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## SURVIVAL AND REVIVALS OF ALLITERATIVE MODES

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Writers on the so-called "alliterative revival" usually have in mind the *Gawain*-poet, the *Morte Arthure*, *Piers Plowman*, and its immediate predecessors and successors. Many of these are notable works on any count, and several have been accorded the dignity of separate editions. Since most of them are written in the alliterative long line we tend to take that as the norm, and the stanzaic refinements of *Gawain* and *Pearl* as evidence of their writers' unusual verbal dexterity. But this is to leave out of account evidence suggesting that the stanzaic form was established fifty years or so before these poems were written. The process of decomposition - or recomposition - that is so noticeable in *Lazamon* had probably proceeded throughout the 13th century. The date of the second *Lazamon* MS<sup>1</sup> (c.1270-80) suggests that his poem had found a public throughout that century. Many of the Harley lyrics - and they can hardly be earlier than the turn of the century - are heavily alliterative: one might regard them as so many variations on all the possibilities of the alliterative line - experiments that threw up new patterns such as we find in these lines:

Mon in þe mone stond ant strit;  
On is bot-forke is burþen he bereþ.<sup>2</sup>

There are even signs of internal alliteration - possibly due to Welsh influences about which there has already been some speculation<sup>3</sup> - and even the short-lined lyric "Lenten ys come wip loue to toune" has a more or less distinct caesural break between alliterating staves; it builds up to a climax of six lines all alliterating on *w*; though admittedly there are similar bravura effects in Anglo-French verse.<sup>4</sup>

I take the poem *Somer Soneday*, published by Carleton Brown in the *Klaeber Festschrift*, and reprinted by his pupil R.H. Robbins in his collection of *Historical Poems* (No. 38),<sup>5</sup> to represent a further stage in this metrical experimentation. It is certainly more ambitious than any of the lyrics, even in its present defective form. Whether or no the king it describes as "a caytif he was become, and kenned on care" (line 129) was Edward II (and I think it doubtful), it must - on paleographical grounds - be dated before 1450.<sup>6</sup> And its language suggests a West Midland provenance, like that of the Harley lyrics. The first stanza will show some of the affinities with, and differences from, the more familiar alliterative poems:

Opon a somer soneday se I þe sonne  
 Erly risinde in þe est ende;  
 Day dawep ouer doune, derk is in towne,  
 I warp on my wedes, to wode wolde I wende.  
 Wiþ kenettes kene þat wel coupe crie and conne,  
 I hiede to holte wiþ honteres hende.  
 So ryfly on rugge roon and raches ronne  
 þat in launde vnder lynde me leste to lende -  
 And Lenede.

Kenettes questede to quelle,  
 Al-so breme so any belle;  
 þe deer daunteden in þe delle,  
 þat al þe downe denede. (1-13)

The opening line suggests the opening line of *Piers Plowman*; "in launde under lynde me leste to lende" reappears at the beginning of *Piers Plowman* B XVIII; "warp on my wedes" is a variant of the formulaic half-line found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 2025. Later there are such set phrases as "browes ibente" and "blisful burde". Moreover the scene described, the hunting terms deployed, suggest immediately the deer-hunt in *Gawain*, and other later poems. In the alliterative patterns, however, there are three striking differences from *Gawain*:

- (1) There are regularly two alliterating staves in the second half line.
- (2) Alternate lines are linked by rhyme or assonance.
- (3) The bob and wheel is inverted, and looks both before and after: it is tied into the main stanza *and* to the succeeding stanza.

True, the poet finds it hard to keep to this pattern throughout, but he then resorts to still more complex verbal devices, illustrated in a verse put in the mouth of a climber on fortune's wheel:

Be kynde it me com  
 to cleyne kyngene kyngdom,  
 kyndom be kynde.  
 To me þe whel wile wynde.  
 Wynd wel, worþliche wy3th;  
 fare fortune, frendene fly3th  
 Flitte forþe fly3tte  
 On þe selue sete to sitte. (79-86)

This is more complex, and more cryptic, than anything in *Pearl*.

Further, the theme and the presentation thereof place *Somer Soneday* in the centre of the alliterative corpus. As the dreamer in Langland meets with Nature and the dreamer in the *Parlement of the Three Ages* with Elde and Youth, so here the narrator sees Fortune in a wood, turning her wheel - "a wonder whelwry3th" - the very formula to be used in the later *Awntyrs of Arthure*, also in alliterative stanzas; and so also in *Golagros*, not to mention the alliterative

*Morte Arthure*, where Fortune, finely dressed, as here, again brings her wheel into a wood. Indeed, if we go just beyond the alliterative border to the early *Book of the Duchess*, we can say that much of 14th century poetry is found in embryo in *Somer Soneday*. It suggests that there was already an audience for subtle and sinuous alliterative verse: an audience that one can define only as consisting of all such classes as would be attracted by descriptions of a deer hunt - which means everybody from noble lords and hunting parsons to sturdy yeomen, in short, the audience for whom Chaucer made his Theseus a servant of the hunting goddess. Alliterative verse is no longer merely the medium for chronicle and tales of battles long ago. It has developed a springy and elastic stanzaic form that can, and will, be applied to all sorts of purposes. This form offers relief from the monotony of the long line, and great possibilities to the metrical virtuoso. The northern and Scots alliterative poems of the 15th century will be almost entirely stanzaic. Nothing in Old or Early Middle English prepares us for this flowering - unless *Deor* does.

