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REHABILITATIONS

AND OTHER ESSAYS

BY

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THE ALLITERATIVE METRE

IN the general reaction which has set in against the long reign of foreign, syllabic metres in English, it is a little remarkable that few have yet suggested a return to our own ancient system, the alliterative line. Mr. Auden, however, has revived some of its stylistic features; Professor Tolkien will soon, I hope, be ready to publish an alliterative poem; and the moment seems propitious for expounding the principles of this metre to a larger public than those Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse specialists who know it already.

1. Alliteration is no more the whole secret of this verse than rhyme is the whole secret of syllabic verse. It has, in addition, a metrical structure, which could stand alone, and which would then be to this system as blank verse is to the syllabic.

2. Latin verse is based on quantity (= the length of time taken to pronounce a syllable). Modern English is based on stress-accent (= the loudness with which a syllable is pronounced). Alliterative verse involves both.

3. In order to write Alliterative verse it is therefore necessary to learn to distinguish not only accented from unaccented syllables, but also long from short syllables. This is rendered difficult by our classical education which allows boys to pronounce *ille* so that it rhymes with *silly*, and nevertheless to call the first syllable long, which, in their pronunciation, it is not. In dealing with English quantity the reader must learn to attend entirely to *sounds*, and to ignore spelling.

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DEFINITION. A long syllable is one which contains either a long vowel (as *fath(er)*, *same*, *seek*, *pile*, *home*, *do*); or, a vowel followed by more than one consonant (as *punt*, *wind*, *helm*, *pelt*).¹

[Caution. 1. It is here that the trouble from spelling occurs. In modern English spelling, for reasons which need not be discussed here, such words as *silly*, *pretty*, *merry*, *sorrow*, *attraction*, show a double consonant in spelling where there is no shadow of a double consonant in pronunciation. The reader can convince himself of this by comparing the pretended double T in *pretty* with the real double T in *hot toast*: and he will then hear how a real double consonant renders the first syllable of *hot toast* long, while that of *pretty*, though accented, is short. So, in *distiller* the pretended two L's are one, while in *still life* we have a real double L, disguised as a triple L. True double consonants can be heard in *palely* (cf. *Paley*), *fish-shop* (cf. *bishop*), *unnamed* (cf. *unaimed*), *midday* (cf. *middy*), *solely* (cf. *holy*).²

2. In modern English many words, chiefly monosyllables, which end in a single consonant are pronounced differently according to their position in the sentence. If they come at the end of a sentence or other speech-group—that is, if there is a pause after them—the final consonant is so dwelled upon that

¹ That two or more consonants make the *syllable* long is not a metrical rule but a phonetic fact; that they make the preceding *vowel* long, as some say, is neither a rule nor a fact, but false.

² -no in English usually represents a single consonant (o nasalized), but sometimes it represents this consonant followed by a pure o in addition. Hence the first syllable is short in *singer*, *ringer*: long in *linger*, *finger*.

the syllable becomes long. If the reader listens carefully he will find that the syllable *man* is short in

'Manifold and great mercies'
or 'The man of property',

but long in

'The Invisible Man'
or 'The Descent of Man'.

With this caution, the reader will be glad to hear, the serious difficulties in the re-education of our ear are over.]

4. Each line consists of two half-lines, which are independent metrical organisms, connected only by the alliteration.

5. The half-line consists of *Lifts* and *Dips*.

Definitions.

A Lift = either (a) one syllable both long and accented (as the first syllable of *ogre*, *mountain*, *Repton*),

or (b) Two syllables whereof the first is short but accented, and the second unaccented (as the first *two* syllables of *merrily*, *vigorous*, *melancholy*, *evident*).

(Thus in *vary* the first syllable is a Lift: in *very* the whole word is a Lift.)

A Dip = any reasonable number of unaccented syllables whether long or short.

In the following sentences the syllables printed in Capitals are Lifts, the rest Dips.

OF COURSE WE ASSUME.

When a PHILOLOGIST is a FOOL.

RHADAMANTHUS in his MISERY.

6. Every half-line must contain neither more nor less than two Lifts. (The ancient poetry sometimes introduces a three-lift type which stands to this metre much as the Alexandrine stands to decasyllabics: but the beginner will be wise to neglect it.)

