

The Rhythmic Dynamics of Don McKay and Christian Bök

by Brent Wood

Don McKay and Christian Bök are two of the most popular poets in Canada today, having earned significant awards, sizable book sales, and accolades from the academy, other writers, and the reading public. Both men have shown themselves to be acutely aware of the need for poetry to redefine itself in the postmodern world and to find relevance with regards to contemporary crises, whether of representation (Bök) or of ecological alienation (McKay). Toward this end, both have explored alternative approaches to knowledge aiming to integrate poetic and scientific modes of understanding. Some, however, have suggested that the very popularity of the two poets has led to a laxity in the application of critical standards to their work. In separate essays, Carmine Starnino has argued that aspects of Bök's *Eunoia* (2001) and McKay's *Strike/Slip* (2006), both of which earned Griffin Prize awards for their authors, do not fully meet basic poetic standards, and in fact typify weaknesses endemic to the poets' respective compositional practices. While Starnino may be the loudest of a select few finding fault with the work of both Bök and McKay, one can easily imagine significantly larger groups of readers agreeing with Starnino's position on either one or the other: that is to say, a set of readers for whom McKay's explorations of the interface between the human mind and the natural world are vital and necessary, and from whose point of view Bök's constraint-based poetics produce mere novelty texts rather than actual poetry; and another set to whom McKay's *faux* off-hand commentary on personal experience appears trite and undisciplined, while Bök's avant-garde art breaks important new ground.

Obscured by these distinctions, and barely acknowledged in critical appraisal to date, is the degree to which both poets rely on rhythmic dynamism to realize their conceptual and aesthetic goals. While the two poets begin from very different positions, Bök's *Eunoia* and the bulk of McKay's poetry share a reliance on complex rhythmic patterns determined by the interaction of meter, assonance, consonance, word-repetition and syntactical structure that not only propel the audience onward but take them around in circles. Although the poets' ostensibly contrasting *modi operandi* may

have been the foot in the door for many readers, the widespread appeal of the poetry itself can in large part be attributed to its rhythmic dimensions.

Despite the fact that the rhythmic qualities of texts continue to move audiences on fundamental levels, the capacity to bring to life the kind of metrical verse typical of past centuries has become rare. Poets themselves find it difficult to write in meter, even when nominally “free,” and the challenge of creating palpable poetic rhythms that exceed the metrical has proven beyond the abilities of many; most twentieth-century “verse” is, as Marjorie Perloff commented in an early essay on *Eunoia*, little more than “lineated prose” (Perloff 31), bearing an obtuse relationship to rhythmic regularity sometimes pushed to extremes by the imperative of literary modernism to “make it new” and find unique, organic form for each composition. The emphasis on conceptual art characteristic of modernism and especially of postmodernism has manifested itself in the poetic sphere in part as a rejection of the idea of verse itself as a turning cycle. Thus has the eccentric revolution become the norm for self-consciously artistic verse in which repetition finds expressions other than meter and rhyme, while regular stanzaic and other physical forms are conceptually redeployed. Rather than being heard as “organic” themselves, popular verse forms of the past are now often thought of in terms of constraints, and the parodic, ironic or purely formal treatment of such forms has had the effect of reducing rhythm to mere number, duration, convention, or simplistic repetition.

Regardless of the energy it may embody in other areas, however, a work of poetry not composed with devotion to rhythmic pattern will not encourage repeated reading or listening, and no matter how inventive will be quickly reduced to the status of novelty or intellectual curio. Conceptual or numerical applications of “rhythm” may be useful as compositional tools, but they will not necessarily be perceived as rhythmic by readers or by listeners because rhythm is perceived not by the intellect but by the body. As a device oriented around regular pulses, the body perceives vibrations only within biologically determined limits (as shown by music and psychoacoustic theorist Justin London and others). Rhythm manifests itself in language in a variety of ways, and there is no need to confine ourselves to conventional meter and rhyme when tuning in to poetry’s rhythmic dimensions. Pattern is established through felt repetition, and virtually any linguistic element may be repeated in pattern to create rhythm: vowel-sounds, consonant-sounds, short stress-pattern motifs, syntactical clusters, groups of syllables, words themselves, or any combination of these interacting in rhythmic “harmony.”

This essay analyzes in detail and compares the dynamics created by rhythmic harmonies in the verse of Bök and McKay, and aims to show how they support the texts’ conceptual frameworks and poetic purposes. For McKay the fundamental rhythm is of walking; for Bök, it is of talking. Eschewing conventional poetic practices, Bök discovers fresh perspectives on the sound patterns at the root of our language; eschewing conventional biological practices, McKay puts us back in touch with the rhythmic essence of what we call “nature.” Despite the ostensibly contrary approaches to poetry, both reveal rhythm as an important mode of communication between beings which ultimately allows the complex systems in which they are involved to become (to use an idea that Bök espouses elsewhere) “probe-able.”

Rhythm and poetic attention in McKay’s “multi-verse”

At the conclusion of an essay discussing McKay’s thematics and use of metaphor, Stan Dragland acknowledged the importance of the poet’s sense of form to his project of exploring the relationship between human communication and the non-human natural world:

It is one thing, impelled by sincere but thinly sentimental concern for the environment, to cry “Woodsman, spare that tree.” It is something else to think through the very sources of knowing, emotion fuelling intellect, into a rooted version of the Golden Rule—Do unto others as you would have others do unto you—in which the other might be a passive tree. It is something else again to create an organic poetic structure, root, blossom, and bole, that clasps you and never releases, so that you know not only the grab of that structure but your indissoluble relationship with it. Content is not decisive; technique is. (Dragland 888)

The technical qualities for which McKay’s poetry has been praised include its creative use of metaphor, its clever shifts in voice, and its soundscapes.¹ The specifically rhythmic qualities of McKay’s work and the sense of motion they engender have been noted by some critics, but the link between the complex rhythms of the verse and the rhythmic essence of the ecology it attempts to engage has yet to be discussed in any depth or detail. At the most basic level, the relatively steady alternation of strong and weak syllables creates a “walking motion” at the foundation of the verse which sustains its physical presence and draws readers into a rhythmically-based mode of attention integral to ecological consciousness. Upon this are built more complex patterns of sound, syntax, and poetic attention.

The term “verse” itself might be said to remain appropriate to contemporary poetry which eschews a sense of regular meter only through its reference to the “turnaround” which occurs at the conclusion of a line. As Robert Bringhurst has observed, the regular parallel rows of sound and meaning in the vast body of poetry in modern European languages reflect the rows and furrows of agricultural fields and the turning of plows, marking the imposition of human-controlled order onto the natural processes of plant growth in hopes of maximizing the earth’s natural yield (Bringhurst 29-31). In this sense, verse is the very nexus of nature and culture, the wild and the cultivated. To read McKay’s verse is to amble through a verbal meadow, encountering sonic species in pairs or in clusters, irregularly and in combination with others in an ever-morphing pattern. Though we may return home in the end, it won’t be by retracing our steps. The pulse that is a pace in McKay’s work is also an echo of the pulsing life he describes and encounters neither in parallel lines nor in chaos.

McKay’s verse is generally composed in a free yet highly consistent duple-meter (the simple pattern manifest in regular metrical verse as either iambic or trochaic) without regular line-periods, stanza periods, or end-rhyme. In tandem with sentence structures that tend toward the prosaic, this frequently creates the impression of a “free blank verse” not dissimilar to that achieved by Al Purdy. Yet McKay’s verse is nothing if not cyclical; the surface-level absence of periodicity belies the variety of cycles intersecting at differing points in ever-changing patterns. Almost nowhere does McKay put print lineation in phase with his sonic or phrasal patterns, and thus he seldom grants the reader a moment of rest at the end of a line. Yet neither does he rely on the line-break to scissor his syntax, confound grammatical expectations or defamiliarize expressions, as do many contemporary poets; instead, McKay’s line-breaks engender a sense of perpetual motion whose pace they help govern.² Moreover, while repetition of sound is dense, repetition of word and phrase is sparse, distinguishing McKay’s contemplation of human interaction with the non-human natural world from that of Tim Lilburn (and countless others, D.H. Lawrence, for example), whose rhetorical repetition of word and phrase creates a sense of mystery at the expense of incisiveness and humour.