If *Somer Soneday* focuses on recent history, the next items we must consider, the poems of Laurence Minot, are on purely contemporary topics. He is the first journalist in verse, an early Skelton. His stanzas on events in the early years of Edward III<sup>7</sup> are pithy, pungent, largely in monosyllables, doubtless aiming at a wide circulation, like Elizabethan broadsides - but much more accomplished. The pattern of roughly equivalent half lines still persists - the caesural break is marked, and traditional formulas like "fers and fell", "wight in wede", are put to use. One such formula, "god and good men", exemplifies the contribution of older vernacular prose usage to alliterative verse.<sup>8</sup> It belongs originally to the Norse stratum of Danelaw speech - so is found in the *Orrmulum* - and will turn up again in *Piers Plowman*, having escaped beyond the Danelaw. A more distinctive formula of similar origin is found only in Orm and in the alliterative *Wars of Alexander* - the description of the Wizard who

Did on him his dragon-hame and drafe thurȝe the sale,  
With slike a rowste and rerid, the romance it wittnes  
þat nere had bernes for that bere bene broȝt out of  
witt.<sup>9</sup>

The alliterative line has always been hospitable to such inclusive formulae, and Minot has some fresh ones like "cony nor cat". But my present purpose is to note his use of the rhymed line and the linked stanza, in the repeated phrase, as in:

Skottes out of Berwik and of Abirdene  
At þe Bannokburn war ȝe to kene;  
bare sloȝh ȝe many sakles, als it was sene,  
And now has King Edward wroken it, I wene.  
It es wrokin, I wene, wele wurth þe while  
War ȝit with þe Skottes for þai er ful of gile!<sup>10</sup>

The next stanza picks up the word Skottes, beginning

Whare er 3e Skottes of Saint Iohnes toune?

A later stanza has some lusty abusive lines that show a development - if that's the word - of the flyting tradition first found in the Unferth episode in *Beowulf*:

Rughfute riueling, now kindels þi care  
Berebag with þi boste, þi biging es bare.

Northern poets were to prove all too partial to that kind of mud-slinging, which often produces nonce compounds like that *berebag*.<sup>11</sup>

Minot's verses on the taking of Calais (1347) have a shorter, brisker, heavily alliterative line; a variation on the last line of one stanza provides the first word of the next:

3owre care es cumen, will 3e it ken.

leading to

*Kend* it es how 3e war kene . . .

though as in *Somer Soneday* this device breaks down after seven stanzas.

As a boy, Chaucer must have heard such verses sung or shouted in the streets. And I believe that neither Machaut nor de Meun, nor Dante nor Boccaccio ever pushed alliterative rhythms and phrases out of his head. I have argued elsewhere that he knew *Piers Plowman* - of which the first revision was probably finished before he had penned a line - and that it was accessible to him in London.<sup>12</sup> There was nothing limitingly local in its language: a Londoner, Thomas Usk, had lines from *Piers Plowman* running in *his* head just before they lopped it off in 1388,<sup>13</sup> and just about the time that Langland was writing the unknown author of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* was blending scenes from Geoffrey of Monmouth and the French Alexander romances into a didactic epic that was evidently intended, *inter alia*, as a comment on the government of Edward III and the conduct of his French wars. *Morte Arthure* too, then, is a topical poem, though far more dignified than Minot - it perhaps belongs to Lincolnshire rather than the North.<sup>14</sup> Its nearest antecedent is *Winner and Waster*, about the mid century,<sup>15</sup> though *Winner and Waster* is not as topical as it looks - not so much a tract for the times as a "rather poor" variation on the favourite medieval theme of saving and spending. It is in *Winner and Waster* that the standard alliterative line reappears, with some modifications. *Gawain* represents a fusion of this traditional line with the earlier stanzaic developments outlined above. It keeps the traditional pattern in the body of the stanza but admits rhyme and rhyme links in the bob and wheel.

In the period 1350-1380, then, the main drift, the dominant trend, of vernacular verse was towards alliteration, with tail rhyme a very poor second. Chaucer had no reason to think of it as low, barbarous, or uncouth, even though the court favoured French,

and even though French verse was more delicate, graceful and witty. Merely to choose to write in English was to recognise the possibilities of native verse. And Chaucer evidently felt the peculiar fitness of native alliteration for describing scenes of combat and warfare: scenes for which neither French nor Italian verse provided him with adequate models - whilst Froissart had still to write his prose accounts of the fighting in France.

