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Paul Edwin Zimmer's Alliterative Style: A Metrical Legacy of J.R.R. Tolkien and Poul Anderson

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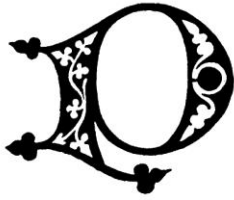
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Abstract

Considers J.R.R. Tolkien as one of the founders of the 20th-century alliterative revival, an informal also including C. S. Lewis and W. H. Auden, and Poul Anderson. The work of Paul Edwin Zimmer, a writer best known for his sword-and-sorcery *Dark Border* novels, constitutes one of the surprising reaches of the modern alliterative revival into contemporary speculative fiction. Analyzes Zimmer’s long narrative historical poem “Logan,” prose fiction, and other works in technical terms and as art.

Additional Keywords

Zimmer, Paul Edwin. *The Dark Border*; Zimmer, Paul Edwin. “Logan”; Zimmer, Paul Edwin. “The Complaint of Agni”; Anderson, Poul. *The Broken Sword*; Alliterative meter; Tolkien, J.R.R. Poetry—Technique; Fantasy literature



PAUL EDWIN ZIMMER'S ALLITERATIVE STYLE: A METRICAL LEGACY OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND POUL ANDERSON

DENNIS WILSON WISE

OF THE MANY WRENCHES THROWN BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN into modern literature, arguably the one least likely to succeed was his attempt to foment a 20th-century alliterative revival in poetry: that is, rendering into modern English the techniques and structures common to Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon verse. Considering that the 14th century had attempted a similar alliterative revival, which ultimately failed to catch on, Tolkien certainly recognized the literary risks. The *Gawain*-poet, for one, “paid the penalty” for the revival’s failure (Tolkien, Introduction 14). Still, a few of Tolkien’s contemporaries did tread along the trail he first attempted to blaze, in particular C.S. Lewis and W.H. Auden. After Lewis and Auden, though, the commonly cited list of alliterative writers generally tapers off. Occasionally Richard Wilbur or Seamus Heaney receive an honorable mention, but their alliterative efforts were either sporadic or extremely loose, nor did Tolkien himself much influence either poet. The case is different, though, with Paul Edwin Zimmer. Mostly forgotten now, Zimmer had something of a cult following in the 1980s and 1990s, primarily for his epic sword-and-sorcery novel of dark fantasy, *The Dark Border*, published in two volumes in 1982. Yet Zimmer began his career as a poet—and a poet, furthermore, who made no bones about his literary debts to J.R.R. Tolkien and Poul Anderson. Zimmer credits both authors for being the literary “masters” for a “half-dozen younger writers,” including himself, who had begun experimenting in ancient alliterative meters (“Another Opinion of ‘The Verse of J.R.R. Tolkien’” 21). Unfortunately, none of these writers except Zimmer truly caught on, and even Zimmer himself only briefly, though perhaps we can attribute this to the pulp tradition in which they worked. All of Zimmer’s poetry, for example, appeared in out-of-the-way venues—i.e., long-defunct speculative fiction fanzines and newsletters with poor circulations, and difficult to find today.

My goals are therefore twofold. First, I would simply like to shine some light on a neglected author’s impressive and original contributions—in poetry and prose—to the 20th-century alliterative revival. For example, Zimmer’s evocatively written scenes of battle, for which he’s now best remembered, stem directly from techniques he first gleaned from studying alliterative verse.

Second, I'd also like to highlight the long (but insufficiently recognized) shadows of influence cast by Tolkien and Anderson, especially within speculative fiction. Indeed, Anderson often seems like speculative fiction's odd man out, his independently-developed contributions to modern alliterative poetry apparently forgotten—and certainly never mentioned—by critics discussing the 20th-century revival. His most widely read efforts, like Tolkien's, come through his novels, particularly *The Broken Sword* (1954; rev. 1971) and the *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* (1973). He also published several Old Norse translations in *Amra*, an influential sword-and-sorcery fanzine from the 1960s and 1970s. Zimmer, a personal friend of Anderson's, would have known these well. The works by Tolkien known to Zimmer would have included the alliterative poems in *The Lord of the Rings*, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" in *The Tolkien Reader* (1966), and possibly *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Orfeo* (1975), released two years prior to the publication of Zimmer's own best alliterative poem. In general, Anderson preferred the Old Norse forms whereas Tolkien preferred the Old English ones, yet both shared a love for the traditions, history, and literature of the ancient heroic north—and that love shines forth in Zimmer.¹

Yet Zimmer does not simply imitate techniques and structures inherited from greater masters. Like Auden, he modifies alliterative meter for his own unique purposes. My first section looks at "Logan" (1977), a long narrative historical poem inspired by "Logan's Lament," a once famous statement by Logan the Orator reprinted in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* and reproduced, with minor metrical modifications, within Zimmer's own poem.² Overall, "Logan" plays into a rising postcolonial awareness.

¹ One of Tolkien's few excursions into Old Norse meter comes in his lays of Sigurd and Gudrún, never published in his lifetime and thus unavailable to Zimmer. Those lays were written in eight-verse *fornyrðislag* stanzas. Of the difference in effect between Old Norse and Old English alliterative forms, despite their metrical similarities, Tolkien has said that the more stately Old English verse "does not attempt to hit you in the eye," though such was "the deliberate intention of the Norse poet" (*The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* 17-18). Anderson himself wrote relatively few poems in the *fornyrðislag* mode but, when he did, they appear in his novels; his translations for *Amra* generally follow the much more difficult eight-verse *dróttkvætt* stanza, the "courtly meter," with six syllables and three stresses per verse. Anderson, though, rarely attempts the assonance and internal rhymes common to this form. A partial exception is "The First Love," a translation from Olaf Haraldsson, published in *Amra*, vol. 2, no. 12, 1960, p. 16.