In the essay “Baler Twine” McKay discusses what he calls “poetic attention” in terms of an active listening to natural forces and processes:

before, under, and through the wonderful terrible wrestling with words and music there is a state of mind which I’m calling “poetic attention”...though even as I name it I can feel the falsity (and in some way the transgression) of nomination: it’s a sort of readiness, a species of longing without the desire to

possess, and it does not really wish to be talked about...this is a form of knowing which counters the “primordial grasp” in home-making, and celebrates the wilderness of the other; it gives ontological applause. (*Vis à Vis*: 26-27)

McKay also specifies what he means by his use of the word “wilderness”: “not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations” (21). More than once in this regard has McKay quoted from the opening of a prose poem by Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer: “Deep in the forest there is an unexpected clearing which can only be reached by someone who has lost his way” (*Deactivated West* 100, 2005: 104). “The clearing,” comments McKay, “will be completely itself, a wilderness outside the coordinates imposed by maps and plans. We will understand that the clearing is, before all else, a gift” (106). In his essay “Approaching the Clearing” McKay suggests an alternative translation, attributed to Charles Khan, of a relevant aphorism of pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Herakleitos, *phusis kruptesthai philei*: “the true character of a thing likes to be in hiding,” rather than the conventional “nature loves to hide” (102).

The entry “Word, Walk” in “Between Rock and Stone: A Geopoetic Alphabet” makes an observation on the relationship between the limits of language and ambulatory rhythm:

Walk comes to the aid of words here. The rhythms of walking, whether it’s a hike, a pilgrimage or a stroll, let language be in the body, give it access to physical being. They mediate between the anxious inadequate words in our heads and the silent, oracular earth. (67)

The entry goes on to quote Margaret Avison’s poem “Civility a Bogey”:

To walk the earth
is to be immersed,
slung by the feet
of the universe.

The rhythmic contact of our feet with earth and rock reminds us that in our search for “a stronger word for love” the “greatest eloquence” of our words “lies in their failure” (68). The motion resulting from the oscillation of two legs differs from the strictly ordered alternation of purely mechanical systems such as electric motors and computers, and even from the driving of a plowshare across a field, in that the aim is not control but exploration, and

the pulse does not produce uniformity but rather provides a ground for harmony. Focusing on the walking of words in this way, neither the relentless procession of prose nor the relentless cycles of traditional verse, helps create a state of “poetic attention” even before that attention is directed toward other creatures. Words may fail to communicate the infinite complexity and beauty of the ecosystem in which we find ourselves involved, but through the poetic attention generated by “word-walking” we stand a chance of finding that “stronger word for love.”

As is the case with other iambic verse, the walking rhythm of McKay’s verse is put in tension with its sound-play, syntax, grammar, and typography. The resulting complex relationships echo the complexities of the ecosystem or creature which might be the focus of the poem, and also those of our relationship to it, a corollary almost always present. The points at which the rhythm and the syntax are in greatest tension are the points of our greatest *attention*, and their pattern determines our sense of form. Sound repetition is enabled to reach across sentences, and lists and other forms of redundancy are modulated by these patterns and their underlying duple rhythms. Whereas blank-versifiers from earlier periods often employed iambic pentameter to moderate pathos, McKay flirts with it in order to moderate our tendencies to cynicism on one hand and romanticism on the other, having already undermined pathos with humourous and intentionally tawdry figures of speech and shifts in diction. The poles of the duple-meter pulse paradoxically help to subvert that “either/or” choice by heightening our attention to the play of difference and repetition on multiple levels.

The musical awareness inherent in McKay’s work is evident in the many pieces presenting themselves as song, ode or adagio for a variety of species and forces, in frequent references to music and instruments, and in an emphasis on listening.³ The activity of listening is frequently central to the action in his poems and to the sonic “imagery” prominently deployed, and what is heard is often strongly rhythmic. In “Song for the Song of the Wood Thrush” (*Camber* 125), the speaker listens to the bird and to his heart, “the old contraption pumping iambs” which is “going to take a break to sing a little something.” In “Wings of Song” (186), that voice ventures away from language into music via a process of rhythmic subtraction, as it prepares to

take its little sack of sounds
and pour them into darkness, with its
unembodied barks and murmurs, its refusal
to name names, its disregard for sentences,

for getting there on time,
or getting there,
or getting.

Even when there is no sound at all described in a poem, McKay manipulates repetitive patterns to bring out the rhythmic essence of motion and of life itself. In “Lost Sisters,” rhythm is created by symmetrical constructions such as “ghosts of ghosts,” “ache for earth / ache for air,” and “Burger King and Dairy Queen.” He refers to the “symmetries” of the nunnery, and characterizes human appetite as “rhythmic” in a steady iambic flow which continues up unto the poem’s final cadences:

no snapshots, footprints, spoon-marks on the table
where you never beat the rhythm of those appetites
you never had –

(57)

The poem, about bodiless spirits, is silent until this imagined “beating,” the rhythmic centre of life itself, and concludes with reference to the “catch” in the poet’s voice, the hindrance of sound-making as he is thrown off his rhythm by the imagination of his lost sisters’ absent life-rhythms.

Rhythmic dynamics in two poems from *Strike/Slip*: “Pond” and “Dipper at Parkinson’s Creek”

In 2007, Laurie Ricou commented in a *Canadian Literature* editorial that McKay’s poem “Pond” had helped answer for him a question about literature’s relationship with the politics and ecology of water. Focusing on the poem’s opening and its concluding rhetorical question, Ricou wrote:

In an exuberantly restrained freshet of water vocabulary, McKay subtly reminds that each water verb—“been rush been drip been / geyser”—is also a noun. And so, of course, is “pond” a noun-verb. The small, confined body of still water is also a movement, both instinctive and planetary, a gathering together. The narrative of the poem might follow the elusive, invisible, vital cycle of transpiration that keeps our animal body, and the planet, breathing and nourished. Look in a pond, McKay wonders, supposing a new Narcissus:

would the course of self-love
run so smooth with that exquisite face
rendered in bruin undertone...?

To pond is to ponder the “pollen, heron, leaves, larvae, greater / and lesser scaup” that the pond takes in and is. And looking at this wholeness, the human bears can't help but see themselves composed of earth and decomposing into earth. (Ricou 6)

McKay's “Pond” does cleverly mimic the flow of water at its outset and provocatively address narcissism at its conclusion, and much of the poem concerns itself with the language we use to conceive such phenomena, but it is the rhythmic essence of the verse which engages us with ecological reality as well as artistry. Readers might naturally assume that McKay's poem derives from actual encounters with actual ponds, while Bök's descriptions of creeks wending and cool brooks flowing are purely motivated by his game (*Eunoia* 48, 68). Not unlike the episodes of “pastoral tableau” in *Eunoia*, however, “Pond” relies on parallel syntax, incorporates lists, hosts scientific terms side-by-side with colloquial and elevated diction, and gives sound patterns key roles in making meaning of a description of a scene from the natural world. There is, moreover, little in McKay's poem to suggest the specific instance, as its main interest is in the exploration of human conceptions of the natural phenomenon, and despite contrasting approaches to poetic form and substance, there are marked similarities in the kinds of “poetic attention” cultivated by Bök and McKay as a result of their rhythmic manipulation.