The main evidence is in the tourney scene in the *Knights Tale* (CT, I.2600-20) and the description of the naval engagement off Actium in the *Legend of Good Women*, 635-55. Almost all the features of alliterative poetry - including the "liberties" taken by the stanzaists - are to be found in these two passages, which perhaps resemble each other more than any other sets of similar length in the whole canon (not least in repeated inversions and plethora of deictic pronouns). It is worth noting that in both the alliteration is entirely consonantal:

Ther shyveren shaftes upon sheeldes thikke (KnT 2605)  
With gryselly soun out goth the grete gonne (LGW 637)

and that the caesural break is usually clearly marked:

And he hym hurtleth / with his hors adoun (KnT 2616)  
He styngeth hym / upon his speres orde (LGW 645)

though the break is delayed and less marked in a line like

He feeleth thurgh the herte-spoon the prikke (KnT 2606)

Though older battle pieces are heavily formulaic, few of the formulas appear here: combat and weaponry had become more elaborate by the fourteenth century and it was no longer enough to say "faege men feollon". Yet a few words and phrases keep the flavour of the "classical" language, such as "shyveren shaftes", and the adverb *heterly* (LGW 638). From the 12th to the 15th century the latter word is encountered only in alliterative contexts, namely in the alliterative prose of the Katherine group, the alliterative *Troy* and *Alexander* poems, *Gawain*, and here. Another link with *Gawain* is provided by the French verb *foyne*:

He foyneth on his feet with his tronchoun (KnT 2615)

So Arthur's household *foyned* the Green Knight's head. One of the few other examples of the word is in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (1494): "foynes faste atte the fore breste with flawmande swerdez".<sup>16</sup>

The Actium passage also takes us to the alliterative *Morte*, for there, at lines 3644ff, is to be found the only other verse account of a sea battle: it is probably based on contemporary accounts of the battle of Espagnole-sur-Mer. Chaucer in his medieval way has modernised Cleopatra's fleet, giving it guns and grapnels - the *crepers* of *Morte* 3667 which are used in both passages to tear down the ropes supporting mast and topcastle. In both accounts the hatches are burnt, the foe thrown or driven overboard (at which, in

the *Morte*, 3698, "alle oure lordes one lowde laughene at ones"). Both begin and end in the same way:

Up goth the trompe, and for to shoute and shete  
 (LGW 635)  
 Merily iche a mate . . . braggede in trompes.  
 (MA 3657)  
 And thus the longe day in fyght they spende  
 [Antony flees] And al his folk to-go that best go myghte  
 (LGW 650-3)  
 Thus they dalte that daye, thire dubbidde knyghtes,  
 Tille alle the Danes ware dede, and in the depe throwene  
 (MA 3693-4)

If there are few formulas in either piece, that is because there were no models for either poet to follow. But the naval battle and the tournament alike show Chaucer exploiting the onomatopoeic effect of certain initial consonant groups, especially to suggest harsh noise and violent action. So in describing the "grisly" temple of Mars he clogs the lines with phrases like "knotty, knarry", "stubbes sharpe", "Contek with bloody knyf", "shippes hoppesteres" (all from *KnT* 1975ff). In this same passage we also find an unusual number of lines with marked caesural pause that breaks them into two half-lines linked by alliteration:

For wyndowe on the wal	ne was ther noon (1988)
The pykepurs	and eek the pale Drede (1977)
Amyddes of the temple	sat Meschaunce (2009)
The shepne brennyng	with the blake smoke (2000)
	(transverse allit.)

It is in the light of these passages that we must consider the Parson's disclaimer: "I am a Southren man, / I kan nat geste - 'rum ram ruf' - by lettre" (*CT*, X.42-3). This is undoubtedly pejorative in intention. But unless it is glancing at Chaucer's own "rum ram ruf" - and note that the knight has overweighted alliteration in some of his lines about the tourney, eg. "He thurgh the thikkeste of the throng gan threste, / There stomblen steedes stronge . . .", 2612-13) - Unless that is what is satirised, the words tell us no more than that the unworldly, serious-minded Parson did not hold with the secular poetry popular or fashionable in his day. He has been asked to *tell a tale* and he is eschewing both alliteration and rhyme ("God woot, *rym* holde I but litel bettre"). And as a vehicle for narrative (as opposed to didactic or vision poetry) alliterative verse was indeed associated with the North. But the Parson avers that he cannot - and will not - compose it, not that he cannot understand it. "Rum ram ruf" may well allude to the enriched or overweighted alliterative lines that are found in the northern stanzaic romances. It is by no means certain that *geste* means, as is usually supposed, "compose in alliterative measure".<sup>17</sup> It may mean simply "compose a geste, a tale".

But it is the phrase "by lettre" that we should here attend to. English poets had apparently composed alliterative verse for seven

hundred years, à la M. Jourdain, without ever naming it - so much was it the natural, the inherited medium. It is curious that about the same time that Chaucer wrote his Tales an equally self-conscious West Midland poet has described his tale as "with lel letteres loken",<sup>18</sup> a beautifully apt description of the alliterative line, whether or no the following phrase "in londe so hatz ben longe" refers to the continuity of the alliterative tradition.<sup>19</sup> Neither poet, of course, meant by "lettre" written letters of the alphabet, but initial sounds, as the Squire does in his Tale (*CT*, f.101), describing the Knight who hailes in at the hall door, precisely like the Green Knight, and announces his message "withouten vice of silable or of lettre".

There was, to be sure, a familiar rhetorical term for alliteration as found in Latin. Gerald of Wales (who claimed, incidentally, that the French were entirely ignorant of this verbal elegance) cites two examples from Virgil:

Tales casus Cassandra canebat (*Æn*.iii.183);  
Dum dubitet Natura marem faceretve puellam,  
Natus es, O pulcher, pene puella, puer.<sup>20</sup>

*Annominatio*, says Gerald of Wales, was much favoured by the Welsh (or as Camden was to put it, "the English & Welsh delighted much in licking the letter, and clapping together of Agnominations").<sup>21</sup> An English example cited by Gerald is very revealing. It is the phrase

God [good] is togedere gamen and wisdom.

