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What causes Sir Gawain to go at a gallop

A practice-based study of accentual alliterative narrative verse

By the end of my first reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, in the Simon Armitage translation, I was enchanted. I was predisposed to connecting with this poem; my parents are North Staffordshire folk as were their predecessors going back several generations, and I have lived and worked in the North and West Midlands for most of my life.

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

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

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

> This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.[1]

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

Through this simultaneous process, I began to perceive what it was about the meter and rhythm that had taken me on that galloping adventure. First, it was simply the rejection of end-rhyme and the embracing of alliteration. The force and flow of Middle English alliterative verse is hugely enhanced by its non-rhyming nature and the ease with which the telling of the tale can gallop on from one line into the next unhindered by the phonological hurdle of a rhyme scheme. Marie Borroff sees it as a straight swap: 'Both Old French and accentual Latin verse are of course characterised by end-rhyme, which corresponds as a formal constituent to alliteration in Old English verse.'[2]

I began to understand that it was the muscularity of the accentual alliterative verse that had carried me along so powerfully. In comparison, I was beginning to feel that end-rhyme could seem rather ineffectual, especially when telling a tale. If alliteration with its varying degrees of accentuated stress is muscular and sinuous, then end-rhyme is somewhat decorative and cosmetic. Alliteration works constantly within the line, dynamic and integral, running through the poem manipulating its movement. Whereas end-rhyme seems passive and peripheral, sitting at the end of the line, waiting, always confined to the poem's outer edge.

However, there wasn't just muscularity – there was flexibility – because whilst the accented syllables were counted there remained a lack of restriction on the numbers of unaccented syllables. This allowance, in the long line of alliterative poetry, offers a variety of metrical possibilities and of line-

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

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

lengths, enabling the poet to alter the pace and rhythm of the gallop and to slow it to a canter or trot at any given point. This is especially important in a poem of over 2,500 lines in order to 'prevent the verse from falling into a monotonous "dog-trot" rhythm'[3] or conversely, to prevent it from galloping on when it doesn't suit the nature of the narrative.

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

However, I was soon to make a further discovery that would transform my appreciation of accentual alliterative verse and my efforts to write it. In Borroff's 1962 study of the meter and style of Gawain, and in the appendix that follows her 1967 translation, she explains further variations and irregularities in the metrical pattern: 'I have spoken of four "clearly predominant" stresses as constituting the basic form of the line. There are many lines, however, which contain stressed syllables above and beyond the basic four.'4 Borroff's approach to the meter of Sir Gawain recognizes a subtlety of sound-patterning that allows for varying degrees of weight or stress on some syllables that are neither fully stressed, nor completely unstressed. It is for this reason that Borroff, in her metrical analysis of Gawain, replaces the conventional terms 'accented' and 'unaccented' – or 'stressed/unstressed' – in favour of 'chief' and 'intermediate' syllables.

My research, and with it my writing, was discovering an agility in the meter of Gawain to go with its muscularity and flexibility. This subtlety of accent and emphasis affects the rhythm of the whole poem. Quite appropriately, the meter of Gawain evokes a ride over rough terrain. We are crossing rivers and ridges and rocky outcrops, leaping hedges and ditches, negotiating a moral and metaphysical mire. As the hoofbeat of the tetrameter drums on, the inflections and irregularities create a suitably uneven rhythm – a metrical adventure more like Coleridge's undulating ramble 'over uneven ground…breaking through the struggling branches of a copse-wood' than Wordsworth's civilized gait 'up and down a straight gravel-walk… where the continuity of his verse met no collateral interruption.'[4]

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

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

In addition, I had felt from early on that the unfamiliarity of the language in Gawain had, somewhat paradoxically, enhanced my enjoyment of the verse. My detachment at times from the semantics of the language freed me to feel and appreciate the soundscapes of the poem in their own right. This suggested to me that I might attempt to write in an invented language similar enough to contemporary English to be understood, yet sufficiently different and detached to enable the reader to be carried along by its rhythms and other phonological effects.