The microcosmic complex system of the poem “Pond” manifests many of the ways in which the macrocosmic complex ecosystems which include ponds themselves encounter the human world of artifice and perception. The idea of the complex ecosystem is as integral to the nature-culture interface today as was the agricultural “versus” five hundred years ago, and McKay's unrhymed “multi-verse” aims to encourage a kind of poetic attention to these complex systems within and without. The absence of definite articles in the first part of the poem, a strategy not infrequently employed by McKay, implies the boundlessness of the living pond, both within itself and across all ponds and ponding past, present and future—a kind of timelessness in cyclic motion. In describing these rhythms of pond life, the poem's own rhythms naturally play a primary role.

One might reduce the principal part of the poem (the first thirty-five lines) to a single phrase comprised of its opening and conclusion: “eventually water / shudders into pelt.” The latter part of the phrase is formed from a rearranged cluster of the sounds of the former (in the notable exception, “w” is replaced by “p”), framing this passage by highlighting both its sonic and conceptual identities. The following representation offers a rough sketch of the passage's rhythmic features and their patterns of intersection

and overlap. Syllables likely to be stressed strongly relative to their neighbours are in bold type. Key repeated vowel and consonant sounds to be discussed are italicized, and rhetorical pairings are enclosed by square brackets.

- 1 *Eventually water,*
 having been possessed by every verb –
 been **rush** been **drip** been
geyser eddy fountain rapid drunk
 evaporated **frozen pissed**
 transpired – will **fall**
 into itself and sit.

- Pond. [Things touch
 or splash down and it
 10 takes them in] – [nothing declined,
 nothing carried] **briskly off to form**
alluvium somewhere else. [Pond gazes]
 into sky religiously [but also
 gathers] in its edge, reflecting **cattails, alders,**
reed beds and behind them, ranged
 like taller **children in the grade four photo,**
conifers and birch. All of them [inverted, carried]
 [deeper into sepia,] we might as well say
 [pondered. For pond is not pool,]
 20 [whose clarity is **edgeless and whose emptiness],**
 beloved by [poets and the moon, permits] us
 to imagine **life without the accident-**
[prone plumbing] of its ecosystems. No,
 [the pause of the pond] is **gravid [and its wealth]**
 a **naturally occurring soup.** It **thickens up**
 with **spawn and algae, while,**
 on its [surface, stirred] by every
 [whim of wind,] it [translates air as *texture*] –
 [mottled *moire*], **pleated, [shirred or**
 30 **seersuckered] in that momentary ecstasy from which**
impressionism, like a bridesmaid, steps. When it **rains**
 it **winks, then puckers up all over, then,**
moving two more inches into metamorphosis,
shudders into pelt.

(Strike/Slip 12-13)

There are no more deviations from regular duple-meter over the course of the passage than might be found in any ostensibly metrical twentieth-century verse, and, as often in the latter, these mark pivotal moments in the poem. Prior to the first (the one-word sentence "Pond" on line 8) are twenty-four consecutive iambic "feet" which can be heard in various possible combinations of groups of three, four and five. The pace increases during the list of verbs, retards as the water slows, and pauses as the water settles with the successive stressed syllables around the first two iterations of the word "pond." Before our third meeting with the word, we again encounter three successive stresses highlighting an ironically prosaic simile, "grade four photo," the first reference to mundane artifice in this ecosystem, but at the same time a sympathetic anthropomorphism. The first triple-step, the pun on "pondered" in line 19, introduces the dialectic between the messy and thriving actual pond and the smooth idealized "pool" clearly reflecting the human face.

This pulsing is interwoven with patterns of assonance and consonance which register in the sonic imagination more prominently than in the visceral, producing a complex wave pattern not unlike the one described as manifest on the surface of the pond. Concentrations of attention are found at the nodes created by semantic, metrical, sonic and syntactical confluence, creating patterns worth examining in detail. Just as the pond itself is a momentary culmination of the water cycle, the word "pond" is the momentary culmination of musical cycles. The vowel sound "ah" in "water" (α:) is the sonic center of the principal subject of the opening sentence, but the subsequent list of water's possible motion is expressed using almost every vowel sound except "ah" until the ultimate movement, "fall." This echo of the "l" sound from "eventually" (prepared by the ancillary verb "will") is perceptible six lines away because every intervening liquid consonant sounds has been "r." The "ah" sound recurs with "Pond," whose initial consonant brings to a cadence the cluster of "p" sounds in the preceding verbs." The "f" and "l" from "fall" recombine with the short "i" (i) introduced in the near-anagrams "drip" and "rapid" to transform the action of falling into the essence of pond—that which "sits itself." The other sound in the word "pond," the consonant "n," draws out the vowel and echoes the past states of water with the repeated "been" and with "drunk," "fountain" and "frozen." Between "pleated" on line 29 and "pelt" on line 34 is a pattern of liquid consonants which mimics that of the poem's opening in complementing prominent "l" sound with a long intervening sequence of "r." Over this span "pleated" is transformed through recombination with sounds from "seersuckered" to resolve with "pelt," as the long

"e" becomes short and the pond is personified as a breathing animal at the conclusion of a series of metaphorical references to artificial textures.

Rhetorical pairing begins following the initial statement of the poem's focus. A plethora of "p"-consonance in pairs characterizes the relationship between human and pond, and other sound-pairings describe the interface between air and water: "translates/texture," "surface, stirred," "whim/wind," "mottled moiré," "sheared/seersuckered." This repeated pairing pattern effectively adds a moving rhythmic harmony to the duple-meter pulse, while the words' melodic qualities echo across the patterns because the duple-meter carries the harmony of sound-clusters over the length of several lines, such as with "texture/ecstasy" and "momentary/metamorphosis." The "m" sound, already doubled in these words, is reinforced six more times around these instances. The duple nature of the grammatical action adds yet another such pattern to the mix: water will "fall" *and* "sit"; pond "gazes...but also gathers" elements which are "inverted, carried"; then it "thickens up" and "translates." Even sentences with a single principal verb are dual in nature, as one negation is negated by another, and the descriptions within split into two, focusing on "clarity" and "emptiness," "pause" and "wealth." At last, "shudders into pelt" provides a third term subsequent to "winks" and "puckers," and thus a strong cadence which marks the poem's primary pivot point.

Through their capacity for flight and song, birds embody the desire to escape from the merely material, and much of McKay's most successful poetry has been created in dialogue with them. To engage in a dialogue with stone and maintain the all-important sense of rhythmic motion is clearly a much more challenging task. In *Strike/Slip*, McKay uses an array of self-conscious language games to develop a perspective on the motion of rock that puts our animal time scales in an uncanny relationship with the lives of rock formations, as in the book's first two poems, "Astonished" (3) and "Petrified" (4). Elsewhere in the book he resorts entirely to prose, as if ceding a set to his opponent. With "Dipper at Parkinson Creek" he manages to link both subjects through the motion of their intermediary, running water.

The bird who is the main character of this piece is initially addressed as "presto-critter," alluding to its quickness, small size and range of motion, which includes not only dipping and bobbing but swimming underwater. An aura of magic and music is implied by "presto," and a sense of playfulness in its mix of the Italian-derived adjective with the American colloquialism "critter," which echoes "dipper." The poem explores the bird's micro-habitat until the perspective enlarges in the final line, whereupon its

macro-habitat is named by rearranging the consonant sounds from “presto-critter” into “Pacific Rim Terrane.” The latter incorporates the vowel-sounds of the words describing the rock which is eaten into by the music of the water, the “laminated grey-green schist,” thus creating a sonic link between bird and the rock underpinnings of its habitat.

The motion of the bird up to the moment at which it dips below the water’s surface is framed by the dialectic of long and short “i” sounds and a rush of accents and consonant clusters similar in structure to those at the opening of “Pond.” The dipper is the creek’s “bright idea,” but its travels are almost entirely expressed with the short “i” (i) of “critter.” The long “i” (ai) signifies the bird’s entrance into the water, as with “inside,” “like someone casually committing suicide,” and “right into the rapids.” The latter phrase joins the two sounds via alliteration as the first part of the poem comes to a conclusion.