Though he does not recognise it as such, this makes a perfectly respectable alliterative verse line and it also illustrates the English fondness for putting gnomic statements into alliterative form: compare "ofte owere dom at owere durre charret", which I find scribbled in the margin of MS Lambeth 93, f.60a, of the same date.

This takes me well beyond my brief. Yet we cannot understand Chaucer's attitude to alliterative verse, or the general acceptance of it, unless we recognise alliteration as part of the very texture of our language and our thought. I give a mere scatter of Chaucer's alliterative combinations, many of them instanced only in earlier alliterative verse, though some doubtless were more widespread and in colloquial use. They are tenacious of life because they compact general experience.

(1) combinations of cognates:

*CT*, II.388 sent his sonde (frequent in *Lajamon*, but not earlier)  
I.2338 brondes . . . brennynge (no precise parallel earlier, but a similar phrase occurs in the Old Frisian Laws, and see Oakden, p.237)<sup>22</sup>

(2) combinations of similars:

I.2605: shaftes . . . sheldes (in OE and ON verse)  
II.873 wynd and weder (*Lajamon*, Katherine group)  
I.309 War and wys (OE, *Orrmulum*)<sup>23</sup>



## (3) combinations of near-synonyms:

- I.536 dyke and delve (Lazamon, *Piers Plowman*)  
 I.1416 drugge and drawe (Old Frisian Laws; also Dunbar, Douglas)

## (4) antitheses (very common):

- VII.796 dale and downe (OE *Phoenix*, Lazamon, Orm)  
 PF 46 lered or lewed (Lazamon, Orm)  
 I.1837 loth or lief (OE and ON verse)

## (5) Nouns chained to adjectives:

- V.1305 cares cold (cf. *Beowulf* 2396: "cealdum cearsiðum")  
 I.2419 sorwes sore (Katherine group)  
 I.2309 wodes wilde (Lazamon)

## (6) Miscellaneous combinations:

- II.1104 falleth hym to feete (OE, Lazamon)  
 I.2171 As a leon he his lookyng caste (*Piers Plowman*)

On the other hand, many of Chaucer's combinations are *not* found earlier: not "straunge strondes" (CT, I.13), "sterne stremes" (I. 2610) - nor even "fair of face" (VII.28). The fact is that the whole set of the language - much strengthened by the Norse admixture - has always favoured such pairings. This circumstance helped powerfully to keep alliterative poetry alive.

It did not die from disuse, but from being overdone. The admission of two alliterating staves into the second half line opened the way for lines in which almost every word alliterates - "rum ram ruf" indeed. On the other hand the admission of rhymed couplets made for conflict, or compromise. Before the mid-century we find even half-lines riming in *Love is Life*, attributed to Richard Rolle -

Lere to luf, if thou wyl lyfe / when thou sall hethen fare  
 All thi thought til Hym thou gyf / that may þe kepe fra kare<sup>24</sup>

- where only the first and fourth half-lines alliterate (within themselves) and the metre is syllabic. *The Choristers' Complaint*,<sup>25</sup> a decidedly northern text, is likewise syllabic; it keeps the old half-line pattern but loads the second half-line with double alliteration and the first sometimes with triple:

Uncomly in cloistre I cowre ful of care;  
 I looke as a lurdein and - listne til my lare -  
 The song of the ce-sol-fa dos me siken sare  
 And sitte stotiant on a song a moneth and mare.

(lines 1-4)

Even here, alliteration sometimes yields to rhyme:

Way me, leve Water, thou werkes al til shame  
 Thou stumblest and stikes fast as thou were lame.  
 (17-18)

In such jeux d'esprit we are far away from traditional formulaic verse, alike in theme and language. Only one phrase sounds like a set formula - "I donke upon David" ("I hammer away at the Psalms"). In *Piers Plowman* too they "ding upon David" (B.III.310). Yet further away are the lines on *The Blacksmiths* ("Unsocial hours").<sup>26</sup> In this deliberately onomatopoeic exercise, once more, some lines have five alliterating staves some even six, like triple hammer blows:

Swarte smekyd smeþes / smateryd wyth smoke  
 Dryve me to deth / with den of here dyntes  
 Swech noys on nightes / ne herd men never  
 What knavene cry / and clateryng of knockes  
 þe camede congons / cryen after "Col! Col!"

This outdoes Virgil's representation of the clang of hammer on anvil in *Aeneid* VIII.423, and is only equalled when the Green Knight sharpens his axe:

Quat! hit clatered in the clyff, as hit cleve schulde,  
 As one upon a gryndelston hade grounden a sythe  
 What! hit wharred and whette, as water at a mulne;  
 What! hit rusched and ronge, rawþe to here.  
 (2201-4)

The alliterative technique survived and flourished precisely in these Northern areas where initial consonants preserved their strength and where words with strong initial consonantal groups bulked large in the vocabulary.