In particular, I was fascinated by what I began to see as a combination of the visceral with the vernacular. The oral and aural effects of its somewhat Germanic diction, with its characteristically glottal and guttural register, had resonated with me as I had read the original text out loud. I was keen to emulate the Anglo-Saxon quality of the poem's phonology. Just as Simon Armitage 'detects an echo of his

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

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

own speech rhythms within the original'[5], I likewise recognize something of the accents and dialects of my own region of the Black Country and further north into Staffordshire.

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

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

If ȝe wyl lysten þis laye bot on littel quile, I schal telle hit... (lines 30-1)[6]

Note: Please read the poem below, aloud. In verse, the realizing of sounds often accompanies the recognizing of meanings. In addition, you will find it helpful to listen to the rhythms and intonations in my reading of the poem: https://soundcloud.com/user-902768106/tha-spawnen-a-scousenlish-part-1

Tha Spawnen a Scousenlish[7]

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

[5] Simon, Armitage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), vii.
[6] W.R.J. Barron, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), 32
[7] "Tha Spawnen a Scousenlish" was first published in *Butcher's Dog*, issue 17, Sept 2022.

then tha cold kynda cauten me
im tek me by suppryzen /
an tha salt-watter tauten me
im opn myn eyzen //

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

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

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

Title:	**Key:**
- C - - C - c **Tha Spawnen a Scousenlish**	C = Chief stressed syllable c = Intermediate syllable - = Unstressed syllable

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

Lines 1 to 3:
- - C - - C - C - - - C c -
A wa bornt on the browen banken ov a brown rivern
c - - C - C - - C - c C
dowen where tyd im turnen an curven lyk turd
- - C - C - c - C - - C -
as im slyden slownish owt ta sea an wherevern

The four heavy plosives of first line pick up the rhythm. The weighting of these heavy 'b' consonants reduces the stress of 'rivern' to a slightly subordinate position as the cadence falls at the end of the line. The disyllabic representation of 'browen' comes straight from Black Country and other Midland dialect forms. In the second line the alliteration is more nuanced by its interplay with various aural effects. The echo of 'tyd turnen' in 'lyk turd' suggests the ebb of the tide in the estuary setting of the poem. This musicality is supported by the assonance of the 'ur' vowel, in 'turnen', 'curven' and 'turd' which slides fluidly through the line between the sharper consonants of these words. The onomatopoeic effect of these long slow vowels is supplemented by the watery sibilance of 'slyden slownish' in line 3.

Lines 4 to 6:
c C c - - C - c C - - C c

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

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

Lines 7 to 10:
c - C . . C - C - - C -
wen a woken a wa chimdley-choken an chuffin
- C - C - C - C -
in smokelish stench ov chemic-clouden
- - C - C - C - - C
tha cud stunt an stilt th shapin ov tung
- C - - C - C - - C
an lungen an lossen langwij anaull /

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

Lines 11 to 13:
- c - C - C - - C c C
A cunner lern no worden just chirp lyk bird
C - - C - C - - C -
mewlen lyk gull on miserish mornen
C - - C - c C - - C c
howlen an honken lyk ferry in hawfogg /

This pace continues into line 11, as the use of assonance rather than consonance creates a comparative lightness. Like the Gawain-Poet's use of regional diction, line 11 features the Potteries' 'cunner' for 'couldn't'. This line illustrates well the importance of performative considerations in our reading of a narrative poem where the telling is crucial. In my notation 'cunner' is subordinated in favour of the assonantal weight of 'lern'. A different reading might swap these stresses to make 'cunner' feel more frustrated and emphatic. Alternatively, we might give this line five chief stresses – making it iambic – but, for me, losing some of the performative impact of varying the stress. In lines 12 and 13, the alliteration is made flexible by the sinew of unstressed alliterative effects: in line 12 three 'l' consonants

limber up in the first three syllables of the line; and in line 13, the onomatopoeic alliterations of 'howl', 'honk' and 'haw' are complemented at the end of the line by the more rasping fricatives of 'ferry' and 'fog'. The accentuation of 'Hawfog' also has performative value – its onomatopoeia offers a sonic correlative of 'fog-horn'

Lines 14 to 18:

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

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

Lines 19 to 21:

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

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

Lines 22 to 28

C - - C - - C - c - C -
Slownish an shurlish am slidden enta shinglen
C c - C - - c C - - C -
deeplisher dowen to myn ankln ma neezen
c C -
na thyzen /

- - C c - C - -
then tha cold kynda cauten me
- C - - c C -
im tek me by suppryzen /
- - C c - C - c
an tha salt-watter tauten me
- C - c C -
im open myn eyezen //

* * * *

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

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

I have begun to ride the rhythms of Gawain's galloping Gringolet, and as I close I'm wading with Scousenlish deeper into the eye-opening waters of accentual alliterative narrative verse. Scousenlish's adventures have only just begun, more poems will follow, as I continue this mytho-poetic journey to its, as yet unknown, conclusion.[8]

Martin Yates, May 2020.

[8] Footnote: True to his final paragraph, the poet went on to explore Scousenlish's adventures in three further alliterative poems, which are printed below. He assures us that there is more of Scousenlish to come; with a fifth poem in the pipeline and plans for this to be an ongoing project resulting in a set of around twenty pieces – all in the same accentual-alliterative, Gawain-inspired form – over the next few years.

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Martin Kennedy Yates

Scousenlish a-singen[9]

At firss ma voiss wa fritful flatlish -
al chit an coff lyk crake an chuff
an choakt wit thorn-beak an thinny throat -
but slownish an shurlish a starten singen /
A fownt ma voiss in storms full forcen
an a formt it from fins flex an flit of feathern /
Sol for shurlish a-singen in stormlish
an wit al the woilden ov wind-wet weathern /
Hou high a wa hangen in tha howl ov a hooly
an lollop ina lowlish loop ov longen-waven /
Twa wen a flappen for fuden in fishboat waken
an diven deep inta death-black wattern
that a fownen ma voiss an ma voiss fownt me /
Nowen a loven ta loop longen an lowlish
an singen ower seashor and cityschapen /
A charmen tha childen wi ma cheersom chirpen -
an tha wimmen wit wunder an wisht a-waillen -
an tha menfoulk al miserish wit melancolen
uplooke hiyen
an them a-wistful gazen
enta steelish skyen -
as am softlish serenaden
them a-weplish cryen /

Martin Kennedy Yates

Scousenlish a-fallan lufen[10]

Twa wen a wa stel wit and yunlish an ween
a sen yun shegul sa shapplish an sheen
tha ma eyen bemakken al majik a-mistlish
ana cummen al colt an shivrish an keen /
aber shen na shone na seemen mish a-sen
jas flute ova faslish al fin an nofa fren /
an a gazzen an ganden agen an agen
aber shen neva shote na cummen a-shorlish /
twa munnen a-lattern a mussen a-makken
a-flyt ta hooly ile an farren oota farnenilen
wer puffen em nessen an nurt em yunnen
wer graet norta-sean im grim an gra na grun
an beg skyz a bruden browen na blu /
an her-agen a senn sam shegul wit snolish
gannen an gullamot an garralisher kittawakken
aber shen wa bessen byfarren al blakk an bute /
a kenn twa ha wit nek sa curven an lank
an ha grennen eyen glinten al garnlish an gelt

[9] "Scousenlish a-singen" was first published in *The Rialto*, issue 90, June 2021.
[10] "Scousenlish a-fallan lufen" was first published in *Poetry Wales*, issue 58/3, March 2023.

an ha wingen wa wundfallen al widden an welt /
an shem a-singen sonnen al soflish an shiff
fa yunnen im nessen al nakken and nulish /
am axen sam gannen a-tellen ha nammen
aber wen im spokken ma lufen ist baddlish a-bruzzen
an ma beatter hart en ma bress ist brutish a-brokken /
ma dera hoppen ist dullish an dashen dedlish
ana feelt ma fevrish eyen full a-fillen
as im spokken
mish al mystrish an mum
ha namm ist Quen Trute
an shen al hautish a-cum
fra scandan a-jute /

Martin Kennedy Yates
Scousenlish an Scarren Yaweth

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

badlish brokken wingen
ma leggen a-cum humman /
An wit tha wylder winden
coltern a-krulish cummen //