The five different types of half-line depend on the five ways in which Lifts and Dips are combined. Before learning these, however, the reader should 'work his ear in' with the following:

We were TALKING of DRAGONS, | TOLKIEN and I
In a BERKSHIRE BAR. | The BIG WORKMAN
Who had SAT SILENT | and SUCKED his PIPE
ALL the EVENING, | from his EMPTY MUG
with GLEAMING EYE | GLANCED TOWARDS US;
'I SEEN 'em MYSELF', | he SAID FIERCELY.

7. The 'A' type of half-line is arranged Lift-dip, Lift-dip.

e.g. GREEN and GROWING: MERRY were the MINSTRELS:
COME from the COUNTRY.

Licence. One or two unaccented syllables may be added before the first Lift, forming what is technically known as an Anacrusis.

e.g. And green and growing: and so merry were the
minstrels: he came from the country.

Warning. But this licence should be very seldom used in the second half-line. In the first half-line (i.e. at the beginning of the whole line) it may be used freely.

8. B type = dip-Lift, dip-Lift.

e.g. and NUMBED with NIGHT: where MAIDS are MERRY:
and to the PALACE of PRIDE.

Warning. The first dip may contain 'any reasonable number' of unaccented syllables: but the second should normally consist of a *single* unaccented syllable. In all circumstances a predominantly 'anapaestic' movement is to be avoided.

9. C = dip-Lift, Lift-dip.

(*Note.*—Here we reach a rhythm of daily occurrence in our speech (e.g. 'I can't stand him') which has been allowed no *metrical* recognition for centuries.)

e.g. The MERRY MASTER: In the DARK DUNGEON:
Through CLOUDS CLEAVING: It is EVER-OPEN: And
with GOD'S BENISON.

Licence. In this type a *single short, accented* syllable may serve as the second Lift, giving us:

A cold kipper: but they're hard-headed: a proud palace.

10. D = Lift, Lift-dip.

Here there is only one dip, whereas A, B, and C have two. To compensate for this, in D types the dip must be strengthened by a syllable¹ nearly (but not quite) as strong as the Lifts.

(*Note.*—This again rescues a genuine English speech rhythm from metrical non-existence.)

e.g. HARD HAYmaking.

It will be heard that the syllable *mak* is as long as, but just less accented than, *hard* and *hay*.

e.g. BRIGHT QUICKsilver: MAD MERRYmaking: SHODDY
SHIPbuilders: GRIM GLADIATOR: HELL'S HOUSE-
keeper.

¹ Or, of course, two syllables whereof the first is short. The rules for 'compensating elements' are, in this respect, identical with the rules for Lifts.

In all these examples the strengthening element of the dip stands first in the dip: e.g. in 'Hell's housekeeper', *keep-* comes before *-er*. Obviously the reverse order may be used, giving us:

ALL UNDERclothes: MAD MULTitude: EATS ARTichokes:
POOR DESTitute.

Licence 1. In D, as in C, a single short, accented syllable may serve as the second Lift, giving us, instead of *Hard haymaking*, such forms as:

SHEER SHOTOVER: PURE PALimpsest.

Licence 2. The compensating element in the dip may also be a single short, accented syllable, giving us:

MAD MELANCHoly: HEAV'N'S WAR-office: BORN BOOT-
legger.

Licence 3. The sub-type *Mad multitude* may be extended by inserting a single unaccented (and preferably short) syllable between the two Lifts, so as to give:

MAD the MULtitude: EATING ARTichokes.

11. E = Lift-dip-Lift.

Here again we have only one dip, and again the dip must contain a compensating element. E, in fact, is a rearrangement of D.

e.g. HAYmakers HEARD: SHIPbuilders SHOW: GLADIATOR
GRIM.

Licence. The compensating element in the dip may be a single short, accented syllable, giving us:

NEW-College KNOWS.

12. For the reader's convenience, I add a recapitulation of the five types.

- A. 1. Green and growing.
2. (With Anacrusis) The grass is growing.
- B. And life runs low.
- C. 1. A dark dungeon.
2. (With single short for 2nd Lift) The gray gravel.
- D. 1. Hell's housekeeper.
2. (With compensating element last in dip) Earth's antidote.
3. (With single short for 2nd Lift) East Abingdon.
4. (With single short for compensating element in dip) Heav'n's war-office.
5. (Extended) Evil antidote.
- E. 1. Shipbuilders show.
2. (With single short for compensating element in dip) New-College knows.