Presto-critter, you are the creek’s own
bright idea and your quicknesses – dart,
tilt, look, zip-across-the-rapids,
perch – inflect its flow. Each dip
curtseys to the mists, the crashes,
the rushed-over rocks, to the falls’
translucent lip with all ferocity
still soft inside it, dip,
tilt

dip. And then, like someone
casually committing suicide, you hop
right into the rapids.

(60)

Subsequent lines describe the waiting in relative stillness while the bird swims underwater, hinting at the creek’s “music” in the onomatopoeic “wash and loss” and the iambic pentameter phrase it concludes.⁴ The dipper re-emerges after the mystery of its absence provokes a polite human inquiry which maintains the metrical flow, and with a few quick moves varies it. Lines 21 through 23 are passable iambic pentameter if we include “dip” as the final syllable, lending a momentary air of sophistication to the highly colloquial “lunched upon the bugs and micro-bugs of trouble,” and highlighting its assonance on the short “u” (Λ).

“Dipper at Parkinson Creek,” unlike “Pond,” is evidently a recounting of a particular moment (or series of comparable moments) in a specific set-

ting. Nevertheless, both poems embody a feature of McKay’s poetry pointed out by Anne Szumigalski, who wrote that, “out and about with McKay, I do not feel myself contemplating the landscape he is writing about – I feel myself contemplating his mind as he considers the natural order” (Szumigalski 76). These comments, made prior to the publication of *Another Gravity* (2004) and *Strike/Slip*, might also be applied to McKay’s subsequent work. If this is indeed the case, it is all the more essential that the reader/listener bring first-hand knowledge of the natural world to the poetic encounter. Rhythm, however, provides a direct experience, a carrier wave capable of making tangible the communication of the abstract. In a critical review of *Another Gravity*, which takes up previous critiques of McKay’s approach to form and lineation, Zach Wells asked, “why, when I do re-read his poems with a critical eye, do they mostly disappoint me so much?” The answer, as noted by Travis Mason and others, is that the poems are not intended for the eye as much as they are meant for the rhythmically tuned ear and body, as their visual dimension is merely a gateway to the rhythmic communication of the self-aware mind and ear.

The “Pataphysical Rhythms of *Eunoia*

Both Bök and McKay would seem to concur with Martin Heidegger’s view that the ultimate danger of technological advance is the rendering of the living into “standing-reserve” by the process of “Enframing” (*Gestell*), the essence of modern technology. McKay’s term for “standing-reserve” is the French *matériel*.⁵ McKay argues in the essay “Remembering Apparatus” (*Vis à Vis*) that wilderness provokes in us both fear and longing, and that one leads to the turning of wilderness into *matériel*, and the other to poetry. The counter to Enframing postulated by Heidegger himself is in fact poetry, punctuated by a line from Friedrich Holderlin (“poetically dwells man upon this earth”), while the relationship of *poiesis* to *techne* is encapsulated by another Holderlin quotation: “where danger is, grows the saving power also” (Heidegger 34). Bök references the latter quotation in the conclusion to his critical work *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science* (2002), in which he conjectures that the “solution to the problems of technology” must be technological (*Pataphysics* 101). Bök acknowledges the role science has played in potentially “facilitating the extinction of the species” (99), and suggests that, in response, “the ‘pataphysician does not counteract science so much as exaggerate science, adopting it parodically and applying it excessively, in order to destroy it by ultimately exhausting its imaginary potential” (102).

Bök's fascination with 'pataphysics is the product of his desire for alternative modes of knowledge. In this light, one might consider *Eunoia* a kind of 'pataphysical techno-poetry, or a "probable system," to use bpNichol's term. Nichol's "probable systems," Bök writes, "constitute a set of preliminary experiments for a possible science, whose nomad research defies the prejudice of royal theories" (88). Bök takes note of the improbability of Nichol's so-called "probable" systems, observing that they are

probable (in a 'pataphysical sense) not because they can be proven but because they can be probed. They are 'probe-able' systems. They maintain a formal rigor despite their sober whimsy, since they all express a hypothetical reason for their 'pataphysical design. Like number theory, which reveals uncanny quirks in mathematical correlations, the probable systems reveal 'pataphysical coincidences in a lexical field. Such proofs systematically generate alternative insights and informational surprises. (88-89)

Eunoia is just such a system, and we may add Bök to the group of "Canadian Jarryites" he names. Some of the poem's 'pataphysical revelations are brought to light by Sean Braune and Jean-Phillipe Marcoux in essays focusing on the paradoxes of meaning-making and the peculiarities of the narratives Bök constructs. Yet *Eunoia* is a 'pataphysical work also because it seems to be a product of a world whose poetics are much different than ours yet whose vocabulary is eerily identical. Like Nichol's probable systems (and the work of the original 'pataphysician Alfred Jarry and his creation Doctor Faustroll), *Eunoia* is meant to be amusing as well as provocative.

Surprising insights conveyed with an obvious sense of humour through a soundscape organized by dualistic repetition in pseudo-prosaic "verse" characterize Bök's *Eunoia* no less than McKay's verse. Presented to the public as the product of an extended exploratory mission based upon simple rules, *Eunoia*'s chapters each employ but a single vowel-letter and aim to use every possible word permitted in English under this restriction. Although some have viewed *Eunoia* as little more than a "parlour trick" while others have admired its conceptual originality or scientific meticulousness, many in both camps have appraised it as a *tour de force* demonstrating its author's discipline and prowess. This phenomenon, cogently explored by Robert David Stacey in an essay focusing on the "work" of *Eunoia*, has inadvertently drawn attention away from the work's actual poetic qualities. Bök himself has referred to *Eunoia* as "just an act of athleticism, a crushing endurance test" and a "stunt—Evel Knievel writing poetry," and admitted that he was "very surprised by the popular response"

it received (Redhill 117-18). Although it has been shaped by conceptual restrictions, at its core *Eunoia* is complex work of sound-poetry from a poet well practiced at the art. Whether we listen to Bök's own performance, read passages aloud for ourselves, or simply imagine its sounds subvocally, the auditory dimension is integral to the success of the piece. As Darren Wershler-Henry observed, audience members are initially "entertained by its rhythms" before beginning to find it amusing, and then astonishing (118). Its curious rhythmic qualities, firmly rooted in the verbal yet utterly unidiomatic in character, are instrumental in making *Eunoia* a likeable, dynamic, amusing and stimulating long poem, allowing readers and listeners to explore realms of vocabulary at a level of detail and in combinations which would not have otherwise been possible.

Each chapter's series of one-page paragraphs combines words in unfamiliar sequences whose uniqueness contrasts with the self-similarity of the sound patterns. This focus on the materiality of language, on the patterns and shapes in its auditory and pictorial dimensions (rather than on its abilities to convey experience), is typical of postmodern poetics in Canada, and Bök inherits his aesthetic attitudes not just from the French Oulipians but from bpNichol and Steve McCaffery. Such poetry has often been called "conceptual" but from another angle is perhaps better understood as simply "non-representational." Nevertheless, we might find the exercise in poetic attention achieved by Bök in many respects not so very different from that developed by McKay in his ostensibly "representational" work, as both poets bring their readers palpably in touch with possible worlds.

Whereas Coleridge defined poetry as "the best words in their best order," Bök has undertaken a project in which order is the only creative medium available. There is little reason to doubt that *Eunoia* does indeed constitute the "best" possible ordering of the complete sets of available words, and little likelihood that anyone will attempt to demonstrate otherwise. Moreover, because order is all the poet has to work with, none of the words can really be said to be "his own." The self-referential material which frames each chapter is the most cleverly constructed and densely packed of the poem and thus the most immediately appealing and impressive, but the poet's success in the more challenging task of synthesizing a relatively coherent sense of narrative progression from the available materials in such mosaic fashion should not be overlooked.