As I have already suggested, the Northern and Scottish development is not from the alliterative line as we know it in the 14th century masterpieces but from the rhymed stanza. The gap between *Somer Soneday* and the Northern *Awntyrs of Arthur*, or *Golagros*, is not so great as the text books lead one to believe. Both the Northern romances may belong to the late fourteenth, not the fifteenth, century. Then, probably, come the *Buke of the Houlat* and *Rauf Coilyear*. The technique of all four is adequately analysed by F.J. Amours,<sup>27</sup> and I need not dwell on it, save to mention that traditional formulae again appear in mainly fighting scenes. The York Plays, so thick with alliterative expressions, approach the Scottish stanza form in Play 46 (The Appearance of Our Lady to Thomas). Gavin Douglas, in the Prologue to *Aeneid VIII* adapts the stanza form to moralising satire. Douglas is a bishop, and familiar with Renaissance classical scholarship, yet he can still turn his hand to this older form. The opening lines indicate his acquaintance with the tradition:

Of dreffling and dremis quhat dow it to endyt?  
 For, as I lenyt in a ley in Lent this last nycht,  
 I slaid on a swevynnyng, slummerand a lite.<sup>28</sup>

The dreamer in *Piers Plowman* likewise "lened to a Lenten", and in fact Douglas has a cryptic reference to *Piers Plowman* in his *Palice of Honour* (line 1714). The prologue to *Aeneid VIII*, like some earlier alliterative verse, is estates satire (and David Lindsay was to revive the pattern in his *Satire of the Three Estates* 20 years later); one or two long-lived alliterative phrases pop up, like "Cayniſ kyne", found also in Langland (B.IX.127); the line "was nevir wrocht in this world mayr wofull a wycht" (6) is a formula found also in the *Awntyrs of Arthur* (189). There is much thrust and parry in the dialogue. Evidently Douglas found nothing incongruous in setting this essentially vernacular diatribe alongside Virgil.

Douglas wrote this prologue in or before 1513. 1513 was the year of Flodden, the greatest disaster in Scottish history, the end of an epoch. It was fittingly commemorated in *Scottish Field*, the last alliterative poem in the epic chronicle style. It is in the direct line of descent from the alliterative *Morte Arthur*, and uses the same kind of alliteration, the same vocabulary, the same 14th century formulas (e.g. makeles of mercy, nicked them with nay). Whole lines can be matched in the 14th century poems:

That all the dale dunned of their derfe strokes (329; cf.  
*Morte Arthure* 2031)  
 Clowdes cast vp full cleerlye like Castles full hie (307;  
 cf. *Gawain* 2001)  
 Thus he promised to the prince that paradice weldeth (203;  
 cf. *St. Erkenwald* 161)  
 And profer him a present all of pure gold (106; cf. *Piers  
 Plowman* A.VII.282)<sup>29</sup>

The alliterative line, in more than one sense, goes down fighting.

A few years before Flodden, however, the traditional line had been put to rather new uses in Dunbar's *Two Married Women and the Widow*, that rich blend of traditional alliterative language and setting with sharp satire and colloquial abuse. The thick spitting rasping Northern consonants have always been good for vilification: when combined alliteratively they are deafening. And the alliterative tradition, insofar as it survived after Flodden, died of its own too much. Dunbar, Kennedy, Montgomery, all raked the gutters for new and dirty alliterative epithets. By the time James VI, at the tender age of 18, came to set down his "Reulis and Cawtelis" for Scottish poetry, "tumbling" verse, as he called it, had come to be associated entirely with such flytings.

His account<sup>30</sup> constitutes the epitaph of the alliterative tradition. Knox set the Scots to psalm singing instead. And EK's remark in his *Dedication to the Shepherd's Calendar* suggests the same sort of degradation, or limitation, in English use: "I score and spue out the rakehellye route of our ragged rymers - for so themselves use to hunt the letter". But a loose alliterative epilogue to a local mystery play indicates that the mode was still acceptable on formal occasions to a small town audience as late as the 1550's.

Now, wursheppful souereyns þat syttyn here in syth,  
 Lordys and ladyes and frankelens in fay,  
 With alle maner of abesyans we recomaunde vs ryght  
 Plesantly to 3our persones that present ben in play.<sup>31</sup>

So completely did the tradition die out that when OE poems were rediscovered and printed in the 17th century scholars had difficulty in recognising them as verse. George Hickes, the great non-juring divine, was the first to do this in his massive *Thesaurus Linguarum Septentrionalium* (1705). Hickes was a little troubled by the varying number of syllables; but he recognised that the words were linked alliteratively - aptly and rhythmically ("concinne valde et rythmice conjunctis").<sup>32</sup> He saw that alliteration was unlikely to derive from usage in Latin poets (though Landor was to devise an imaginary conversation in which Ovid discussed the matter in exile among the Goths!) And Hickes recognised that alliteration was basic in Langland too - indeed he thought that he was imitating Anglo-Saxon, because he has the same "tinnitum consonantem initialium". His quotations from Spenser and Donne show too that he had some sense of the persistence of alliteration in English verse. But his remarks are buried deep in a great folio volume that few could afford and that never sold very well. A century later an historian like Sharon Turner could still imagine that alliteration was merely an "occasional ornament" of Anglo-Saxon verse. Not till German scholarship got to work were the techniques of alliteration thoroughly investigated; notably by Rieger, in 1876,<sup>33</sup> who drew on Snorri's *Háttatal* and discovered, for instance, that in Old English as in Old Saxon the key is always to be found in the first accented syllable of the second half-line. Then in 1885 Sievers proclaimed the doctrine of the Five Types that was eventually challenged by Heusler and Leonard. The debate still continues, as may be seen from an article by Winfred Lehmann on the alliteration of Old Saxon Poetry in a collection of essays on the *Heliand*.<sup>34</sup>