13. In every line both the Lifts of the first half-line may, and one must, alliterate with the first Lift of the second half-line. As

In a Berkshire Bar; the Big workman

(both Lifts in the first half alliterating with the first of the second) or,

We were Talking of dragons, Tolkien and I

(one Lift of the first half alliterating with the first of the second).

An alliteration on all four Lifts as in

And walks by the waves, as winds warble

is regarded not as an added beauty, but as a deformity. (Its use in Middle English, it will be found, radically alters the character of the metre.)

Hith'gar'es

14. Where only one Lift in the first half-line alliterates, it should normally be the first.

15. All vowels alliterate with one another.

Warning. Do not be deceived by spelling. *Union* alliterates with *yeast, yellow, &c.*, not with *uncle*.

16. No half-line of any type should end in a pure dactyl. *Noble Norbury, with trash and trumpery, glancing gloomily, &c.*, are unmetrical.

17. *Structure.*

(1) The medial pause which divides the first from the second half of the line must be strictly observed, so that the two halves fall apart as separate speech-groups.

[By speech-groups I mean those units—rhythmical, rhetorical, emotional, and to some extent syntactical, units—out of which our actual conversation is built up. Thus if the reader says 'The big workman who had sat silent and sucked his pipe all the evening', he will (I hope) find that the speech-groups coincide with the half-lines in the example given under para. 6. A good deal of re-education is here necessary, for the chief beauty of syllabic verse lies in a deliberate clash or contradiction between the speech-groups and the 'feet', whereas in alliterative verse the speech-group is both the metrical, and the aesthetic, unit. See below, para. 18.]

Examples. Thus, *he will stand as a stone till the stars crumble*, is metrically good. *The laugh of the lovely lady is silent* is bad. But *Lost is the laugh of the lovely damsel* is not a line at all: for it pretends metrically to be.

LOST is the LAUGH of | the LOVELY DAMSEL

(A-type + A with anacrusis): and in this the first half is so impossible as a speech-group that a poet could have written it only because he was really still thinking in feet and syllables, and not in speech-groups and half-lines.

(2) But while we cannot run across the medial break, we can run across the end of a line. In other words, the last half of a given line and the first half of the next are more intimately connected than the two halves of a single line. Hence we may write

There stands a stone. Still'd is the Lady's
Peerless laughter.

Corollary. Hence, though the poem begins and ends with a full line, yet within the poem a new paragraph or sentence should usually begin in the second half of a line.

18. *Aesthetics.*

It follows that whereas syllabic poetry primarily uses the evocative qualities of words (and only secondarily those of phrases), alliterative poetry reverses the procedure. The phrase, coinciding with the half-line, is the poetic unit. In any English country tap-room the student may hear from the lips of labourers speech-groups which have a certain race and resonance in isolation. These are the elements of our native metre.

Such are the rules. Where no tradition—at least no modern tradition—exists it is rash to offer advice, but perhaps two counsels may be given. In the first place, if any one is attracted by the metre in general, but disposed to omit the rules of quantity and produce a merely accentual adaptation, I would like to save him disappointment by warning him that he will

suck?

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almost certainly produce rubbish. Torture the language, or the thought, as he will, the result will be *thin*. The thing to aim at is richness and fullness of sound, and this cannot be attained without quantity: with quantity, the metre opens possibilities of resonance which have not been exploited for a thousand years. In the second place, I would advise him to be on his guard against too many B types. His iambic training will probably be tempting him to them at every turn: but if he yields his poem will sound like octosyllabics. And lastly, I would advocate to all who have a taste for such things some serious contention with the difficulties of this metre. A few successful specimens would be an excellent answer to the type of critic (by no means extinct) who accuses the moderns of choosing *vers libre* because they are not men enough for metre. For if syllabic verse is like carving in wood and *vers libre* like working with a brush, this is like carving in granite.

A man who preaches a metre must sooner or later risk his case by showing a specimen: and if the fate of Gabriel Harvey deters me, that of Campion invites. In order to avoid misunderstanding I must say that the subject of the following poem was not chosen under the influence of any antiquarian fancy that a medieval metre demanded medieval matter, but because the characters of the planets, as conceived by medieval astrology, seem to me to have a permanent value as spiritual symbols—to provide a *Phänomenologie des Geistes* which is specially worth while in our own generation. Of Saturn we know more than enough. But who does not need to be reminded of Jove?

