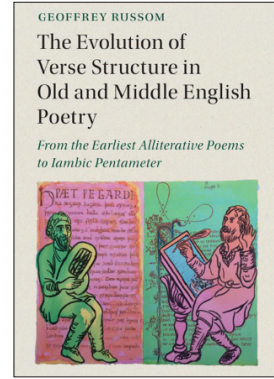
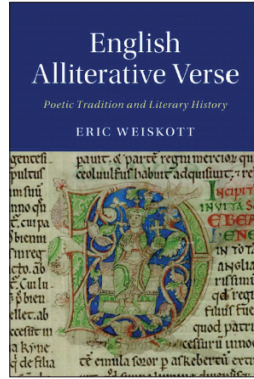


BOOK REVIEW

ALLITERATIVE HISTORIES



Ian Cornelius. *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 219 pp. ISBN 9781107154100.

Geoffrey Russom. *The Evolution of Verse Structure in Old and Middle English Poetry: From the Earliest Alliterative Poems to Iambic Pentameter.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 316 pp. ISBN 9781107148338.

Eric Weiskott. *English Alliterative Verse: Poetic Tradition and Literary History.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 236 pp. ISBN 9781107169654.

The appearance of three substantial works on alliterative verse in quick succession from Cambridge University Press is a testimony to the emergence of fresh insights in this area. Scholars have clarified in recent years the metrical constraints applying in later English alliterative verse, and one in particular has provided a historical account of how these constraints emerge from the earlier workings of alliterative metre in English. This work has cleared the ground for this surge in interest. The burst of Cambridge publications is particularly noteworthy given that their last title with ‘alliterative’ or ‘alliteration’ in the title is from 2003, which also appears to be the only(!) work with such a keyword in its title from this press.

All of the three books under review take a long view of the subject – Russom even begins with Indo-European – but none goes further than the sixteenth century, which is when alliterative metre disappears in English. Disappearance is not a new thing – there is a period of two and a half centuries from about 1100 on, where the written record is extremely spotty. For the last half century or so of scholarship, the idea of metre surviving this period has been dismissed, even, at worse, seen as a national-romantic delusion, but one of the most remarkable aspects of the new scholarship is that it is now respectable once again to speak of survival. (Deliciously, Weiskott even historicizes this anti-survival attitude as part of the academic politics of that time, namely the defence

and consolidation of Middle English studies.) Nicolay Yakovlev has produced an account of how Middle English metre, which he sees as accentual, derives from Old English 'morphological' metre via the hybrid forms we see in the early Middle English *Brut*. This influential account depends upon continuity for its explanatory power. Yakovlev's work is the key influence behind especially the books of Cornelius and Weiskott (Russom seems not to have digested it, although his thinking has some points of contact with it). It is somewhat of a surprise that a PhD thesis should be so influential, and that it has not reached book form in the decade since the thesis was defended a decade ago at Oxford. In lieu of this, Weiskott provides a useful summary of Yakovlev's thinking in the early pages of his own book.

Another innovative aspect of the new scholarship is that it sees alliteration not as metrical but as decorative. Given we do not get poems in this metre that do not alliterate, this comes over as counter-intuitive. Although all the books under review have a broad diachronic sweep, they do not look very far afield to other alliterative traditions. If they had, they might have found that the same question of whether alliteration is metrical had been addressed by scholars working on Baltic-Finnic alliterative verse. For example, the account that Leino provides of Baltic-Finnic alliterative metre notes that even though lines without alliteration occur, "the alliteration rule belongs to the metrical part of the grammar" (1986: 134).

Cornelius in his book has both metrical and historiographical concerns. Much of the work is concerned with the historical "pursuit" of the metre's underlying principles. In his treatment, we are presented with a fascinating tragi-comedy of errors involving medieval authors, who were either not concerned to describe what they knew, or who did so only fleetingly and in a way overly-influenced by Latin paradigms and terminology, who were then followed by belated early modern and modern scholars who were very much stumbling to an understanding. Cornelius is highly sceptical about the sources, and even dismisses what had been hailed by as the insider's view of James VI and I as itself being an already-belated misinterpretation. Yet his account of all this misunderstanding is not a pessimistic one, as he (and others) now see English alliterative verse as an expanding research field, where right knowledge is finally being established.