² My citations will come from the 1989 reprint of "Logan" in *Armageddon!: There Will Be War: Volume VIII*, a science fiction anthology. Zimmer had originally published the poem in *Wyrd*, a short-lived fanzine that exacerbated the problem of poor distribution with poor copyediting. The *Armageddon!* reprint at least corrects the typos. With one exception, though, the same text appears in both versions. In the *Wyrd* version, Logan speaks the

Tolkien, highly aware of “things once lost from the olden days, not only in ideas but the words and the forms as well,” had attempted his alliterative revival as a means to recover an ancient English tradition (Hall 45). Zimmer, though, uses the meter, at least a loose form of it, to evoke an archaic aura without stooping to the archaisms reminiscent of European history and language—a powerful way, in his view, of articulating the dignity and the cultural independence of a non-Western indigenous people. When Zimmer eventually abandoned poetry for fiction, however, he did not similarly abandon either Anderson or Tolkien. My second section therefore examines how Zimmer incorporates many techniques of classic alliterative verse into his prose style. Ironically, besides alliteration itself, Zimmer—despite the greater freedom afforded by prose—here seems to have adhered more closely to such alliterative devices as paratactic compression, trochaic stress patterns, and compounds. He uses these devices sparingly but, when he does, especially during his battle scenes, the effect is memorable. Ultimately, I would like to suggest that the alliterative achievements of Paul Edwin Zimmer—an underappreciated and unjustly unremembered writer—constitute the most important legacy in speculative fiction of Tolkien’s and Anderson’s alliterative revival.

ZIMMER’S POETRY: “LOGAN” AND “THE COMPLAINT OF AGNI”

Content-wise, several remarkable features distinguish “Logan” as a long narrative poem. It tells the story of Logan the Orator, a Cayuga—later Mingo—diplomat and war leader who, after moving to the Ohio Country in the 1760s, worked as a peacemaker between British and Native American peoples until the brutal murder of several family members led to retaliations that eventually culminated in “Dunmore’s War” of 1774. With one exception, Zimmer accurately and powerfully renders the war’s complex political situation.³ Although Lord Dunmore comes off as something of a mustachio-twirling

following line after the murder of his family: “Now thirty scalps will not thaw out my hatred!” (28). In the *Armageddon!* reprint, Zimmer improves that to “Now thirty scalps I’ve seized to soothe my heart’s aching: / But thrice thirty scalps will not thaw out my hatred!” (282). Incidentally, “Logan” contains no fantastical elements. Only its original publication in *Wyrd* and the fantasy-orientation of Zimmer’s other work justifies calling the poem “speculative fiction.”

³ The exception occurs over which of Logan’s specific relatives were killed in the Yellow Creek Massacre. In the poem, the murder victims were Logan’s small child and pregnant wife, but that’s pure poetic license. In truth, the victims were Logan’s brother John Petty and two close female relations, one of whom was certainly Logan’s sister. The sister *was* pregnant at the time and accompanied by another small infant, but the father was obviously not Logan himself. Instead, the father was John Gibson, a British-American trader well known throughout the region. Also contra the poem, the infant child survived the massacre, although accounts differ as to why her life was spared.

villain, eager for his own advancement and King George's good graces, Zimmer nevertheless captures the Virginia governor's complex twin ambitions of vigorous westward expansion and of re-directing the revolutionary fervor then sweeping the colonies against the British crown. More importantly, the poem situates Zimmer as clamoring for a re-assessment of America's colonial past—a late articulation of the Counterculture's rising political will and sympathy in favor of Native American peoples. Also, in a stance still hotly contested among scholars today, by calling Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson a "new Deganoweda and Hayenwatha" who built "a Great League, / In imitation of the first" ("Logan" 285), Zimmer demands that readers acknowledge the influence of the Iroquois League on America's post-Revolution political system. A harsh note, however, closes out the poem. When Zimmer writes, "Who are *we* that mourn for Logan" (285, emphasis original), we are presented with the bitter caution that neither a white poet nor a (mostly) white audience should presume to speak truth to power for a Native American past that does not belong to them. In this regard, Zimmer directly challenges the appropriating tradition of American poetry exemplified by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, first published in 1855, which meekly ends with the legendary Hiawatha's Christianization.⁴

My main interest, though, here concerns alliteration. Technically speaking, only one-third of "Logan" counts as an alliterative poem—but every line suggests the politics of poetic meter. The dominant meter, i.e. the one used by the speaker to narrate events, comes courtesy of free verse, an apparently "neutral" choice. When Zimmer wishes to present the British perspective more directly, however, he abruptly switches to unrhymed iambic pentameter—blank verse, in other words, the traditional form of English-language poetry and drama. Hence we get lines such as

The Virginia governor, Lord Dunmore,
Cast covetous eyes on Ohio land.
The vastness of the West impells his dreams
And bends his mind to Westward rulership. (275)

Occasionally Zimmer will insert rhyme or near-rhyme into his iambic pentameter—and these abrupt switches always indicate moments of