I began by questioning the usefulness of the term "Alliterative Revival". There is only one century to which that term might apply - our own. The return to alliterative patterns in our own time has been wholly deliberate, and in origin largely academic: an unexpected offshoot from the grafting of Anglo-Saxon studies on to university curricula. Of 19th century metrical innovators only two, Hopkins and Tennyson, show any interest in alliterative metre (in Swinburne alliteration is merely a disease). Hopkins, though he found *Piers Plowman* not worth reading for its content, professed to see in it the basis of his sprung rhythm: he doesn't even mention its alliteration. Perhaps he took it for granted: certainly in some of his poems alliteration almost amounts to a structural principle:

Some candle clear burns / somewhere I come by.  
 I muse at how its being / puts blissful back  
 With yellowy moisture / mild night's blear-all black,  
 Or to-fro tender trambeams / truckle at the eye.<sup>35</sup>

He is in this respect different from most Romantic and post-Romantic

poets, who, however, were perhaps more alert to the sensuous effects of alliteration than their predecessors. So we find Wordsworth employing it in lines like:

A blue rim borders all the lake's still brink . . .  
There waves, that, hardly weltering, die away,  
Tip their smooth ridges with a softer ray.<sup>36</sup>

Tennyson owed his acquaintance with Anglo-Saxon verse to his Cambridge friend John Kemble, first professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University. He produced a version of *The Battle of Brunanburh*, which does at least indicate the pattern of roughly equivalent half-lines, even if inflexional losses make his lines more staccato than his originals. He used the text and translation in Guest's *History of English Rhythms* (1838). His metre is in fact unrhymed dactyls and trochaics:

Edmund Atheling  
Gaining a lifelong  
Glory in battle  
Slew with the sword-edge  
There by Brunanburh  
Brake the shield-wall.

To alliteration as such Tennyson was always particularly partial, confessing that he had to comb through early drafts, eliminating alliterative excesses. But his Victorian nostalgia for Anglo-Saxon virtues never took him further than this formal battlepiece.

For the first recreation of the Anglo-Saxon verse pattern we must turn to Ezra Pound. His version of the *Seafarer*, as Saxonists will gleefully point out, is full of howlers: his Anglo-Saxon was no stronger than his Greek, or his Chinese. It was the rhythm of the verse that attracted him. He puts down the Old English *Charms* and the *Seafarer* as required reading. His rendering of the latter at least shows us what we cannot reproduce in modern verse: namely, the weight of the consonants (and double consonants); the clear vowels in unaccented final syllables (*alegdon*); the effect of the "gripped" epithet that holds a noun as in a vice. Our unemphatic articles, definite or indefinite, merely clutter the alliterative line. The Old English line is wrought and fashioned, like masonry. Even when it is liquid it is sonorous:

Aledon þa leofne þeoden.

Pound's version of the Old English elegy (written at about the same time that he was advising Eliot to cut out the seapiece from *The Waste Land*) does recreate the beat and pattern of the original:

May I for my own self song's truth reckon,  
Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days  
Hardship endured oft.  
Bitter breastcares have I abided,  
Known on my keel many a care's hold

And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent  
 Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship's head  
 While she tossed close to cliffs. Coldly afflicted,  
 My feet were by frost benumbed,  
 Chill its chains are.

Some of these lines keep the original stress and alliteration. In others the stress shifts to forms that would not normally carry it in Old English. In 1.2 the alliteration fails. Sometimes he allows double alliteration in the second half-line ("days little durable"). But in general he gives us the resonance and mood of the piece better than Tennyson.

There come now no kings or Caesars  
 Nor gold-giving lords like those gone.

But we are still within the realms of translation - as we are in Gavin Bone's alliterative renderings, one of which appeared in *The London Mercury* in its heyday. Bone's version of *The Seafarer* is rather a poem suggested by *The Seafarer* than a rendering.<sup>37</sup>

It is when we come to Auden that we find a poet who has been taught Anglo-Saxon (and brought up on Norse saga). His first long work, the charade *Paid on Both Sides* (1930), based on a saga situation, is full of allusions to Anglo-Saxon poetic themes, from *Finnesburh* to *Maldon*, and of phrases from *Beowulf* and the elegies:

. . . Doomed men awoke . . .	
Would wake their master	Who lay with woman,
Upstairs together,	Tired after love . . .
Guns shook,	Hot in the hand,
Fighters lay,	Groaning on ground
Gave up life.	Edward fell, . . .
By no means refused fight.	

This still has an air of pastiche; but Auden's interest (or was it the Oxford syllabus?) took him to Middle English alliterative prose and he began a poem with a line straight out of the alliterative prose of *Sawles Warde*:

Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle<sup>38</sup>

And in 1945, in his New York Eclogue, *The Age of Anxiety*, he gave us a large scale alliterative poem, in half-lines linked by alliteration, with marked caesural pause. Most of them can be read according to the classical five types, though the second half line often has to end with a stress.

