creeks,  
except to sever  
field into fields,  
man from fellow?

Building a bridge  
for cutting across  
will fetch an old friend  
who's drifted far,  
to help by hefting  
a second hammer,  
railroad ties,  
rock for riprap,  
pressure-treated pine  
and some metal posts.  
In our back and forth,  
a bridge will take form.

The heat is heavy,  
here in August.  
Saws and sawdust,  
wisecracks and sweat,  
have come to the creek.  
It's chill in its channel,  
tempting until  
we toss ourselves in.  
What courses in creeks  
to gouge or gully,  
welcomes and cools us,  
we who will work.

The span is suspended, poised in its place,  
secure as the currents are carried under.  
Bank to bank, no boundary stands  
or rift is as wide as the will to reach.  
What builds a bridge is lines through a border,  
fields or friends that refuse to be parted.



## Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

### The Lizard: A Portrait of the Natural World

By David Jalajel

#### Under the Log...

Ease the banded eastern grass  
a little further. Perform a flourish  
to showcase the nest of this native specimen.  
Then plod off to a perfect setting  
for woodland revelry. Go wild as a gyre.  
Show your devotion neath veils of greenery.  
Then read with a pipe: It is prey sized,  
but sports with total, tack-sharpness,  
layers of teeth, its life on the line.

#### On the Moss...

In retrospect, stage its presence  
as variations on an otherworldly  
spring carol. Catch those small,  
metaphysical, first and novel  
twin animals: like icon photographs,  
hand painted. Place them enshrined  
at land's end. Allow them to burrow  
into arable substrate. Then upend their dance:  
pour off the soil from their obsessive heat.

#### Atop the Tree...

Years ago, these eucalyptus  
were as abundant as light. Brandish optics  
to focus humour on your hero's quest  
for that premium shot. Display the credits  
upside-down on its dorsal patterns.  
Process its colours to expose the hues  
from grey-green to sage. Set it ghosting  
among bright leaves, berries and insects.  
Focus on its head; highlight its eyes.

#### Within the Skull...

Choose a specimen like a silver brooch.  
Prefer a temperate and fairly large  
totemic likeness. Go live on air  
to divine its primitive proud fire.  
Identify it with the forest's honour.  
Let its last meal alight in X-rays  
to be clearly seen. Calm your fame.  
Go incognito on the next release.  
Get out in the field, up under its jaws.

### Flying in Concrete

By Lancelot Schaubert

Imagine flying mid-concrete  
C.D. Wright hath said, more or less.  
New Yorkers have known this daily.  
We are a people whose peddles move  
As Huorns root; as hard waters;  
As tentacular tubes of motion  
Upon the grey gravelstone walks  
That have not the healing powers  
Of Roman limestone — seawater lithe  
Powder and lith that liquid sunshine  
Will heal whole. We have its cracks  
As places to posture our promised dream.  
We squirm along, squeal alone,  
Squiggle in the sea of iron stones  
For a splash of watercolor. For the rose spray  
On the capstone where the stark color  
Of a carved maw — simulacrum —  
Suggests something unthought:  
Gargoyles are still good  
When tamed and turned into a talisman.  
You are now free to frolic in puddles  
And gargle the rain; grey runners.

### The Mages of Mars

By Steven Withrow

The mages of Mars are mean as time,  
And time's a tyrant on trillions of worlds.  
They speak their spells in a spastic tongue  
That holds the hearer a hostage for years.  
Inducing death, these dreaded few  
Are Mars-maulers who make a grave  
Of the polar plains and planetscape.  
Twice-born are twisted by a twilight oath  
To bind them blindly, a bloodless rite  
No son of Saturn or sorcerer of Earth  
Would dare endure, so dire the risks  
Of losing a life with lust for the next.