⁴ Intriguingly, J.R.R. Tolkien both read and liked "The Song of Hiawatha"—Longfellow derived some inspiration from the Finnish *Kalevala*, which of course Tolkien himself partially translated as a young man. Tolkien biographer John Garth has also suggested that the death of Smaug scene in *The Hobbit* may have found some influence from the death of Megissogwon scene in Longfellow's poem.

exceptional evil. For example, when Daniel Greathouse momentarily resists Lord Dunmore's machinations, Dunmore thinks

The vicious, low-born dog was insolent!
Nevertheless—the perfect instrument. (276)

When Greathouse does murder Logan's family, it comes in perfectly rhymed iambic pentameter:

Greathouse has taken Lord Dunmore's bright gold,
And now his men to earn their pay are told,
Women and children lie helpless in mud,
Hatchets and skinning-knives are stained with blood. (280)

This pattern of having rhymed iambic pentameter denote exceptional acts of evil *seems* to break near the poem's finale when, due to the American Revolution, Lord Dunmore's political career falls apart—yet the Revolutionary War also permanently sunders the Iroquois League. The use of rhyme also suggests the tragedy of Native Americans who give greater loyalty to the English or American colonists than they do to other Native Americans. Hence, in that same finale, we read that American rebel “preachers have taught the Oneida well: / Who stands for the King takes the road to Hell” (284). These rhymed lines also recall similar earlier rhymed passages such as those about “Anglican Mohawks, loyal to the King” who hail from “the Great League's eastern wing” (281).

In contrast to Anglo-American iambic pentameter, though, the Native American perspective always comes via alliterative verse. This marks an interesting choice on a number of levels. On one hand, of course, alliterative meter belongs to a quite different cultural tradition, and it originated in a Germanic language group whose aural hallmarks differ greatly from the Iroquoian languages.⁵ On the other hand, Zimmer seems to have valued this meter for its archaic feel, something he considered appropriate for a non-Western cultural tradition whose development came independently of Europe's post-Renaissance “modernity”—and at least one contemporary Native American poet, Carter Revard, has likewise found alliterative meter useful for presenting indigenous themes.⁶ A representative example of Zimmer's

⁵ For example, Old English vocabulary favors short mono- or disyllabic words, whereas the Iroquoian languages are polysynthetic, meaning that they use words composed of many different morphemes. In addition, the Iroquoian languages generally lack labial consonants common to Old English, such as [m], [p], [b], [f], and [v].

⁶ A short representative example of Revard's alliterative verse comes in “Birch Canoe,” told from the viewpoint of the tree used to make the canoe:

alliterative verse occurs when Logan makes his first appearance in the poem. Logan's reputation as a trans-cultural peacemaker is described as follows:

Though shrewdly shielding his Shawnee charges,
He wins White friends by the wisdom of his counsel:
Wars were averted, and once, when words failed
And death and destruction by deaf ears wrought,
Calm in his cabin, the Cayuga chief
Sorrowed for the slaughter and sought for peace;
Well was he famed as "the White Man's friend." (274)

The first thing to note about this representative passage is that, despite Zimmer's professed—and often polemical—admiration for the alliterative verse of Tolkien and Anderson, these lines don't actually resemble anything composed by either poet. Anderson preferred the Norse forms, which Zimmer never imitated, at least not in print, and Tolkien preferred Old English alliterative meter. Yet my excerpt from "Logan" produces an effect quite different from Old English verse, at least as understood by Tolkien. Tolkien has noted that the ancient English measure, for example, seems "harsh and stiff and rugged to those unaccustomed to it" (Introduction 14); Christopher Tolkien adds to this by explaining that the Old English language, especially "in verse, was slow, not very nimble, but very sonorous, and was intensely packed and concentrated" ("Appendix: Old English Verse" 231).

A good example comes in Théoden's rallying cry for the Riders of Rohan:

Arise, arise, Riders of Théoden!
Fell deeds awake: fire and slaughter!
spear shall be shaken, shield be splintered,
a sword-day, a red day, ere the sun rises!
Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor! (*The Lord of the Rings*
V.5.838)

Red men embraced my body's whiteness,
cutting into me carved it free,
sewed it tight with sinews taken
from lightfoot deer who leaped this stream—
now in my ghost-skin they glide over clouds
at home in the fish's fallen heaven. (*An Eagle Nation* 87)

The unusual perspective, not to mention the alliterative meter, harkens back to the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Dream of the Rood," which tells the Crucifixion story from the perspective of Christ's cross—an association which thus deepens the resonances of this aspect of Native American life for the (Western) reader.

Here, Tolkien adheres strictly to the Old English measure. Each half-line contains two stresses, and the first half-line (or on-verse) bears alliteration on one or both of its stresses whereas the second half-line (or off-verse) bears alliteration on its first stressed word only. Every line observes the medial caesura. Although this example contains no enjambed lines, a frequent tendency of Old English verse, many of Tolkien's other alliterative efforts often did. Tolkien's diction also resembles Old English diction: consonant-heavy, syllables closed, and words never more than two syllables long. Several of the words, such as "fell" and "ere," are themselves archaic; they thus recall the special poetic language to which Old English poets often resorted. Furthermore, and most significantly, Tolkien strives to follow the poetical verse types first identified by Eduard Sievers. The A-type verse is most common in Old English, following a pattern of lift-dip-lift-dip. For example "*fire* and *slaughter*," "*shield* be *splintered*." Sometimes, on the A-type verse, an anacrusis applies where we can drop an initial unstressed syllable without affecting the meter. But Tolkien also employs the dip-lift-dip-lift pattern of B-type verse, Old English poetry's second most common type: hence, "*arise, arise*."