In addition to the primary rule of vowel-exclusion (as Bök informs his audience subsequent to the text), *Eunoia* has been composed so as to emphasize internal rhyme with syntactic parallelism, to incorporate in each chapter a description of "a culinary banquet, a prurient debauch, a pastoral

tableau and a nautical voyage" (*Eunoia* 103), to minimize the repetition of substantive words, and to avoid the letter "y" entirely. A corollary of the single-vowel restriction is the exclusion not only of all words which employ the other vowel-letters, but of all multi-syllable words which combine different vowel-letters. The potential for rhythmic assonance and consonance in the resulting vocabulary set is great, offsetting the limitations of vocabulary and sentence structure. Bök has gracefully risen to the task of maintaining correct prose grammar throughout, creating a text which warrants its fully justified block-style lineation, a "pseudo-prose" which is paradoxically more rhythmically oriented than the majority of what presents itself as verse today.

Due to the limited pools of prepositions, conjunctions and articles, the variety of sentence structures in *Eunoia* is strangely minimized, and in a unique way in each chapter. There is thus a degree of disingenuousness in the poet's characterizing as a constraint the condition that "all sentences must accent internal rhyme through the use of syntactical parallelism" (103-4), as in truth he has actively exploited the rhythmic potential offered by such a set of possible sentence structures. The rhythmic use of assonance, consonance, familiar metrical patterns, and repeated motifs furthers the dynamic established by syntactical parallelism, counter-balancing the "awkward grammar" that "appalls a craftsman" (12). The rhythmic power thus developed carries audiences along a journey through unexpected shifts in diction, obtuse and repetitive phrasing, obscure vocabulary and tenuous narratives. Yet it also returns us to listen to passages again, and to listen more carefully to these unique patterns of word and sound built out of bits of more familiar expressions.

Because Bök takes maximum advantage of his logical operators (both words and punctuation marks) to allow *Eunoia* to be read as grammatically coherent prose, expectations of poetic rhythm are eliminated, while the plain justified blocks of text effectively remove any sense of line as either a cyclical or grammatical unit. At the same time, however, there can be little expectation of prose artistry in a work so strongly oriented around sound, and as a result the text's use of repetitive syntax appears not unimaginative but clever. Moreover, the consistent and correct grammatical patterns allow reader/listeners to follow the often fragile or maze-like sequences of words either so alike or so unlike one another that we have rarely if ever encountered them together in such close quarters. Indeed, the diction in *Eunoia* is nearly as striking as its sonic patterning. Pulling words together for their sounds and meanings alone with merely ironic attention to consistency with idiomatic usage, etymology, and cultural connotations,

Bök has created a peculiar hodgepodge of history, geography, culture and class which counteracts the sense of monotony created by the repetitive syntax and tiny ranges of vowel sounds.

In his postscript, Bök downplays the text's audible dimension by characterizing *Eunoia* as a "lipogram." He states his intention to "exhaust the lexicon for each vowel, citing at least 98% of the available repertoire" (104), but does not precisely define "lexicon" and "available repertoire," allowing himself considerable latitude in incorporating words from other languages. Entire phrases and expressions are imported from French and Latin, proper nouns and verbs from German, and a variety of words (primarily names of people and places) from Asian, African, Native American and other European languages. The poet is thus working not with an absolutely pre-confined set of terms, but with one whose elasticity may be exploited to bridge the gaps created by the basic lipogram rule. This enriches the soundscape and fills out the parallel syntactic forms which organize the repetitive but unpredictable sounds into a rhythmically, grammatically and narratively coherent work of art. In many cases Bök employs words he would hardly be obliged to in "exhausting the lexicon," and repeats functionary words more often than necessary in order to maintain rhythmic interest and consistency.

Almost lost among the many fine moments in Bök's recorded performance of *Eunoia* is the final cadence of "And Sometimes," a text with a large proportion of pure sound-poetry employing words with "y" as the only vowel (the only letter not yet encountered over the preceding five chapters, though we have heard the sounds it makes). Ostensibly the first piece in the second part of the book (entitled "Oiseau"—the shortest French word to employ all five vowels), "And Sometimes" also acts as a conclusion to the first part (Chapters A through U) in making use of the "sometimes" vowel, "y." Following a sometimes frantic run through peculiar, difficult-to-pronounce vocabulary whose contours are amplified by his own gifts for pure sound vocalizing, Bök concludes calmly with the self-referential phrase "mythymns / thy myrhh / my rhythms" (85). Echoing the conclusions of the preceding chapters, Bök here makes the only explicit acknowledgement of the rhythmic basis of the larger work, which can be heard to resolve with the very word "rhythms."

The Rhythmic Dynamics of Chapters A, E, I, O and U

Due to the defining parameters of *Eunoia*, there is almost no possibility of creating rhythmic energy by maintaining regular meter over any extended

period while maintaining narrative sense. On the other hand, the materials available provide only limited ability to *avoid* metrical regularity. Thus the text floats in and out of identifiable rhythmic patterns in ways not entirely dissimilar from most free verse, but with quite different effect. In general, the repetitive vowel sounds and unusual word combinations and phrases oblige the reader to pay close attention to the consonant sounds and to stress syllables marked by assonance. Despite the fact that consonantal repetition is not meant to be a defining force, the rhythmic character of *Eunoia* is somewhat reminiscent of alliterative Anglo-Saxon poetry due to the focus on sound repetition across matched phrases and to the high percentage of stressed syllables and Anglo-Saxon-derived vocabulary. Though iambic metrical passages are noticeably present throughout the work, the true governing interests are the syntax and the rhythm of the words themselves. Moreover, Bök aims not only at syntactical parallelism, but at syllabic parallelism, a technique he also uses throughout *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science*. In Chapter A, especially, the availability of the conjunction “and” facilitates apposite phrases of similarly-constructed words.

The quick oscillation through the basic short (æ) and long (ɑ:) sounds (as in “slapdash” and “arc”) provides the foundation for Chapter A’s unique sonic qualities. The range of sounds also includes the schwa, which is common to all five chapters. Repetition of the short “a” sometimes continues for an entire line, but more typically is interrupted by the longer “ah,” slowing the tempo, an effect aided by the liquid consonants and blends which typically follow. Although “e,” “i” and “y” are unavailable, “phrasal” and “pagan” do not need them to make the “ay” (ei) sound, which occurs always as the core of the first of two syllables and is always stressed. Occurring about once per page, the “ay” sound adds an element of surprise and an unexpected elevation of tension from the relentlessly rolling and sometimes even soothing combinations of “a” and “ah.”

The opening phrase of page 21 is typical of *Eunoia*’s grammatical constructions, describing a subject and an action (“Hassan can tax all banal trash that vagrants at a plaza”) which is then completed with a series of pairings: the vagrants “pawn and swap” “ant farms and lava lamps, rat traps and lawn darts, chaff and draff.” Among the auto parts to be traded are groups of three (“fans, amps and a dashlamp; rads, cams and a camshaft”) as well as pairs (“gas tanks and clamps, car jacks and straps”). The parallel phrases and vowel-sound oscillation are further shaped by patterns of consonantal inversion, such as the transformation of the “z” sound at the end of “fans, amps” and “rads, cams” into the “sh” in the middle of

“dashlamp” and “camshaft.” In the companion unit, the third item’s rhyming syllable comes first, and its conclusion, the “ft” of “shaft,” echoes the opening sound of “fans,” closed with the stop “t.”

These and the following examples show some basic techniques with which Bök develops and maintains rhythmic interest amid a bare-bones and largely arbitrary storyline and potentially monotonous tonal palette. Page 24 makes use of a series of place names in parallel phrasing and syllabics to create a sumptuous complex of rhyme. None of the names derive from English, and one would hardly expect them to be integral to such a lipogram; on the contrary, they allow Bök to bring foreign flavours to the feast. When lineated to bring out its syntactic-sonic structure and patterns of stressed syllables (indicated in bold), the rhythmic properties of the passage are more easily perceived:

Hassan can **scan** an atlas
that **maps** Madagascar
and **all lands** afar:

Java, **Malta** and **Japan**,
Chad, **Ghana** and **Qatar**,
Canada and **Lapland**,
Rwanda and **Malabar**.