THE PLANETS

Lady LUNA, in light canoc,	A : B
By friths and shallows of fretted cloudland	B : C
Cruises monthly; with chrism of dews	A : B
And drench of dream, a drizzling glamour,	B : B
Enchants us—the cheat! changing sometime	B : A
A mind to madness, melancholy pale,	A 2 : E 2
Bleached with gazing on her blank count'nance	A : C
Orb'd and ageless. In earth's bosom	A : C 2
The shower of her rays, sharp-feathered light	B : E 2
Reaching downward, ripens silver,	A : A
Forming and fashioning female brightness,	A : A
—Metal maidenlike. Her moist circle	D 2 : C
Is nearest earth. Next beyond her	B : A
MERCURY marches;—madcap rover,	A : A
Patron of pil'gers. Pert quicksilver	A : D
His gaze begets, goblin mineral,	B : A
Merry multitude of meeting selves,	D 2 : B
Same but Sundered. From the soul's darkness,	A : C
With wreath'd wand, ¹ words he marshals,	B : A
Guides and gathers them—gay bellwether	A : D 4
Of flocking fancies. His flint has struck	C : B
The spark of speech from spirit's tinder,	B : C
Lord of language! He leads forever	A : B
The spangle and splendour, sport that mingles	A 2 : A
Sound with senses, in subtle pattern,	A : C 2
Words in wedlock, and wedding also	A : C
Of thing with thought. In the third region	B : C
VENUS voyages . . . but my voice falters;	A : C
Rude rime-making wrongs her beauty,	D : A
Whose breasts and brow, and her breath's sweet-	
ness	B : C
Bewitch the worlds. Wide-spread the reign	B : E
Of her secret sceptre, in the sea's caverns,	A 2 : C 2

¹ Alliteration on second list of the first half. The orthographic *w* in *wreath'd* has, of course, no metrical function.

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MANUSCRIPT

In grass growing, and grain bursting,
 Flower unfolding, and flesh longing,
 And shower falling sharp in April.
 The metal of copper in the mine reddens
 With muffled brightness, like muted gold.
 By her finger form'd. Far beyond her
 The heaven's highway hums and trembles,
 Drums and dindles,¹ to the driv'n thunder
 Of sol's chariot, whose sword of light
 Hurts and humbles; beheld only
 Of eagle's eye. When his arrow glances
 Through mortal mind, mists are parted
 And mild as morning the mellow wisdom
 Breathes o'er the breast, broadening eastward
 Clear and cloudless. In a clos'd garden
 (Unbound her burden) his beams foster
 Soul in secret, where the soil puts forth
 Paradisal palm, and pure fountains
 Turn and re-temper, touching coolly
 The uncomely common to cordial gold;
 Whose ore also, in earth's matrix,
 Is print and pressure of his proud signet
 On the wax of the world. He is the worshipp'd
 male,
 The earth's husband, all-beholding,
 Arch-chemic eye. But other country
 Dark with discord dins beyond him,
 With noise of nakers, neighing of horses,
 Hammering of harness. A haughty god
 MARS mercenary,² makes there his camp
 And flies his flag; flaunts laughingly
 The graceless beauty, grey-eyed and keen,
 —Blond insolence—of his blithe visage
 Which is hard and happy. He hews the act,

C : C
 A : C
 C : A
 B : C 2
 C : B
 B : A
 C : A
 A : C
 C : B
 A : C
 B : C
 B : A
 A 2 : C
 E : A
 A : C
 A 2 : C
 A : B
 E : C
 A : A
 B : B
 C : C
 B : C
 B : B
 C : A
 E 2 : C
 A : A
 B : A
 A : B
 D 2 : E
 B : D
 A 2 : E
 D 2 : C 2
 B : B

¹ Cf. Malory, v, cap. 8.

² -ARY being the compensating element in the Dip.