Except for alliteration and four-stress lines, Zimmer really follows none of these strictures. He avoids archaisms (except possibly for "wrought" in line 4). No special concern for his words' language of origin marks his diction—"destruction" comes from Latin, and "shrewdly" and "chief" both entered *Middle* English via Latin (and even Old French in the case of "chief"). Occasionally, Zimmer even breaks the iron-clad Old English rule about never alliterating on an unstressed syllable: for example, line 4, "And *death* and *destruction*." Most notable, perhaps, is Zimmer's ambivalence toward echoing the sonorous compactness of classic Old English alliterative meter. Zimmer's lines, except in a few pleasant cases (such as "Though shrewdly shielding," an A-type verse with anacrusis), tend toward looseness. Doubtlessly this stems partly from changes in the language. In modern English, prepositions have largely replaced verb and noun endings, thus making the lift-dip pattern common to Old English difficult to imitate with any frequency. Tolkien, to get around this problem, often incorporated rhetorical devices such as causal parataxis and adversative asyndeton to suggest grammatical relationships without the requirement of an additional, meter-busting dip. Strangely enough, Zimmer does nothing like this in his poetry, though his prose often will (as we'll see in the next section). As a result, although many of Zimmer's lines sound more idiomatic than Tolkien's, they do so at the expense of the compactness achieved by Tolkien—and Anderson, too, for that matter.

Actually, the alliterative meter in "Logan" seems to suggest Middle English alliterative forms more than the Old English ones preferred by Tolkien. The poets of the 14th-century alliterative revival, already dealing with a changing

language, often ran their lines longer and looser than their predecessors. Overrunning the caesura wasn't uncommon, either, and Zimmer does this in all but two of the quoted lines—specifically, lines three and five. The sense of his lines often stops at the line's end, rather than continuing onward through enjambment: another characteristic of Middle English alliteration. Indeed, if Zimmer hadn't championed Tolkien and Anderson so fiercely while never once mentioning W.H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*, we might have suspected a more profound impact on Zimmer from the latter poet. In Auden's adaptation of alliterative meter to modern English, he more often used (in contrast to Tolkien) the Middle English models, seeing the "essential characteristic of alliterative meter [as] the use of alliteration on stressed syllables" to bind his lines together, thus downplaying other features such as vowel quantity and syllable length (Phelpstead 455). Similarly, Zimmer also uses alliteration mainly to bind together his lines, rarely observing other key features of Old English meter.⁷ Nonetheless, despite longer and looser lines, Zimmer *does* prefer in "Logan" certain features of Old English alliterative models over standard Middle English ones. For example, he never packs three alliterating stresses in his on-verse, nor in the off-verse does he ever alliterate on the second stressed syllable. In addition, Zimmer also distances himself from some of the innovations introduced by Auden, particularly the strict syllable-counting Auden used to compensate for abandoning rules of vowel quantity. The alliterative lines in "Logan" run anywhere between nine and twelve syllables.

What all these modifications mean, in my view, is that while Zimmer clearly drew inspiration from Tolkien and Anderson, he nonetheless felt free

⁷ The closest Tolkien came to the "looseness" of Auden's Middle-English alliteration would have come in his 1975 translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*. As mentioned in the introduction, this book was probably published too close in date to "Logan" to have made a major impact on Zimmer. Some debate, though, could be had on "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," which appeared in the 1966 *Tolkien Reader*. It's an open question whether this short verse drama suggests Old English or Middle English alliterative models more. Tolkien himself says that *The Battle of Maldon*, for which his own metrical adaptation was "little if at all freer" than the original, hung on the cusp of change, "composed in a free form of the alliterative line" that, through its use of rhyme, presages "the fading end of the old heroic alliterative measure" (5-6). Carl Phelpstead certainly places the verse drama closer to Old English meter, arguing that the poem shows "how effectively Tolkien manages to assimilate the Old English poetic meter to dialogue in modern English" (442). In contrast, Tom Shippey has argued that the verse drama's relatively looser pattern and greater stylistic variation suggests the "longer and looser, but equally powerful metrical forms of the Middle English poets like the author of *Sir Gawain and Pearl*" (21). Personally, I lean more towards Phelpstead's placement but, however "loose" we may consider "The Homecoming," it still adheres to the ancient meter more strictly than Zimmer's "Logan."

enough to experiment somewhat daringly. The weighty impressiveness of Tolkien's own attempts at alliterative verse in *The Lord of the Rings*, not to mention the gruff yet beautiful compactness of Poul Anderson's translations, enchanted Zimmer, and so his fierce advocacy, but what Zimmer choose to emulate was the suggestion of great age, of unsurpassed dignity—the feel of premodern life. To capture the legacy and tragedy of Logan properly, Zimmer needed something archaic but lacking in explicit archaisms. Zimmer seems to have felt that such archaisms, laden down by their associations with English literary history, might have too strongly suggested a *European* cultural and historical past. In stark contrast to Tolkien and even C.S. Lewis, who both wished to resuscitate an ancient cultural mode belonging to the English but forgotten by modern Englishmen, Zimmer takes an old form, loosens its basic structure, renders its diction idiomatic, and sets it in opposition to the much more recognizable “English” meter of iambic pentameter: an archaic meter set against a modern rival. Zimmer wants neither *recovery*, nor even so much *revival* (if we understand by such terms a nationalistic project), but something that would bestow an aura of stateliness upon a contemporary, but non-industrial and non-Western, indigenous people. In a way, Zimmer's adaptation of alliterative verse makes more sense than even Auden's. Though Auden wished to discuss modern alienation and anxiety, nothing about the old alliterative meter truly suggests such themes; he merely liked the sound of it and wished to experiment. In “Logan,” though, Zimmer takes a meter that originated in pre-industrial and pre-Enlightenment social conditions, relatively free of modern literary associations, and applies it to a Native American cultural group that, in some ways, remained closer to Anglo-Saxon ways of life than modern Anglo-American ways.⁸