Russom's book, although his title includes the word "iambic pentameter", is chiefly focused on the alliterative tradition, indeed on some of this tradition's minutiae ('Middle English Type A1 and the Hypermetrical B-Verse' is a sample chapter title). At the same time, he is keen to deploy a "universalist theory of poetic form" (p. 5). This is a new field, and it is not yet clear how universal such universals are in practice. For instance, the *universal word constraint* states that "the average number of words per line must be no greater than nine and is usually no smaller than five" (p. 20), and as an example of this gives a line of Shakespeare with 7 words. But we do not have to look too far to see this "universal" is not so universal. I have an Estonian poetic text beginning "Sõeru, sõeru, lehmakene," open on my computer – in its seventeen lines, only two meet the so-called minimum of 5 words. The remainder are six 4-word lines and nine 3-word lines. In the same tradition, 2-word lines are also possible: "Neiukene, noorukene". Yet, if we take the number of *syllables*, there is far less of a difference: 8 in the Estonian example, 10 in the Shakespearean pentameter. Later on, on page 59, Russom presents an excerpt from *Beowulf* where there is, as he says, an average of four words per line. But if we count

syllables, we find 8–11 per line once again. Wouldn't a formulation of transcultural *syllable constraint* per line be more useful? We might treat two other supposedly universals more briefly, the *introductory principle* and the *principle of closure*, which state there is great regularity at the opening and closings of units. Isn't the opposite true just as often? Consider the extra syllables at line-starts and line-ends in the English pentameter, and consider how unusual openings and closings of poems as a whole often are when compared with the body of a poem.

Weiskott's book is the one that had the strongest impact on me, given that it can most convincingly be read as defence of the honour of the alliterative tradition and its dynamism. It emphasizes the variety of styles within the tradition, and the influence of this tradition on other traditions, which lead to the invention of various hybrid forms. He also sees the death of this metre as non-inevitable. This contrasts with an account such as Russom's, which essentially says that the substantial linguistic changes in English rendered the metre obsolete (he fingers particularly the development in word order from SOV to SVO). But language change can only be part of an explanation – alliterative metre had successfully adapted to substantial linguistic change before. Cornelius' chief explanation is that alliterative metre grew imperceptible *as metre*, it was heard as an eccentric version of the new standard metre: “we might say that alliterative verse did not so much die as suffer reinterpretation” (p. 146). Other factors are important here as well, including cultural fashion and domain loss, and once again attention to metrical death in other cultures could shed light on the matter (e.g. Roper 2009).

Reading Weiskott's account as someone interested in the history of folklore studies is interesting as it soon becomes apparent that he is in favour of using biological metaphors to describe his material and against using linguistic ones. If we think of the current orthodoxy in folklore studies (Hafstein 2001) where the use of biological metaphors is taken to be a misleading practice that should be consigned to the past, then this is a bracing view.

Weiskott also publishes an extraordinary work I knew nothing of – a twelfth-century translation of the Old English alliterative poem *Brunanburh* into Latin. He claims (although he notes it “requires certain assumptions” (p. 183)) that the translator, Henry of Huntingdon, is trying to recreate twelfth-century English alliterative metre in his Latin text. If Henry is really trying to emulate all the relevant features then the presence of only incidental alliteration in the target-language text might suggest alliteration really was seen as decorative, although the task is an immense one, and not everyone can show the versatility that Tuomo Pekkanen did in his largely alliterative rendering of *The Kalevala* into Latin (1996).

Weiskott in his Conclusion calls out a figure such as James Fenton who has claimed that alliterative verse “is somebody else's poetry” (p. 168). Inasmuch as Fenton might be called Audenesque, at least as his verse style is concerned, the parochialism of his views betrays a substantial difference between him and his predecessor as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. One reason for Auden being so different from the ‘Audenesque’ Fenton is that the former is familiar with Old and Middle English (and indeed with Norse) alliterative verse – at one stage he said one of his three major poetic influences was William Langland (the others being Dante and Pope). The frivolous aspect of Auden would have been all the greater without such a counterweight to Pope that figures such as Langland and Dante provide. This danger is not one unique to Auden amongst English poets.

To sum up, this sudden revival in scholarship on alliterative verse is a very welcome development. All three books form important contributions to the ongoing debate. All of these books stop, however, in the sixteenth century. There has been alliterative verse written in English since then, most especially in the twentieth century, including works from the pens of such distinguished names as Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and indeed Auden. These attempts, metrically at least, hark back strongly, too much maybe, to the norms of the past rather than remaking the metre for our day. Perhaps there are more clues as to how it could be done nowadays might be found in the alliterative work of Richard Wilbur and of Hopkins. In any event, it may be that it is not just the study of historical alliterative verse that is undergoing a revival.

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