### Alliterative Experiments

On the Forgotten Ground regained [mailing list](#), Thaliarchus (nom de plum for a British Middle English scholar) suggested an alliterative experiment in the following terms:

*The idea here is to recruit some of English's past resources to achieve an effect close to that of haiku, since I don't find raw syllable-counting very interesting in English, and English's syllables aren't exact equivalents of Japanese on anyway.*

*The grisly details: I work onward from late fourteenth-century alliterative-stanzaic caudae, which often run [a-verse, a-verse, a-verse, b-verse]. Each stanza here is two a-verses followed by a b-verse that cross-alliterates on the previous two lines; the middle line has three lifts, as some scholars argue could happen in later ME AV (I'm unconvinced but enjoy the idea); the metrical closure is swapped, so that the b-verses must end on a lift, and the a-verses must end on a dip—which, unlike the b-verse terminal dip in later ME AV, can be long as well as short.*

He provided an example, which is reproduced to the right. I enjoyed the experiment, so I repeated it too. Judge for yourself whether either experiment worked.

I tried another experiment after a discussion arose on the listserv, in connection with a small technical question. Traditional alliterative verse rarely alliterates on the final stress, but when people try to imitate the form in modern English, they often do. I suggested that this is because English normally has rising stress (rather than the falling stress of Old English or Old Norse), which makes the last stress of the line the natural place to put the strongest alliterating stress.

So this experiment suggested itself: writing a form of alliterative verse that always alliterates on the fourth stress and avoids it on the third stress of the line (the traditional head-stave). Once again, take a look and judge for yourself whether the experiment worked.

### Christmas Walk

By [Thaliarchus](#)

*Here a pond-surface peaceful,  
mirror though moved by the mallards,  
the murk-sky repeats.*

*Leafless aloof-tilted,  
an ash-tree up-angles in ire-taut  
lour at my act.*

*All is wattle of withy  
in the fencing that fends me off from fair-pool,  
with a full worn face.*

### Breakwater

by [Paul Douglas Deane](#)

*Feel the wind slap on water;  
watch small ripples, unruffled, rising  
until whitecaps race*

*and the helm heels over:  
past the last buoy the bow slaps against breakers,  
harrowed to safe berth.*

### Housebreaker

By [Paul Douglas Deane](#)

*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.*

## Forgotten Ground Regained: A Journal of Alliterative Verse

In my Field Guide to Alliterative Verse, I argue that alliterative verse is a closer cousin to some kinds of free verse than most people realize. Rebecca Henry Lowndes' poetry illustrates what I refer to as *alliterative free verse*, where alliterating strong stresses are regularly used to link phrases rhythmically; the complete absence of alliteration, as in stanza 5, creates a stark change of pace.

### Three Miles, August By Rebecca Henry Lowndes

1.  
To the pilot overhead,  
    plane  
        dozing  
on midday's merest breath,  
    I am  
    a khaki oval, feet  
    pumping  
    fore and aft.  
Twist of silver flashes on my arm.

2.  
Every "On your left!"  
    hailed from behind  
    a benediction;  
"Good morning" to my face,  
    nodded,  
        smiled:  
            simple grace.

3.  
Photograph: an arch  
    of ferns, gravid with  
    late-season growth  
    – remnant,  
    despite the tireless, churning drone  
    of dozers fields away, of  
a germinal, a lush and greening world.

4.  
Sun swells and pulses,  
    scales  
        sky worn  
        to a memory  
        of blue.  
Errant bee bombs my hat brim;  
inchworm deftly belly-  
    rolls and curls at my approach

– then,  
a message from my firstborn.  
    I don't break stride.

5.  
Though lost in words, the sounding  
    of these words as,  
in my heart, before my eyes,  
    this mind I love is  
        screening words,  
I reach the farthest point almost  
    oblivious to pain,  
        and turn around  
to words that drown the sound of insect  
    orchestra, nudge me almost  
    painlessly;  
        almost without pain:  
I turn around these words.

6.  
Out of body – flick! – I fly, tens of decades  
    back in time:  
    under this maddening prod of  
        sun  
    have I beyond all sense become  
the Donner Party –  
        except  
    I trek alone in shoes of leather,  
        snug, whole;  
except it's blazing summer;  
except the ground is level,  
    the air not mountain-thin;  
except I slept last night upon a bed –  
    slept and dreamed;  
except clear water and cool air await,  
    minutes on;  
except the egg breakfast I can almost taste  
    will be, not a figment, but real food.