After “Logan,” Zimmer's only other major alliterative effort comes in a poem called “The Complaint of Agni.” Although less impressive in accomplishment, it does deserve some mention as one of the earliest attempts to imbue speculative fiction with a non-Western mythology. It also presages some elements in *The Dark Border*, whose Bordermen are a brown-skinned people with

⁸ As these comments suggest, I'm taking a highly positive view of Zimmer's modern English adaptation of alliterative meter. Still, writing in alliterative meter requires a steep learning curve, and it should not be forgotten that Zimmer's looseness might parallel some of Tolkien's own early difficulties in successfully adapting alliterative verse. Tolkien's most representative early example is “The Lay of the Children of Húrin,” published posthumously in the *The Lays of Beleriand* (1985). As Tom Shippey authoritatively states, Tolkien wrestled mightily with the alliterative meter at this stage in his career, and as such his lines were often “rather rhythmically restricted, and rather metrically licentious” (17). Zimmer almost certainly would have struggled with all these same issues, though strict fidelity mattered much less to him as it did to Tolkien.

place-names suggestive of Hindi language elements. The narrative itself derives from a famous episode in the Hindi epic *Ramayana*. Agni, the Hindu Fire-God, grows angry with Lord Rama for doubting his wife Sita's purity, even after Agni proves it by refusing to burn her alive on the pyre. This distrust and lack of faith, according to Agni, sunders the old connection between men and gods. As with "Logan," Zimmer deems the alliterative meter an appropriate means for representing non-Western content—but also like the previous poem, only a portion of "Complaint" can be considered alliterative. In each stanza, just the first four lines in each 10-line stanza alliterate. The fifth line bears various types of rhyme, including internal (or double internal) rhyme, and the final five lines bear shorter lines that correspondingly produce much different metrical effects.

For example, the poem begins:

I am flickering fire, fiercely flashing:
Glittering God of Glowing Glory.
Hot on the hearth, the home I bless,
I force the food to fuel your body;
I light the night with gleaming beams,
Yellow gold
And jeweled red—
See now! The Demon Cold
Has fled!
Agni—Fire-God am I! (22)

Even in this excerpt, we can see that "Complaint" deviates even more radically from Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse poetic models. Some similarities with "Logan" still remain. In both, for example, the sense of the lines usually end-stops, and lines have a tendency to run over the medial caesura. In both are language and sentence structure relatively idiomatic, with few unnatural inversions, although occasionally Zimmer will insert archaisms into "Complaint": *ye* and *wroth* in the third stanza, for example. The most obvious deviation, however, concerns the introduction of packed alliteration. The first four lines alliterate on all four beats, which the poets of the 14th-century alliterative revival—but never Old English poets—sometimes did. Tellingly, Tolkien calls such verse "decadent," cloying upon the ear if done too often ("On Translating *Beowulf*" 67); he may have been thinking particularly of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, although the *Gawain*-poet sometimes packs as well.⁹

⁹ Tolkien, intriguingly, once wrote a still-unpublished parody of *Piers Plowman*, entitled "Doworst," about students doing quite poorly in their oral exams; John D. Rateliff quotes a few lines in an article on Tolkien's use of medieval forms (135). For what it's worth, Rateliff also notes that while Tolkien's familiarity (or interest) in Langland is relatively

In lines 3 and 4 of my excerpt, a more standard alliterative pattern on the first three beats returns—yet Zimmer also adds an interlinear alliteration on the *b* in “bless” and “body.”

Nonetheless, besides comprising the first four lines of each stanza, the alliteration in “Complaint” doesn’t follow any consistent pattern. Sometimes Zimmer’s lines employ packed alliteration, sometimes interlinear alliteration; other times they even resort to rhyme, another occasional feature of Middle English alliterative verse. For example, in stanza two:

The logs I lick to light are turned!
The body I bless whose bones are burned. (22)

The ultimate effect, while not necessarily striking poorly upon the ear, is still haphazard, which suggests that Zimmer uses alliteration in “Complaint” as something more ornamental than structural—thus raising questions whether these lines should, in the strict sense, be called “alliterative” at all. The necessity for maintaining alliteration, unfortunately, also leads to a number of infelicities, such as in the fourth quoted line where Zimmer uses “force” instead of *cook*—indeed, the line’s core idea is dull enough that only the wish to maintain four alliterating lines in each stanza could have compelled Zimmer to retain it. In addition, a significantly greater proportion of unstressed words bear alliteration than permitted in “Logan.” For example, a half-line in the penultimate stanza of “Complaint” reads “miracles come no more” (24), but the word *more* hardly bears any natural stress. In the end, the seemingly decorative nature of the alliteration in “Complaint” deprives it of the archaic aura that makes “Logan” so effective. Thus Zimmer’s earlier narrative poem easily becomes his most significant contribution to the 20th-century alliterative revival.