The indifferent deed with dint of his mallet
 And his chisel of choice; achievement comes not
 Unhelped by him;—hired gladiator
 Of evil and good. All's one to Mars,
 The wrong righted, rescued meekness,
 Or trouble in trenches, with trees splintered
 And birds banished, banks fill'd with gold
 And the liar made lord. Like handiwork
 He offers to all—earns his wages
 And whistles the while. White-featured dread
 Mars has mastered. His metal's iron
 That was hammered through hands into holy
 cross,
 Cruel carpentry. He is cold and strong,
 Necessity's son.¹ Soft breathes the air
 Mild, and meadowy, as we mount further
 Where rippled radiance rolls about us
 Moved with music—measureless the waves'
 Joy and jubilee. It is JOVE's orbit,
 Filled and festal, faster turning
 With arc ampler. From the Isles of Tin
 Tyrian traders, in trouble steering
 Came with his cargoes; the Cornish treasure
 That his ray ripens. Of wrath ended
 And woes mended, of winter passed
 And guilt forgiven, and good fortune
 Jove is master; and of jocund revel,
 Laughter of ladies. The lion-hearted,
 The myriad-minded, men like the gods,
 Helps and heroes, helms of nations
 Just and gentle, are Jove's children,
 Work his wonders. On his wide forehead²

B : B
 B : A 2
 B : D
 B : E
 C : A
 A : C
 C 2 : E
 B : D 2
 B : A
 B : E
 A : C
 B : B
 D 5 : B
 B : E
 A : C
 C : A
 A : E
 D 5 : C
 A : A
 C : B
 A : C
 A : B
 C : C
 C : B
 B : C
 A : C 2
 A : A 2
 A 2 : E
 A : A
 A : C
 A : C 2

¹ The *c* in *necessity*, being an *s* in pronunciation, carries the first alliteration.

² This is *c* 2 in my pronunciation because I pronounce *forehead* so as to rhyme with *horrid*. In the alternative pronunciation (which is now heard even among educated speakers) it would be *c* 1.

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Forming and fashioning female brightness,	A : A
—Metal maidenlike. Her moist circle	D 2 : C
Is nearest earth. Next beyond her	B : A
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Patron of pilfers. Pert quicksilver	A : D
His gaze begets, goblin mineral,	B : A
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Same but sundered. From the soul's darkness,	A : C
With wreathèd wand, ¹ words he marshals,	B : A
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Rude rime-making wrongs her beauty,	D : A
Whose breasts and brow, and her breath's sweet-	
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Bewitch the worlds. Wide-spread the reign	B : E
Of her secret sceptre, in the sea's caverns,	A 2 : C 2

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ALTERNATIVE METRE

Calm and kingly, no care darkens
 Nor wrath wrinkles: but righteous power
 And leisure and largess their loose splendours
 Have wrapped around him—a rich mantle
 Of ease and empire: Up far beyond
 Goes SATURN silent in the seventh region,
 The skirts of the sky. Scant grows the light,
 Sickly, uncertain (the Sun's finger
 Daunted with darkness). Distance hurts us,
 And the vault severe of vast silence;
 Where fancy fails us, and fair language,
 And love leaves us, and light fails us
 And Mars fails us, and the mirth of Jove
 Is as tin tinkling. In tattered garment,
 Weak with winters, he walks forever
 A weary way, wide round the heav'n,
 Stoop'd and stumbling, with staff groping,
 The lord of lead. He is the last planet
 Old and ugly. His eye fathers
 Pale pestilence, pain of envy,
 Remorse and murder. Melancholy drink
 (For bane or blessing) of bitter wisdom
 He pours for his people, a perilous draught
 That the lip loves not. We leave all things
 To reach the rim of the round welkin,
 Heaven's hermitage, high and lonely.

A : C
 C : B
 A 2 : C
 A 2 : C
 A 2 : E
 C : C
 B : E
 A : C
 A : A
 B : C
 A 2 : C
 C : C
 C : B
 C : C
 A : B
 B : E
 A : C
 B : C 2
 A : C
 D 2 : A
 A : E 2
 B : C
 A 2 : B
 C : C
 B : C
 D 2 : A

VII

BLUSPELS AND FLALANSFERES: A SEMANTIC NIGHTMARE

We are often compelled to set up standards we cannot reach
 ourselves and to lay down rules we could not ourselves
 satisfy.
 LORD COLERIDGE, C.1 (Law Reports, Queen's Bench Division
 XIV, p. 288 in *Reg. v. Dudley and Stephen*).

Read at Manchester University