— Thus, nothing plucky here to see,  
    no: just a creaking lady  
    thinking clearly now,  
        still  
            set  
        on putting one  
        foot in front of the other  
                                    until she's home.

New Series I, Winter, 2024

Excerpt From *Mister Either/Or*  
By Aaron Poochigian

1.4  
Stay for a stand-off?  
    Stupid talk.  
Dutchie's dead,  
    and duty dictates  
you steal his stash.  
    Stuffing your backpack  
with contraband that houses  
    horrors, perhaps,  
or an antique scam,  
    you scout escape routes.  
Hope's out back:  
    where blind bullets  
shot up the sunroom,  
    shattered glass doors  
frame a plush  
    paradise of produce.  
An Olympian lunge,  
    and you land mashing  
sweet potatoes.  
    Slats of slanted  
latticework lift  
    your velocity over  
a ten-foot fence,  
    and trash-bags greet  
your lengthwise splat.  
    Spoiled seafood  
nukes your nostrils,  
    but now's no time  
to gag and grimace:  
    gung-ho gunmen  
have rushed the alley.  
    Up instantly,  
you trust in your All Stars,  
    your track training,  
but that weird weight  
    whacking your backside  
shrinks your stride  
    and saps stamina.  
There's hope, though, Hoo-ah!,  
    half a block on:  
sun-lit signage  
    for a subway station.  
One leap from street level  
    to the lower landing,

and you start stumbling  
    but stay standing.  
Parades of posters  
    rush up and push  
iPhones, action flicks,  
    online degrees—  
Interminable tunnel!,  
    and the tough guys hunting you  
keep closing.  
    Clips of silenced  
potshots purring,  
    pocking concrete  
before your feet,  
    you're fucked, man, finished  
until a heartening  
    headwind howls in:  
by the grace of God,  
    a getaway train.  
You hurdle a turnstile,  
    then hide, hunched down,  
amid a cluster  
    in the closest car.  
Ding, then, dong,  
    the doors have met,  
and rescue is rolling.  
    You rise and smile,  
straining to strike  
    stoic straphangers  
as, no, not a nut,  
    a normal person.  
Focus, freak.  
    Finish the mission.  
You lucked out, sure,  
    but this line runs local  
the wrong direction  
    and reeks like someone  
soiled himself.  
    Screw mass transit.  
Once clear of the catacombs,  
    you can catch a cab  
down to the Village,  
    dump, daintily,  
Armageddon  
    or whatever it is  
at Warehouse Delta  
    and unwind somewhere.  
Your mind is drifting



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toward dives and dartboards,  
warm waitresses,  
when Whoosh! an emergency  
exit opens.  
Outside air  
ruffles coiffures.  
Fucked-up features  
peek in, pug-nosed,  
pugilistic—  
one of the goons,  
his gun a growth  
in pleated pants.  
Puke must have breached  
the next doors down  
and now is naughtily  
crossing cars,  
a crime in this town.  
Vlad your Glock  
is getting giddy,  
but shots can sheer  
in shaky surroundings,  
blast bystanders.  
It's bad news causing  
collateral damage.  
Don't yet, dumb-ass;  
chill till chance  
chooses a path.

1.5

Waiting, you're whistling,  
weighing angles  
when a curve kicks  
the car to larboard.  
Physics forcing  
freight straight on,  
you all sway starboard,  
and the start startles  
your instincts to action:  
on the upswing  
back to balance,  
you bum-rush Ugly,  
check him hard,  
hack his Heckler  
across the car.  
Cough, though, gasp,  
he bounces back

a black-belt champ  
of duck and parry,  
pooh-pooing punches  
like last year's fads.  
Feints, footwork,  
and your mouth is mashed.  
A meat mustache  
sprouts, spreads,  
and the split-lip smacks  
of old pennies.