ZIMMER’S PROSE STYLE: *THE DARK BORDER*

After Zimmer published his first solo novel in 1982, volume one of *The Dark Border*, he seems to have mostly abandoned poetry, afterward publishing only a few short pieces. Also, in contrast to Anderson and Tolkien, he also seems to have rejected including poetry and song in his fiction—of his novels, only *The Dark Border* contains any verse, a few isolated stanzas of “The Ballad of Pertap’s Ride.” (These fragments, incidentally, do not even appear in traditional ballad meter). Hence, Zimmer’s work as a novelist greatly overshadows his work as a poet and, within his novels, he has earned the most comment for his powerful evocations of battle and his vivid descriptions of swordsmanship. Part of that success stems from his own intimate knowledge of sword technique, having

undocumented, two “excerpts from *Piers Plowman* (totalizing 436 lines) were included in Sisam’s *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, to which Tolkien provided a glossary” (146n6).

trained in various styles from China, Europe, and Japan (including the Japanese Yagyū Style of Iai-Do); and, alongside Poul Anderson and several others, Zimmer co-founded the Society of Creative Anachronism, which often performed re-enactments. The other part of Zimmer's success, though, comes from metrical lessons he learned from his two alliterative "masters." Even though he stopped producing poetry, Zimmer's *prose* nonetheless incorporates such techniques as alliteration, poetic compounds, paratactic compression, the clearing of "extraneous" grammatical matter, and metrical patterns that include a high proportion of spondees and trochees (in imitation of Old English A-type verses). All these techniques are a direct off-shoot of Zimmer's participation in the 20th-century alliterative revival, and the closest any critic has come to noticing (at least in print) is a short comment by linguist and Celticist Alexei Kondratiev in praise of Zimmer's "use of discreet alliteration and metric prose" (56). My goal, then, is to situate Zimmer as the first prose stylist of the modern alliterative revival.

The following representative scene comes from *King Chondos' Ride*, volume two of *The Dark Border*. It concerns a cavalry charge by Martos's Kadarins against an opposing Seynyorean force still gathering into formation. I choose this scene, partly, because it contains all Zimmer's main alliterative features, which rarely come so tightly packed together. But I also choose this scene because critic Bruce Byfield has criticized this section of *The Dark Border* for dragging the novel's general narrative pace; in that same paragraph, he also criticizes Zimmer for being a less accomplished prose stylist than a poet (Byfield). While I agree that this section's "increasingly futile" scenes of battle slow down the narrative, they also reaffirm Martos's skill as a young commander after a prior bad decision had disastrously enabled Istvan's forces to take the fortress at Ojakota. They also show Zimmer's prose techniques in their most highly concentrated form. In order to compensate for any narrative drag, Zimmer attempts to portray the tense experience of men in war: the grim poetry of battle.

The chosen passage reads thus:

Flying mud spattered from the horses' hooves: each hoofbeat jolted in the bones; speed-chilled winds rasped men's faces.

Seynyoreans shouted and spurred their own horses. The lines clapped together. Milky highlights¹⁰ rippled on charcoal-grey swords; shields were lifted to meet them, and the thunder of steel on iron numbed

¹⁰ This phrase is meant to describe the sunlight reflecting dully on men's arms and armor; the battlefield conditions are incredibly muddy because of an on-going "thin silver wash of rain" in the daylight (Zimmer, KC 169).

the ears. Horses fell, hurling their riders into mud; grey swords were stained crimson.

Martos' shield shuddered under a blow that bruised his arm beneath it. His sword rose and fell, hammering until his arm ached, as he drove his steed into the ranks before him. Men were yelling all around him, and the chiming of steel was an ache in his eardrums, but above it all he heard the crowing of Border war-cries.

And then suddenly it seemed that all the rearing, plunging horses that still had riders on their backs were running in the same direction, and the crowded mass was splitting apart. He blinked, stared about wildly, and saw little groups of Seynyoreans wheeling their mounts, trying to get free of the melee. [...] (*King Chondos' Ride* [KC] 170)

Looking at this passage through a narratological lens, a common way of understanding writerly style, we see a number of shifts in both focalization and duration. The normal focalization for this section of the book has come through Martos's perspective, but in this passage a quick shift to external focalization—an abrupt “zoom out”—grants a bird's-eye-view of the battle. With external focalization comes a corresponding loss of individual detail; the first two paragraphs offer an “impression” of the battle *en masse* not limited to Martos's own individual line of sight. Indeed, the battle described here is heavily depersonalized. The bearers of action in the first three paragraphs are either groups (“Seynyoreans” and “horses” in paragraph two) or objects: the mud, hoofbeats, and wind in paragraph one, the shield and sword of Martos in paragraph two. His sword and shield, furthermore, are not raised by Martos himself; grammatically, they seem to rise of their own accord. All this creates an intriguing effect. Despite the stress and terror of combat, such heavy war-work has also become a matter of methodical absorption for these weary, rain-drenched professional mercenaries. Conscious thought and individual self-awareness have been replaced by years of training and the need to focus mechanically on the task at hand. Only halfway through the third paragraph does Zimmer begin returning us to the impression of events as they appear to Martos specifically.