Curiously enough, the poem is most successful in scenes of combat (this time air-combat):

Untalkative and tense, we took off  
 Anxious into air; our instruments glowed,  
 Dials in darkness, for dawn was not yet;  
 Pulses pounded; we approached our target . . .

Bullets were about, blazing anger  
Lunged from below . . .

The proportion of run-on lines is noticeable, and there is some repetition with variation in the following half-line, in the Old English manner ("instruments glowed, /Dials in darkness"). Auden even makes use of tags, but satirically - they are the tired tags of copy-writers and newscasters:

Definitely different. Has that democratic  
Extra elegance. Easy to clean.  
Will gladden grand-dad and your girl friend.  
Lasts a lifetime. Leaves no odour.

Part of the dialogue is in the manner of the Old English *Deor*, with a refrain corresponding to *Deor's* "þæs ofereode: þisses alswa mæg": "Many have perished; more will". The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer who spoke of Auden's adaptation of Langland's alliterative method<sup>39</sup> was misled by two purely verbal parallels in the line he cited:

When in wanhope I wandered away and alone.

That line is not only uncharacteristic: it bears no rhythmic resemblance to *Piers Plowman* at all.

Meanwhile, at Oxford, Tolkien and C.S. Lewis went on teaching Old English and Middle English poetry. Lewis wrote a plain man's guide to alliterative metre (or rather a plain woman's: it was contributed to an ill-fated woman's journal called *Lysistrata*). They composed alliterative verse as a parlour, or bar-parlour game. But a younger Magdalen man, Richard Murphy, who ruined a year of *Beowulf* with me, made several effective adaptations of the Old English line - using two-stressed half-lines usually linked by alliteration in his poem, "The Last Galway Hooker":

That "tasty" carpenter from Connemara, Cloherly,  
Helped by his daughter, had half-planked the hull  
In his eightieth year, when at work he died.<sup>40</sup>

Murphy's poem on "The Cleggan Disaster" has some subtle variations on this pattern; and again it is noteworthy that the scenes he is describing might have come from Old English poems about the trials and dangers of the sea.

Finally, the wheel, having come full circle, stops with the author of the *Lord of the Rings*, who composed light alliterative verses in Anglo-Saxon that ignore all the rules and conform to modern syllabic counting and modern rhyme. One about a seafarer who succumbed to a mermaid is too long to quote. But the tune to which the other is set may be recognised by its last stanza, which can serve as a tailpiece (Caedmon's Hymn up to date):

Uton singan scirne sang,  
herian Beorc and byrcen cynn,  
lare' and lareow, leornungmann -  
sie us sæl and hæl and wynn!  
Ac sceal feallan on þæt fyr  
lustes, leafes, lifes wan!  
Beorc sceal agan langne tir,  
breme glæme glengan wang!



This essay was destined for the present volume, according to the information I have from Dr Helen Cooper. I am very grateful to her for letting me know of the existence of the essay, and to Professor Peter Heyworth, as Professor Bennett's literary executor, for allowing me to use it here. I received the piece in the form of a handwritten script for a lecture: I have amended one or two passages appropriate only to the original occasion and to oral delivery, and developed the footnotes largely from the hints provided. I have left out nothing merely because it was indecipherable. (*Editor's note.*)

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> But note the redating of the earlier (Caligula) MS to which E.G. Stanley draws attention in "Lajamon's antiquarian sentiments", *Medium Ævum* 38 (1969) pp.23-37.
- <sup>2</sup> *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, ed. J.A.W. Bennett and G.V. Smithers (Oxford, 1966; 2nd ed., 1968), poem VIII N, p.127.
- <sup>3</sup> E.g. by A.T.E. Matonis, in *Modern Philology* 70 (1972-3) pp.91-108.
- <sup>4</sup> E.g. a short poem from MS Harley 913 printed in *Reliquiae Antiquae*, ed. T. Wright and J.O. Halliwell, 2 vols. (London, 1841-3), II, p.256. For text of "Lenten ys come", see *Harley Lyrics*, ed. G.L. Brook (Manchester, 1948) p.43.
- <sup>5</sup> *Studies in English Philology in Honor of Frederick Klaeber*, ed. K. Malone and M.B. Ruud (Minneapolis, 1929) pp.362-74; *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (New York, 1959) pp.98-102.
- <sup>6</sup> See T. Turville-Petre, "'Summer Sunday', 'De Tribus Regibus Mortuis', and 'The Awntyrs off Arthure': Three poems in the thirteen-line stanza", *Review of English Studies* 25 (1974) pp.1-14 (p.6).
- <sup>7</sup> Three are specimens in *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, ed. K. Sisam (Oxford, 1921) pp.152-6; see also the complete edition of Minot's poems by J. Hall (Oxford, 1914).
- <sup>8</sup> I have documented it in my notes to *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, p.385.
- <sup>9</sup> *Wars of Alexander*, ed. W.W. Skeat, EETS, ES 47 (1886) ll.487-9. Orm has "rowst and reord"; the ON "rodd" has been accommodated to OE "reord".
- <sup>10</sup> Sisam, *ed.cit.*, p.152.
- <sup>11</sup> Each Scots soldier carried his own bag (*berebag*) of meal. Skelton also was to call the Scots "rough-footed" (*Against the Scots*) in allusion to their brogues of rough hide.
- <sup>12</sup> See J.A.W. Bennett, "Chaucer's Contemporary", in *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches*, ed. S.S. Hussey (London, 1969) pp.310-24.
- <sup>13</sup> See *Chaucerian and Other Pieces*, ed. W.W. Skeat (Oxford, 1897) p.xxvii.
- <sup>14</sup> See Angus McIntosh, "The Textual Transmission of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*", in *English and Medieval Studies presented to J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. N. Davis and C.L. Wrenn (London, 1962) pp.231-40.