Stresses and consonant sounds govern the sense of “line,” and “Malabar” synthesizes the competing liquid “l” and “r” sounds and alternating short and long “a” sounds in the final cadence.

Bök exploits the rhythmic potential of his source material to create a sense of motion and mounting tension as he describes a downturn in Hassan’s fortunes on page 23, lineated here according to natural grammatical/rhythmic units:

Hassan can **watch**, **aghast**,
as **databanks** at NASDAQ
graph hard data and **chart** a NASDAQ **crash** –
a **sharp fall** that **alarms staff** at a Manhattan **bank**.

Hassan **acts fast**,
ransacks cashbags at a **mad dash**,
and **grabs** what **bank drafts** a **bank branch** at Casablanca can **cash**:
marks, rands and **bahts**.

Hassan asks that an **adman draft a want ad** that can **hawk** what **canvas art** Hassan has (a **Cranach**, a **Cassatt** and a **Chagall**).

Hassan can **fast-talk a chap** at a **watchstand** and **pawn a small watch** that **has**, as a **watchglass**, a **star padparadschah** (**half a grand**, a **carat**).

A **shah** can **pack a bag**,
flag a cab and **scram**,
catch-as-catch can.

The repetition of the acronym “NASDAQ” intensifies the crash, as its second iteration encourages the reader to stress both syllables as well as the word “crash,” echoing the three successive stresses (“chart hard data”) immediately following its initial use. The pairs “graph hard,” “sharp fall” and “alarm staff” form an audible motif because of the repeated use of “f” alongside these liquid consonants and the common double-stress pattern. The hard “c” and “g” sounds at the outset combine with sibilants to create a feeling of sudden motion, in response to which Hassan “acts fast.” His deliberation in the third and fourth sentences is hinted at by the preponderance of the “ah” sound, yet the clashing alternation of the hard “c” and the “h” sounds in the third sentence enact an underlying desperation. The final sentence, consisting entirely of one-syllable words, is one-third the length of the others, colouring the hasty exit of Hassan with its plosives, stops and colloquialisms. The pace is controlled by the repetition of word: “data,” “banks,” “NASDAQ,” “watch,” “fast,” “bag,” “catch,” “draft,” “cash,” “ad” and “can” all appear more than once; in fact, only about half of the words or distinct components of compound words on page 23 are unique.

Chapter E provides the most beautifully developed story in the book, retelling the *Iliad* with focus on Helen—a truly “uncanny, if not sublime” achievement (103). The vocabulary is dominated by words derived from Latin and French, and there are significantly more multi-syllabic words than in Chapter A. While the self-referential opening pages move quickly through the use of French expressions, short sentences beginning with “he” and “we,” and minimal repetition of vocabulary, the movement of the rest of the chapter is markedly more measured and poised, much like Helen herself; at times it becomes almost still. Syntactic parallelism is less prominent here due to the wide vocabulary possibilities but limited conjunctive options (primarily “then” and “nevertheless”). Bök evokes Helen’s refined, classical grace through Latinate vocabulary, moderate pacing, and

consonance, and by allowing his material to coalesce into recognizable iambic patterns, often using the meters of classical French (hexameter) and English (pentameter). In the published audio recording Bök moves quickly through the syllables of “nevertheless” and “whenever,” as if compressing them for rhythmic effect, and many phrases come near perfect tetrameter, pentameter or hexameter but for similar deviations due to quick unstressed syllables or syntactic pauses.

The transition on page 33 from the self-referential preamble to Helen’s story is accomplished with two nearly regular groups of iambic pentameter framing two syncopated tetrameter groups:

Versemen retell the represented events,
the resplendent scenes, where, hellbent,
the Greek freemen seek revenge
whenever Helen, the new-wed empress, weeps.

The pair of matched sentences which conclude the first page of Helen’s story use parallelism to imply not motion but stasis. Germanic words are extended with prefixes or suffixes, as in “sleeplessness,” “cheerlessness,” and “enfetters,” aligning the terms more closely with the Latinate “enfeeble,” “demented,” and “render.” These all circle around the pronouns “she” and “her,” creating a self-centered whirlpool, while repetition of the more substantive vocabulary becomes hypnotic amid parallel phrases joined with semi-colon and parentheses:

She needs rest; nevertheless, her demented fevers render her sleepless (her sleeplessness enfeebles her).

She needs help; nevertheless, her stressed nerves render her cheerless (her cheerlessness enfetters her).

“She never lets herself express her *echt Weltzschmerz*” (34) is an iambic hexameter phrase which identifies the repression which will make Helen ill, countered by a trochaic hexameter phrase precipitating her trip to the netherworld via intoxication: “then the empress feeds herself fermented hempseed,” sonically identifying the “empress” with “fermented hemp.” The page concludes with another iambic hexameter, “the nether sphere, where sleepers delve the secret depths,” which alternates short and long vowel sounds over its six stresses as if in pairs, its weak syllables mainly reduced. The consonantal interplay would make this phrase beautiful in almost any context.

Chapter E is dominated by the same kind of short-long alternation in vowel sounds as Chapter A, using the long “e” (i:) of “free” and the short “e” (ε) of “text,” and also includes the further reduction (ə) as in “fern” and the occasional use of the French “é” (ei) as in “*élevées*.” However, a distantly-related sound intrudes, the “ew” (u:) in “new,” a word used in the chapter’s opening pages to characterize the work itself. In Helen’s story, the sound occurs primarily with words of Germanic origin such as “shrewdest” and “lewd” (34), as Helen is said to resemble the “lewddest jezebel” (36). The “ew” sound signals the main character’s decline, as she drinks freshly “brewed” beer and “chews” hemp which “skews” her senses. Nevertheless, when Helen reaches the deepest dens of hell, where “sewers reek” and vocabulary has been dominated by the curt Germanic, the scene itself is referenced parenthetically using a French hexameter: “*les enfers éternels des gens désespérés*.”⁶

The repeated use of “whenever Helen” to begin each page creates a sense of inevitability and fatefulness about Helen’s actions and their repercussions, intensified by the paradoxically weakening effect of sleep, as “her fevered rest meekens her” (40). When the Greek heroes finally arrive at Troy, the Latinate vocabulary in hexameter associated with Helen becomes Germanic moving toward pentameter, as in

The steersmen **steer** the **xebecs** between **steep**,
sheer **clefts**, where **reefs** prevent **sheltered berth**.

The page’s final cadence consists of a pair of phrases approximating the rhythm of a sung ballad, a sense furthered by the alliterative repetition:

The **lee** sheets, when **drenched**, get **reft**, then **rent**.
The **wheelmen**, when **wet**, wrest the **wheel**.

(41)

In this section the “ew” sound occurs in words associated with the practical, heroic qualities, as the Greek warriors “hew” the wood for the Trojan Horse, “screw” it together, with “shrewdness” enter the city, and “skewer” their opponents. When the focus returns to Helen, the hexameter returns as well, as “the pewtered censer spews the sweetest peppered scent,” though the use of “spews” lends a comic tinge, redeemed only by its proximity to “pewtered” (46).

The “pastoral tableau” into which Helen eventually wanders is naturally characterized by monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon agricultural terms and their simple compounds which create an entirely different rhythmic mood.

The chapter concludes, however, with classical symmetry in the form of a long cadence consisting of two sets of parallel grammatical units focusing on the depiction of Helen and culminating in a French phrase, drawing together the narrative focus on the character and the self-referential focus on representation. The second pair are structured virtually in ballad meter, all tetrameter but the trimeter second line.

She seems sexless; nevertheless, men esteem her pert svelteness
(her slender legs, her perfect feet);
she represents perfectness; hence, we never see her defects
(the speckles, the freckles).