At your eyes' edges  
aghast grannies,  
grinning fiends,  
and hipster camera phones  
clicking close-ups.  
Stung by stardom,  
you sound a wounded  
bellow, bear-hug  
the ballet dancer  
against a grab-bar  
and go gangbusters  
kneeing his nuts.  
Neutered, his resistance  
coughs and crumples.  
Kicks quiet him.  
The train slackens,  
slithers to a station.  
Your fans file out.  
Some few may tell  
Metro popo,  
but most migrate  
to the car next door.  
This kid, though, creeps up—  
fifteen, sixteen,  
his septum sporting  
stainless-steel hoops,  
his hair a hennaed  
mess of dreads  
An admirer . . . maybe?  
What's he want? Change?  
A chance to be champ?  
When you bark, "beat it,"  
the brat shoots you  
a sweet-ass smile  
and swipes your backpack.

New Series I, Winter, 2024

Excerpt From *Mister Either/Or: All the Rage*  
By Aaron Poochigian

12 Godzilla  
Why wait? These white-shirts  
                        won't just vanish.  
To Hell with it: Glock-Nine  
                        held overhead,  
you pop off replies,  
                        and pillars of components,  
wired spires,  
                        explode in sparks.  
Loath to harm  
                        the high-tech hardware,  
the parish foot-soldiers  
                        refuse to fire back,  
stalk you instead.  
                        Stacks of servers  
cover their coming.  
                        Clever bastards,  
they will try tackling you,  
                        a team effort.  
Ah, but the rocking  
                        of the rack-mounted routers  
gives you, Eureka!,  
                        a grand idea:  
Why shoot your gun  
                        when your shoulder will do?  
You charge and topple  
                        some techno-totems,  
which knock over  
                        their nearest neighbors—  
and so on, like dominoes,  
                        the data dolmens  
fall and, in falling,  
                        fell each other.  
A chain-reaction!  
                        Cheered by the sound  
of zap and crash,  
                        you exult like Godzilla  
destroying toy  
                        towers in Tokyo.  
What a spectacle!  
                        The spreading collapse  
has crushed, you hope,  
                        the crouching hostiles,  
rubbed them out.

You run at random  
through the remaining  
                        maze of modules  
at the far end,  
                        find a fire-door.  
It opens outward;  
                        all is clear.  
Hot to get  
                        the Hell out now,  
you mount the stairs  
                        that meet you, leaping.  
Four flights up,  
                        you find, on the floor  
with the spacious nave,  
                        no one at first  
to shun or shoot  
                        but, Shit, then, Oof,  
you run into someone  
                        rounding a corner—  
the darkness-markswoman,  
                        that mean mother  
who hunted you before.  
                        The head-on impact  
loosens your grip,  
                        and your Glock goes flying.  
Before she can point  
                        her piece your way  
and pump your guts,  
                        you grab her gun-hand  
and make her loose  
                        her load of lead  
into the ceiling.  
                        A savage knee  
below your belt,  
                        and she breaks the hold.  
Quick as breath,  
                        her Ka-bar comes out,  
and there's no way round her  
                        to reach the street.  
Whoosh, whoosh, slicing  
                        wind from the air  
to flaunt her knife-craft,  
                        she announces, sneering:  
"I've wanted to kill you  
                        for quite some time—  
the golden boy,  
                        the Bureau's best."

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Who is this chick  
that hates you so?  
She feints, feints, lunges  
and, lumbering palooka,  
you bob and weave  
the best you can,  
death-dancing  
Damn, she's slick.  
Biding time  
until the psycho  
goes, finally,  
too far with a slash,  
you snatch and wrench  
her wrist with your right hand  
and with your left  
deliver no lightweight  
hook to her temple.  
She topples quick.  
Still worked up,  
you start strangling her,  
but the resonant tramp  
of troops intrudes  
before you're through.  
Freeing her throat,  
you collect your Glock  
and leave at last  
that homicidal  
house of faith.

### Stripping the Dead:

#### Auden's Appropriation of Anglo-Saxon Poetry

By Aaron Poochigian

W. H. Auden's work is an inexhaustible font of pleasure and, for poets, advice as well. This piece was born out of a craft study I did on his book-length poem *Age of Anxiety* in the hope of gaining insight into the way he appropriated and modernized Anglo-Saxon poetry. I have always admired the character Malin's account, early in the poem, of an RAF bombing run over Germany.