- 15 Or a little later: see Elizabeth Salter, "The Timeliness of *Wynnere and Wastoure*", *Medium Ævum* 47 (1978) pp.40-65.
- 16 Ed. E. Brock, EETS, OS 8 (1865; revised 1871). Cf. line 3689: "foynes with sperys".
- 17 E.g. T. Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge, 1977) p.30. But there is some support for the usual view in the use of the phrase "ryme or geeste" in *Knyghthode and Bataile* (ed. R. Dyboski and Z.M. Arend, EETS, OS 201, 1936) l.1276. Cf. also *Scottish Field* (ed. J.W. Hales and F.J. Furnivall, *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript*, Vol. I (London, 1867) pp.212-34; also ed. J.P. Oakden, *Chetham Society n.s.* 94, 1935), l.416: "A gentleman, by Jesu, that this jest made".
- 18 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon (Oxford, 1925), 2nd ed. by Norman Davis (Oxford, 1967) 1.35.
- 19 See *Gawain*, *ed.cit.*, notes, p.72; also *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (York Medieval Texts: London, 1978) p.208.
- 20 Giraldus Cambrensis, *Descriptio Kambriae*, I.xii, in *Opera*, ed. J.F. Dimock (Rolls series, 21, 1868), Vol. VI, p.188. The second example is pseudo-Virgil.
- 21 William Camden, *Remains concerning Britain* (ed. London, 1870) pp.40-1.
- 22 J.P. Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English*, 2 vols., II: *A Survey of the Traditions* (Manchester, 1935). Oakden's lists of alliterative phrases, though not comprehensive, are extremely useful in the present context.
- 23 Orm has far more alliterative phrases than are recorded by Oakden: see E.S. Olszewska, "Alliterative phrases in the Ormulum", *Leeds Studies in English* 5 (1936) p.50.
- 24 Sisam, *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, p.38.
- 25 Printed in Celia and Kenneth Sisam, *The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse* (Oxford, 1970), no. 80, pp.184-7, where it is entitled "Choristers Training".
- 26 In the same MS as the previous poem (British Museum MS Arundel 292) but dated later (about 1425-50) by Kenneth Sisam in his edition of the poem, *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, p.169.
- 27 In his edition of *Scottish Alliterative Poems*, Scottish Text Society, 1st series, 27, 38 (1892-7).
- 28 Gavin Douglas, *A Selection from his Poetry*, ed. S.G. Smith, Saltire Society (Edinburgh, 1959) p.44.
- 29 For edition, see note 17 above.
- 30 Alluded to in *Amours*, *Scottish Alliterative Poems*, Introduction p.lxxxviii.

- <sup>31</sup> The Reynes Epilogue, lines 1-4, as printed in *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. Norman Davis, EETS, SS 1 (1970) p.123. (Note the editor's comments on the date of the piece, pp.cxx-cxxiv.)
- <sup>32</sup> George Hickes, *Linguarum Vett. Septentrionalium Thesaurus*, 2 vols., 1703-1705 (Oxford, 1725: facsimile reprint, Scolar Press, 1970) I, p.180.
- <sup>33</sup> Max Rieger, "Die alt - und angelsächsische verskunst", *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 7 (1876) pp.1-64.
- <sup>34</sup> W.P. Lehmann, "The alliteration of Old Saxon poetry" (first published as supplement to Vol. 3 of *Norsk tidsskrift for sprogvidenskap*, Oslo, 1953) in *Der Heliand*, ed. J. Eichhoff and I. Rauch, *Wege der Forschung*, 321 (Darmstadt, 1973).
- <sup>35</sup> "The Candle Indoors", *Poems*, ed. R. Bridges, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1930) p.46.
- <sup>36</sup> "An Evening Walk" (*Poetical Works*, ed. T. Hutchinson, rev. E. de Selincourt, Oxford, 1946), ll.115, 122-3 (1849 version, p.4).
- <sup>37</sup> It appeared in *Medium Ævum* 3 (1934) pp.1-6.
- <sup>38</sup> *The Wanderer* (*Collected Shorter Poems*, London, 1966, p.51). Cf. *Sawles Warde* (ed. R.M. Wilson, *Leeds Texts and Monographs* III, 1938), ll.319-20, p.34: "his runes and domes þe derne beoð. and deopre þen eni sea dingle".
- <sup>39</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 Oct. 1948, p.596.
- <sup>40</sup> Richard Murphy, *Sailing to an Island* (London, 1963) p.16.