Yet complete self-awareness, as it were, comes to Martos only in the fourth paragraph. The text switches back to internal focalization. The “suddenly it seemed” phrase suggests that time has passed for Martos in a blur—and, in the following sentence, the first action directly attributed to Martos in several paragraphs is “blinking,” which leads us to understand that he has now, once again, become a cavalry commander who must begin assessing the military situation, no more a simple soldier fighting mechanically within his unit. The “suddenly it seemed” phrase also signals a rapid change in “duration,” a technical term within narrative theory for the relationship between storyworld

time and the textual space allotted to describing events occurring within storyworld time. The initial stages of the battle happen quite quickly: three short paragraphs to describe events moderately lengthy in duration. These events have been blurred for the reader, just as they have been blurred for Martos. The narrative pace, however, rapidly decelerates in the fourth paragraph. That is to say, Zimmer allots more page-space to the battle's closing moments than to its entire middle and beginning. While we still don't witness many of Martos's thoughts and feelings (that will occur afterward), we nonetheless begin to see a more detailed portrait of what Martos individually perceives and everything to which he individually reacts. We lose, in other words, the former bird's-eye-view. Overall, such rapid shifts in duration and focalization help Zimmer sustain the vividness of a battle that has only minor relevance to the larger plot. As such, he also creates a specific variation—mindless, methodical activity—of the experience of men in melee combat. Indeed, the success of *The Dark Border* often lies in how deftly Zimmer uses such narrative technique to vary his descriptions for each battlefield episode.

Yet, for this article, the direct influence of Old English and Old Norse alliterative poetry strikes me as more intriguing than narrative technique. Several influences can be glimpsed within the passage quoted above. The most obvious, needless to say, is alliteration itself. The second paragraph, for example, contains several alliterations and half-alliterations on consonantal diphthongs involving *s*: *sh*outed, *sp*urred, *sh*ields, *st*eel, *sw*ord. Strictly speaking, Old English poets treated these diphthongs as separate non-alliterating sounds; so does Tolkien, for that matter. Zimmer, though, apparently feels no such inhibition, and this freedom allows him to bind the paragraph's individual sentences together in a way not dissimilar to how ancient alliterative poets bound together their own lines of poetry. With only one coordinating conjunction in seven distinct main clauses spread throughout four complete sentences, Zimmer uses alliteration in combination with special syntax to connect each sentence segment. The *sh-*, *sp-*, and *st-* alliterations also help the second paragraph flow into the opening sentence of the third paragraph: "Martos' *sh*ield *sh*uddered under a *b*low that *b*ruised his arm beneath it."

Another obvious influence from "classic" alliterative meter is how frequently Zimmer coins unusual poetic compounds. For example, my quoted passage reveals two new compounds, "speed-chilled" and "charcoal-grey," but to this list we might add "hoofbeat" and "highlights," two compounds which have become words in their own right. Metrically speaking, besides their basic contribution to sentence meaning, these compounds permit the inclusion of additional spondees and stressed syllables into the text, something true adjectives can rarely do. In this regard, Zimmer may have been particularly

influenced by the *fornyrðislag* form in Old Norse poetry, which eliminated unstressed words to the greatest possible extent. A good example in modern English comes via Poul Anderson in *The Broken Sword*:

White-maned horses
(hear their neighing!),
gray and gaunt-flanked,
gallop westward.
Wild with winter
winds, they snort and
buck when bearing
burdens for me. (2)

Here, spondee compounds like “white-maned” and “gaunt-flanked” help create the compact feel of the poem; no single line has more unstressed syllables than stressed syllables. Again and again, Zimmer will return to alliteration and compounds as key components of his metrical style. The following sentence from *A Gathering of Heroes* even manages combine both techniques: “Istvan’s sun-glared eyes peered through *spark-scarred* darkness at *rock* that *rang* with muffled shouts and chimes” (57).

Yet, even beyond visually obvious influences like alliteration and compounds, Zimmer’s tightest descriptive prose—even moreso than in his poetry—seeks to achieve alliterative meter’s classic compactness. My mention of spondees and stressed syllables has already indicated something of this, but paragraph 1 offers the best example of compression in action. To savor its full flavor, let’s break that paragraph down into lines:

Flying mud spattered
from the horses’ hooves:
each hoofbeat
jolted in the bones;
speed-chilled winds
rasped men’s faces.

This breakdown brings several important features to light. Compression comes first. As with Anderson’s *fornyrðislag*, stressed syllables heavily outnumber unstressed. Sixteen syllables out of 24 bear a stress. In fact, assuming that we count “faces” as only one syllable, half the lines—three, five, and six—contain no unstressed syllables at all. Zimmer manages this through syntactical parataxis, a device he neglects in his poetry and which Tolkien uses in abundance. That is to say, Zimmer eliminates conjunctions through the use of a colon and a semi-colon, creating three separate—but equally weighted and

equally strong—images. Indeed, only two prepositions and two definite articles comprise the sentence's meager eight unstressed syllables. In other words, almost every grammatical word that does not contribute to the presentation (to paraphrase Ezra Pound, whom Zimmer disdained) has been eliminated. Yet the technique comes to Zimmer not through literary modernism but through Tolkien and Anderson.

A further influence from ancient alliterative meter comes through Zimmer's high rate of trochaic stress patterns in lieu of iambic ones. Because of inflection on nouns and verbs, what syllable-counting metricists would today call "trochees" came more naturally to Old English and Old Norse, which explains why alliterative poetry in those languages most commonly resorted to the lift-dip pattern of A-type verses. Our language's subsequent loss of inflection made that effect much harder to achieve in modern English. As we saw in "Logan," Zimmer only sporadically attempted this trochaic effect in his poetry. In special prose passages, however, he's more diligent. Of the six lines in my breakdown, only one (the second) begins on an unstressed syllable, and not a single iambic word appears in the passage. Finally, just to add some extra spice, Zimmer adds alliteration on *h* in lines two and three and on *b* in lines three and four, bridged by a single compound: *hoofbeat*.