Whereas most of the rest of the "Baroque Eclogue" consists of meditations and free associations put in the mouths of not quite fully differentiated characters,

this passage distinguishes itself by virtue of being narrative:

Untalkative and tense, we took off  
anxious into air; instruments glowed,  
Dials in darkness, for dawn was not yet;  
Pulses pounded; we approached our target,  
Conscious in common of our closed Here  
And of them out there thinking of us  
In a different dream, for we die in theirs  
Who kill ours and become fathers  
Not tricky targets their trigger hands  
Are given goals by; we began our run;  
Death and damage darted at our will,  
Bullets were about, blazing anger  
Lunged from below, but we laid our eggs  
Neatly in their nest, a nice deposit  
Which instantly hatched; houses flamed in  
Shuddering sheets as we shed our big  
Tears on their town: we turned to come back,  
But at high altitudes, hostile brains  
Waited in the west, a wily flock  
Vowed to vengeance in the vast morning,  
- A mild morning where no marriage was,  
And gravity a god greater than love-  
Fierce interferers. We fought them off  
But paid a price; there was pain for some.  
"Why have They killed me?" Wondered Bert, our  
Greenhouse gunner, forgot our answer,  
Then was not with us. We watched others  
Drop into death; dully we mourned each  
Flare as it fell with a friend's lifetime,  
While we hurried on to our home bases  
To the safe smells and a sacrament  
Of tea and toast. At twenty to eight I  
Stepped on to grass, still with the living,  
While far and near a fioritura  
Of brooks and blackbirds bravely struck the  
International note with no sense  
Of historic truth, of time meaning  
Once and for all, and my watch stuttered: -  
Many have perished; more will.



Let's start by considering how Auden's choice of material in this passage relates to Anglo-Saxon poetry. The alliteration, driving rhythms and clashing rhythms characteristic of Anglo-Saxon poetry are very effective at conveying strain, struggle and brutality. Though the passage under consideration does not allude to any particular passage in Anglo-Saxon literature, it does describe violence, and the Anglo-Saxon poets excel at such descriptions, whether it be the hand-to-hand combat of *Grendel* and *Beowulf* or the epic pitched battle between the Old English and combined Irish and Norwegian forces in *The Battle of Brunanburh*. In his analysis of the Auden passage, Chris Jones explains: "Although fought with modern war-machines, the narrative of ambush and counter-ambush and the sense of tragic inevitability find direct analogues in such material as the Icelandic Sagas and the Beowulf-poet's account of the raid at Finnesburgh" (Jones 2006, 117). Apart from brutality, the only other thematic link is the "morning chill" (*morgenceald*, *Beowulf* 3022), which tends to occur in *Beowulf* when nighttime atrocities are discovered at first light. After the nighttime bombing run, Malin refers to "the vast morning,/—A mild morning where no marriage was,/And gravity a god greater than love." Rather than dwelling on the deaths he has caused (at an alienating distance), Malin sits down to "a sacrament/Of tea and toast." Auden may well be using the lack of *morgenceald* on Malin's part to draw a contrast between up-close and personal ancient warfare and mechanized and dehumanizing contemporary warfare.

Translations of *Beowulf* into contemporary idiom serve as good comparative material for assessing how Auden handles the nuts and bolts of alliterative verse in contemporary English. I will compare the diction, rhetoric and syntax in the passage under consideration with those of *Beowulf* and several translations. The most effective translators of Anglo-Saxon poetry, Tennyson, Heaney and Murphy-Sullivan, stick almost exclusively to words of Germanic origin, however much such a restriction limits word-choice. Auden

certainly favors the Germanic third of the language in *Age of Anxiety*, but he allows himself regular use of Latinate words: "instruments," "altitudes," "fioritura," and "international" are some of the more egregious examples in the passage under consideration. By fitting in these non-Germanic polysyllabics, Auden updates alliterative verse to accommodate a wider range of contemporary diction. Later in *Age of Anxiety*, he uses such diction to travesty the impersonal officialese of bureaucrats (one of his favorite modes; see *Epitaph on a Tyrant* and *The Unknown Citizen*, for example). I understand and respect Auden's decision to allow non-Germanic words into this all-too-Germanic form—he could hardly have felt that he had revived alliterative verse in contemporary English if he did not allow himself to use two thirds of the words in the dictionary.