Men see her elven slenderness,
then pledge themselves her serfs.
She resembles Eve, the temptress –
hence: *elle régné éternellement*.

Chapter I, in which Bök assumes the voice of a lyric poet and the action is centered on the first-person pronoun, moves much more quickly than Chapter E, and the vocabulary in the chapter is almost entirely Germanic in origin. In this chapter the concentration of short (i) sounds is much greater than the long (ai), and the long “i” sound is not typically sustained for as great a duration as other “long” vowel sounds. These two comprise 99% of the vowel sounds in the chapter, as only a dozen words use a reduced vowel (ə) or outright schwa and only “Fiji,” “skiing” and “djinni” the “ee” sound (i:). The near-continuous assonance on the short “i” not only increases the tempo but diverts attention to the consonantal play and rolling rhythms of the extended sentences, resulting in a delightful tongue-twister, challenging enough to tickle but not so awkward as to derail its reading.

Long sentences are possible here because of the availability of verb participles ending in “-ing” and the key functionary words “is,” “in,” “this,” “it,” “I” and “with.” One of the longest takes particular advantage of parallel syntax: “I might twist this infirm wrist, crippling it, wincing whilst I bind it in its splint, cringing whilst I gird it in its sling; still, I risk climbing, sticking with it, striving till I find this rift, in which I might fit, hiding in it till winds diminish” (55). In spite of its length and only two prominent vowel sounds, this remains an almost perfectly comfortable idiomatic utterance in English. Yet Bök keeps changing pace by mixing in very short sentences alongside, such as “Isn’t it glib? Isn’t it chic?” on the

introductory page (50) and “I might slip” immediately preceding the long sentence just quoted.

A kind of ballad meter is again hinted at, though here largely trochaic, in the pastoral tableau on page 52:

**Kingbirds flit in gliding flight,
skimming limpid springs,
dipping wingtips in rills
which brim with living things.**

Trochaic tetrameter phrases recur throughout, such as “might I mimic him in print” (52) and “Lightning flicks its riding whip” (55). Only in the chapter’s final sentences does Bök break away from the dominance of the Germanic vocabulary with the Latinate “inscribing,” “distinct,” “divining,” “implicit,” “intimism,” “civilizing,” “signing,” and an entirely Latin concluding phrase, *NIHIL DICIT, FINI*. Also mixed in amid the last few Germanic words are the French “picnic,” the Tonga “Fiji,” and the Ojibway “Mississippi.” The repeated formula “I find it” not only makes a self-referential pun, but creates a series of parallel phrases which lead up to the final sentence, which is broken up into small units, separated by syntactic pauses.

Though a page shorter than Chapter E, Chapter O seems to go on indefinitely due to the absence of sustained narrative and identifiable central character. The relatively wide variety of vowel sounds, seven in total, sharply contrasts with Chapter I: the single “o” can be pronounced long as in “bold” (ou) and short as in “lots” (ɑ:) but also as a schwa, as in “of,” and as an “au” sound (au), as in “now.” It can also make, before “r,” a sound halfway between that in “of” and “books,” as in “works” (3), and can mimic the “ooh” of the double “o,” as in “to do” (u:) The double “o” makes a short and long pair as well, as in “books” (u) and “school” (u:). Also in contrast with the preceding chapter there are a plethora of actors, a seemingly endless array of profs, dons, jocks, monks, blonds, goofs, and plain old folks who go, or do, or know. Like Chapter I and Chapter U, the vocabulary is primarily Germanic; we find mainly one-syllable words whose combinations result in a consistent rhythmic waveform but risk monotony.

The main source of rhythmic interest is in the patterns of alternation of the wider array of vowel sounds, which contrast the preceding chapters in that they are not dominated by an oscillation between a single long-short pair. While portions of the text can be heard with an iambic or trochaic flow, the more prominent sense is that almost all syllables, with the exceptions of prepositions and conjunctions, receive an accent. Chapter O’s

opening line is a trochaic hexameter, for example, but due to the fact that it is constructed entirely from single-syllable words there seem to be too many stresses in it, and the grace associated with the French Alexandrine is absent along with the Latinate vocabulary. In combination with the long sentences, this diverts our attention from conventional metrical patterns and toward alliteration and assonance. Chapter O is at its best when these are combined with parallel syntactical structures and a variety of vocabulary.

The following sentence on page 60 reads like a proverb due to the confluence of these factors, until the switch to Latin and Greek words at the sentence’s conclusion, which despite their air of sophistication render the entire sentence comical. Here the vowels are coded to indicate their sounds:

**Folks who do not follow God’s norms
word for word wo God’s scorn,**

**for God frowns on fools who do not conform
to orthodox protocol.**

The alliterative stress on “f” continues through the third “line,” a virtual iambic pentameter unit which maintains an “end-rhyme” with the two previous “lines.” The key vowel sound here is “ooh;” it is doubled in the opening part of the phrase and forms the core of the alliterated “woo;” the pivotal word signifying the proverbial poetic justice despite its typically “romantic” overtones. The third iteration of “f” in the third line introduces three consecutive “ooh” sounds, linking back to the opening of the sentence, before “conform” brings together the “end-rhyme” and the primary alliterative consonant. The mock proverb could be complete here after this pair of rhythmically balanced yet slightly different four-stress groups followed by a more regular five-stress cluster, but the cheeky speaker extends the sentence with two three-syllable Greek-derived words which comprise an identical vowel-sound sequence and stress pattern in spite of their divergent consonant sounds.

The repetition of word in Chapter O provides useful stable structures around which the vocalic currents may swirl. Examples of this include “box on box of foolproof clocks, row on row of clockwork robots,” in which “box” and “row” combine to become “robots,” and “most workfolk who sow crops of broomcorn grow corn crops sown from lots of cowflop compost” (66, 70). Repetition of “ooh” as in “cool” accentuates its tension and length, as in the example above, but the nicest rhyming patterns occur

with the short “o” as in “sock” due to the abundance of possibilities for consonantal envelopes. These aspects of the text are audible in the following sentence:

Folks too cool to go to sock hops
go to Woodstock rock shows to do pot,
not to foxtrot to Motown rondos
of pop, bop or doo-wop.

(62)

The pre-existing internal rhyme of “Sock hops” and “foxtrot” are framed with converse “ks/sk” sounds. The second “line” creates a lovely three-syllable near-rhyme which finds yet another similar variation in the fourth.

Chapter U further intensifies the concentration of Germanic vocabulary, and despite its brevity is clearly the most challenging chapter. Bök’s use of the German form of two Latin-derived words, *Kultur* and *Skulptur*, establishes the flavour and energizes the first page’s narrative concerning Alfred Jarry’s anti-hero Ubu, whose repulsive personality and behaviour are nonetheless a welcome relief from the onslaught of largely anonymous subjects in Chapter O and the nearly invisible first person in Chapter I. An extreme counterpart to Helen and Hassan, Ubu takes their self-centered aristocratic decadence to unprecedented, disgusting and comical levels, parodying, like Jarry’s character, the infantile tyranny of aristocratic and economic power.

The short “u” sound (ʌ) as in “busts” dominates, not unlike the short “i” in Chapter I, but even more prominently due to the overwhelming proportion of single-syllable words. The short “u” has rarely been heard until this point in the book, though approximated many times. Ubu himself is the centre of the long “u” sound (u:), but it also crops up at nearly random intervals in Latin-derived words, proper nouns from other languages, abbreviations and sound effects, providing variety of tone colour and moderating the contrast between “Ubu” and the words which describe his behaviour, which are otherwise dominated by the short “u” but also include the closely related short sounds in “pulls” (u) and “spurns” (ʊ).