These techniques appear over and over again in Zimmer's writing—at least for passages of hard battle or sword-fighting, anywhere added intensity seems required. Istvan DiVega's climatic duel with Prince Hansio reinforces many of the observations made here. For example,

A corridor opened between the hostile armies, and there they were:
two old men on dancing horses, their swords fiery splinters lashing.
Martos' eyes saw mastery in the poise of shields.

Jagat pulled up his horse, and Martos reined in beside him. All
around them, men were shouting; but their swords were still.

DiVega glittered in his garment of rings. Russet-clad Hansio
rushed, winged sword wheeling. Supple silver mesh rippled with stars
as DiVega's shield rose and his sword pivoted, turning to a wheel of fire.
Both swords struck as one: the slamming of shields crashed across the
field. (KC 305)

The third paragraph in particular describes a direct martial engagement between two foes. Outside of DiVega's name, every multisyllabic word is a trochee, which signals the intensity of the action. The same applies to the first paragraph's opening sentence after the colon. Indeed, the moderately unusual grammatical order of its final three words ("fiery splinters lashing") seems deliberately arranged for a trochaic effect. More traditionally, we can also note some simple poetic phrasings—Zimmer uses "garment of rings" for ring-mail,

enabling an alliteration on *g*, and “rippled with stars” for the glint of sunlight on the armor of moving men. Some purists of style might object to such poetic incorporations into prose but, as I read the passage in context, these things certainly seem to enhance, rather than to detract, the overall effectiveness of this important scene.

Incidentally, another important point about Zimmer’s style is how rarely—and, when he does, how *strategically*—he uses variations of the verb *to be*. He almost never uses that particular verb for the heaviest fighting; hence, we often see odd yet evocative verb choices such as sound “crashing” across a field or light “rippling” (rather than shining or glinting) on mail. When *to be* verbs appears in the second paragraph, they do so strategically. They are applied, not to the actions of either Istvan or Hansio, but to the people around them; the use of “were” slows down the action, creating a change of metrical tempo that helps accentuate the more active fighting of the duel. Although we can’t really attribute such idiosyncratic verb usage to anything Zimmer learned from Tolkien or Anderson, it does constitute a notable feature of Zimmer’s battle-writing.

I would like to close out with one last short passage: the description of Istvan’s victory over Hansio. It doesn’t, this time, use alliteration or compounds, but a high proportion of semi-colons and colons eliminates unnecessary—and therefore unstressed—coordinating conjunctions. None here appear. Along the same lines, the first sentence employs the previously unseen conjunction-eliminating rhetorical device of asyndeton. Not a single *to be* verb deadens the liveliness of the writing; instead, we see more highly suggestive, but odd, verb usages like “his blade tumbled” and “pivoting steel winged.” Trochaic multisyllabic words proliferate. Finally, we see reflected in this passage Zimmer’s own precise knowledge of the actions possible within swordsmanship, without which his stylistic innovations would have been much emptier:

Istvan let his wrist flop, his fingers loosen, his elbow crook: only thumb and forefinger gripped as his blade tumbled into the path of the stroke; his hand clenched, milking the hilt as edges locked. Then his arm lashed out, catapulting the blade over and down at Hansio’s helm. The other blade sprang to meet it: edges grated above Hansio’s head. Then pivoting steel winged at Istvan’s throat.

Istvan pulled his hilt down. It rocked in his hand as Hansio’s blade hammered his own. He jerked the point up, under Hansio’s chin, deep into the grinning skull. The Fox’s eyes went blank. (KC 308)

By way of conclusion, though not all the strength of Zimmer’s prose comes from stylistic techniques learned from Old English and Old Norse

alliterative verse, much of it apparently does. He minimizes the words that merely perform niggling grammatical work, preferring those words that can bear a stress. When words of multiple syllables appear, Zimmer generally avoids iambs in favor of trochees or spondees. Alliteration and compounds are frequent go-to devices—and he likes compounds that create more spondee patterns. In addition, Zimmer also often engages special syntax—colons, semi-colons, the occasional em dash—as a means to achieve syntactical parataxis, which helps reduce the frequency of unstressed words. All these techniques have been used either in the Tolkien adaptations of Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter known to Zimmer or in Anderson's experiments in Old Norse *fornyrðislag* and *dróttkvætt*.

What, then, is Zimmer's place within the 20th-century alliterative revival? Well, on one hand, his poems have hit upon the original idea of employing an archaic meter, minus any Eurocentric archaisms, to represent a non-Western people with dignity and grace. The looseness of his lines seems to have been a conscious decision, and he was comparatively less interested than Tolkien in "reviving" an older English past nearly lost to us, preferring instead to invoke a contemporary postcolonial context. Zimmer's prose, on the other hand, constitutes the only attempt I could uncover to adapt ancient alliterative meter into modern prose fiction—and here, as I have suggested, Zimmer achieves some of his greatest stylistic successes. Overall, although there's no telling whether his work seems ripe for a reappraisal, even at a time when the status of sword-and-sorcery fiction and grimdark has never been higher, Zimmer's descriptions of swordsmanship and melee combat nonetheless remain among the best in the field—and they form one of the lasting metrical impacts of J.R.R. Tolkien and Poul Anderson on speculative fiction.

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