The *Beowulf* poet frequently employs ironic understatement, and Auden follows suit with the phrase "there was pain for some" (just before the account of Bert the Gunner's death). He also uses paired adjectives to fill out a half-line ("untalkative and tense"), a common structure in *Beowulf*: *isig ond utfus* ("icy and outbound," 33a), for example, and *heah ond horngeap* ("high and horn-gabled," 82a). Auden, however, uses no kennings in this passage and very few in the poem as a whole; possibly because they felt inescapably archaic. Though he had, in fact, updated the *Beowulf* kenning *ecghefe* ("sword-hate," 70b and 1738a) as "gun-anger" in *Paid on Both Sides*, here we find only "blazing anger." An inflected language, Anglo-Saxon allows a poet to separate a noun from its qualifiers (adjectives or nouns in apposition) without grammatical confusion. This poetry loves apposition—noun after noun, for instance, reaching to define the same thing or things. Apposition does appear frequently in contemporary English, though we enjoy far less flexibility with it and tend to put the later nouns immediately after the nouns they restate. In *Age of Anxiety* Auden prefers this contiguous or "concatenated" type of apposition and only places a qualifying noun at some distance from its antecedent

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noun when there is no risk of ambiguity. He uses apposition twice in the following sentence, with the climactic phrase (“fierce interferers”) occurring at the end and some distance from what it qualifies: “. . . hostile brains /Waited in the west, a wily lock/Vowed to vengeance in the vast morning,/—A mild morning where no marriage was,/And gravity a god greater than love—/Fierce interferers.” Though these “interferers” are three full lines from what they qualify (“flock”), there is no risk here that the reader will take them as an apposition for some other noun. We also find synecdoche in this passage, a device common in ancient epic in general and *Beowulf* in particular, where we find Grendel biting a man’s “bone-locks” and Beowulf and Grendel reduced to their hands in the phrase “grip to grip.” In the Auden passage the reduction of the German airmen to “hostile brains” through synecdoche materializes (and thus temporarily dehumanizes) them. At this point the enemy are still simply “them out There.” The impersonal nature of contemporary warfare is, in fact, one of the major themes of the passage.

Though eager to adopt the Anglo-Saxon style of apposition in cases where there is no risk of ambiguity, Auden does not use the syntactic inversions common to Anglo-Saxon poetry, most likely because 1) they would have sounded archaic and poetical and thus alienated his audience, and 2) they would have introduced grammatical ambiguity and thus confused his audience. He does, however, compress contemporary idiom to fit the demands of the form: “dawn was not yet”, for example, compresses the inefficient impersonal construction: “it was not yet dawn.” In sum, though the passage under consideration preserves rhetorical and syntactic hallmarks of Anglo-Saxon poetry, the diction is entirely contemporary. As Jones puts it, “The appropriation here is total. . . Lexically, there is nothing in the above passage which would indicate that something ancient underlies this poetry” (Jones 2006, 118).

The passage, I believe, gives us an example of Auden’s standard method for appropriating and rejuvenating

inherited poetic forms. This theory finds corroboration in the following passage in which Auden (most likely but maybe Norman Holmes Pearson) sums up the legacy of Milton’s poetry: “Milton’s influence on later poets was principally through his diction, which is precisely the element in his style which, when the subject does not demand it, is most likely to fall into pomposity. Few, if any, of them made use of his poetic syntax, his extraordinary way of arranging his clauses . . . This is a pity, because syntax, the structural element in style, is adaptable to different subjects and different sensibilities in a way that diction is not” (Auden and Pearson 1950, Vol. 3, xvi).