“Plus” and “thus” are the only words with a conjunctive function, leaving an outrageously limited range of possible syntactical patterns. These the poet not only navigates expertly with deft use of punctuation marks as logical operators, but actually uses to build rhythmic power, which is at its peak in Chapter U. The long sentence on the first page commands the attention of listeners through its parallel construction, rhythmic assonance and consonance and impressive complexity, while simultaneously defining

the power relationship in question. Here it is lineated according to its basic grammatical/rhythmic segments:

Ubu blurts untruth:
 much bunkum (plus bull),
 much humbug (plus bunk) –
 but trustful schmucks trust such untruthful stuff;

thus Ubu (cult guru)
 must bluff dumbstruck numbskulls
 (such chumps).

(77)

The first half of the sentence resolves with a ten-syllable line in which only the prefixes and suffixes of “trustful” and “untruthful” are unstressed. These provide a rhyme with “bull,” while the short “u” of “trust” links with “schmucks,” and the long “u” of “untruth” reaches backward and onward to Ubu himself. In the second portion, the self-rhyming “Ubu” and “guru” provide the only relief from the short “u” sound in “thus” which continues unabated for the final eight consecutive stressed syllables.

Of all the scenes of “prurient debauch,” Ubu’s is the most comical and vulgar, qualities of which Bök takes full advantage in live performance, accentuating the rhythmic qualities of sexual encounter. Ubu initiates all the action, and thus virtually every phrase begins with “Ubu.” Parallelism between Ruth and Lulu (whose names rhyme with “Ubu”) allows Bök to create a rhythm of parallel interactions: Lulu wears a tutu, Ruth a muumuu, and Ubu alternates between stroking their near-rhyming private parts. Very short sentences are used for the action, culminating in a repeated strong-weak-strong stress motif beginning with “Ubu” as he ruts, huffs, puffs, blurts, thrusts, bucks and cums. The penultimate “Cum spurts” interrupts this rhythmic assonantal pattern as well as changing the subject of the sentence, creating a cadence with “Ubu cums.”

Ubu, oddly the most lively and believable character in the book, is along with Hassan and Helen doomed to downfall by overindulgence; in this case it begins with indigestion and continues with verbal abuse, a pummeling by thugs, punks and cults, and the injunction to “shut up,” which forcibly brings to an end the obsessive talking that has comprised the poem itself. The final page leaves Ubu mercifully behind in favour of the pastoral tableau, a maze of specialized vocabulary referring to plants, animals and the sea from which repeated onomatopoeia reaches out to enliven the scene while maintaining the motif of pairing which has helped sustain the poem’s

structure: *ululu ululu; ruff ruff; buzz buzz; hush hush; rush rush; gush gush* (81). Having laid bare the contours of the very building blocks of our verbal rhythms and allowed us to experience them from fresh angles over the course of this “probe-able system,” Bök grants the proverbial last word to the repetitive essence of talk and its rhythmic mimicry of the natural world.



Given their mutual connection with Heidegger, one might rightly characterize the poetry of both Bök and McKay as authentic attempts at “unconcealing,” as Heidegger characterizes *poiesis*. To use the evocative terms employed by Bök in *Pataphysics*, it is no stretch to consider both poets “nomad scientists” and “rational geomancers.” “A rational geomancer,” writes Bök, “uses ’pataphysics to rechart the fault lines that separate reason from unreason, realigning the nationalist cartography of both a terrain and its culture” (86). Bök would certainly consider his own work not organic but “cyborganic,” but one must not forget that McKay too understands language itself as a kind of “apparatus.” Acknowledging the challenge facing us as we try to use it to “translate” the infinite complexity of our reality, McKay at one point proposes a “small thought experiment” which displays an unmistakably ’pataphysical dimension: the reading of a standard trail guide directly to the creature we encounter, a “both formal and absurd” way to deal with the schism between poetry and science (*Vis à Vis* 65). Moreover, although Bök is considered by many to be a conceptual poet, it must be remembered that one of his greatest strengths lies in the physical realm, in his ability to perform sound-poetry in real time without technological assistance for the sensory pleasure of audiences in relatively intimate settings. Paradoxically, however, his mimicry of machines, real and imagined, frequently dominates his performances, and Bök has expressed admiration for hip-hop “beat-box” virtuosos such as Razel who imitate with their mouths and voices the sounds of electronic drums, themselves a technological imitation of an organically produced vibration (Redhill 123).

Ultimately, although neither McKay nor Bök explicitly acknowledges rhythm as a way to escape the strictures of language-as-apparatus, their rhythmic skills are nonetheless integral to their abilities to carry their readers and listeners along with them in their expeditions to unexpected clearings in the jungles of language. If they are indeed nomad scientists, we might think of Bök as a kind of genetic biologist of language, focused on the evolution of code—an appropriate role for a poet who claims to be working on embedding a poem into the genetic code of a bacterium.

McKay would by analogy become an ecosystems expert, tracking consciousness by listening and keeping pace even while getting lost. Though one aims to unconceal the realities of our relationship with the truly Other while the other aims to unconceal what of ourselves is hiding in language, the creative response to the essentially rhythmic essence of being is key to the success of both.

Notes

- 1 Such commentary is found especially throughout Brian Bartlett’s collection *Don McKay: Essays on His Works* (2006), particularly in articles by Don Coles, Kevin Bushell, Sue Sinclair, Ross Leckie, and Bartlett himself. The only hints of discussion of the specifically rhythmic commentary on McKay’s poetry are in Leckie’s brief discussion of polyphony and cadence, Barbara Colebrook Peace’s acknowledgement of his “complex music,” and Bartlett’s consideration of McKay’s ability to change speeds.
- 2 Critics such as Richard Greene, Zach Wells and Shane Neilson have found fault with McKay’s approach to line-breaks, reading them inconsistently effective and sometimes arbitrary. Although much of McKay’s later work does in fact address readers’ expectations that line-breaks will bear significance by either creating a pause or by thwarting one, in general the poetry does not rely on line-breaks to establish a sense of “verse.” This allows the poet to use them to manipulate attention and pacing.
- 3 In *Vis à Vis*, McKay refers to Martin Heidegger for support, citing the philosopher’s observation that “for a long time before it becomes a speaking, poetry is only a listening” (66). Travis Mason’s essay “Listening at the Edge” focuses on the role of listening with regard to McKay’s poetry and editing skills and to the reinvigoration of public life as well as ecological interaction. The vibrations of musical instruments themselves play important parts in many of McKay’s poems, including “Dixieland Contraption Blues” (*Camber* 60), “Early Instruments” (109), “Glenn Gould Humming” (115), “Big Alberta Clouds” (118), “Hospital Zone” (121), “What Kind of Fool Am I?” (129), “Setting Up the Drums” (148), “Acoustics of the Conical Tube” (149), “Kind of Blue # 41” (181), and “Sometimes a Voice (2)” (193).
- 4 Starmino in his review of *Strike/Slip* uses this metaphorical phrase as an example of McKay’s sloppiness, hearing the onomatopoeia as a trite bit of “sentimental pictorialising,” and disregarding its efficient characterizing of the soundscape that occupies the moments between the dipper’s appearances. Starmino attributes the qualities of continuous motion in McKay’s work to his quick shifts in voice, avoiding discussion of the rhythmic basis of the motion, but reveals his own lack of interest in the audible structure of the poetry (and contradicts his evaluation of its motion) in his assessment of it as “arrestingly arrhythmic” (“Song for the Song of McKay” 36).
- 5 Heidegger explores this idea in the essays “The Question Concerning Technology” and “The Turning.” McKay uses the term *matériel* throughout the essays in *Vis à Vis* and in the suite of poems titled “Materiel,” which appear there and also in *Apparatus*. In the poems, McKay explores the sense of being not just used but “used-up” that he had previously introduced in “Bailer Twine,” recounting his own experience at an old military base in New Brunswick, and imagining the experiences of the mythical Hektor and Cain.
- 6 The line became the title of contemporary Canadian composer Paul Steenhuisen’s transformation of pages 38 and 39 in a musical work commissioned by the vocal group the Hilliard Ensemble.

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