Thus I can conclude, with some confidence, that Auden’s approach to appropriating and rejuvenating forms of ancient poetry was as follows—1) replicate the rhythms (and rhyme schemes if applicable), 2) steal as much of the syntax as current idiom will allow, 3) use only contemporary diction. I like this method and what it implies: first, that vocabulary is a river flowing through our language: some words evaporate or obsolesce in fetid lagoons; others ride tributaries into the main current. Vital poetry draws water from the river of its own time. Second, that the poetic forms our language begat or adopted (often in an altered state) are shapes into which this river water can be poured, and they are eternal. They may pass out of use, but they are always there waiting to be revitalized with living idiom.

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- Jones, Chris. 2006. *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

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## Reprints and Translations Published

### Richard Eberhart

- Brotherhood of Men (1949)

### James Dorr

- The Westfarer (1995)
- The Worm in the Wood (2001)

### Translated by Bruce Byfield

- Exeter Riddle 47
- Beowulf, lines 1335b – 1379

### Translated by Michael Collings

- The Battle of Brunanburh

## Book Links Added

### Beverley Braune

- Historic Lacunae and Poetic Space: A Creative Approach to Old Norse Poetry and Poetics (contains an epic poem inspired by skaldic meters, "Skulváði Úlfr")

### Ted Charnley

- An Invocation of Fragments (collection; contains the alliterative poems "As He Is to Us" and "Other Structures")

### Frank Coffman

- The Coven's Hornbook and Other Poems (collection; includes the alliterative poem "Grettir's Battle with Glam")

### Michael Collings

- Dark Designs: Forms and Fantasies (collection; contains the alliterative poems "Riddle", "Grendel's Mother", and "DCCXCIII: A Fragment")

### A.M. Juster

- "The Phoenix" (translation from Old English) in Spoke Ten.

### Karl Kirchwey

- The Wandering Island (collection; contains the alliterative poem "Gangardinae")

### Tony Mitchell

- Life's Lines (collection; contains the alliterative poems "Toys" and "Strange Season")

## Links Added to Other Works

### Donald P. Goodman III

- The Road with No End (self-published)

### Sam Newton

- Hrædwaldeshrim [The Reckoning of Rædwald] (Self-published)

### Donald Mace Williams

- Defier of Gravity (a riddle), published online in PulseBeat Poetry Journal
- Sweet and Sour (a riddle), published online by Better than Starbucks

### In Mallorn and other Tolkien society journals

- Susan Frances Edwards (Tuilinde), Slaying the Dragon, Mallorn 49, p. 42
- Pat Masson, Hymn to Earendil, Mallorn 14, p. 32
- Pat McIntosh, Grimhelm's Song, Mallorn 7, p. 29
- Gill Page, Lament for Galdor the Brave, Mallorn 21, pp. 20-21
- Colin Rosintheil, "The Lay of Earringa" in Anor 11, pp. 10-11 (Journal of the Cambridge Tolkien Society)
- Tim Scratcherd, The Sealing of Gondolin, Mallorn 16, p. 7
- Valerie Sutton, The Lay of Eowyn (half-lines w/o alliteration), Mallorn 24, pp. 218-224
- Dan Timmons, The Ballad of Bart and Beth, Mallorn 34, p. 20 0

### In Mythic Circle (Mythopoeic Society journal)

- "Hild" by Tim Callahan [alliterative iambic tetrameter rhyming couplets], Mythic Circle #4, pp. 36-37
- "Prayer to Tyr", "Far from Jötenheim". and "A Prayer to Balder" in "The World War I Poems of Nathan Whilc" by Joe R. Christopher, Mythic Circle #28, pp. 41, 42, 46.
- "On Caterpillars, Corneille and Canova" by Joshua Drake, Mythic Circle #33, pp. 48-49
- "Odin Wins the Mead of Poetry" by S.R. Hardy, Mythic Circle #36, pp. 6-12
- The Hoard of Hrothiric by Erin Lale, Mythic Circle #4, p. 6,
- The Wedding of Beorwine by Erin Lale, Mythic Circle #15, p.5
- Skadi: Water Cycle by Erin Lale, Mythic Circle #18, p. 36