

Rhythm as continuum:

Grammar, speechsound and the invention of nature in Lorine Niedecker's 'Paean to Place'.

ANDREW EASTMAN

Rhythm is generally accounted for, and scansion practiced, in terms of prominence or salience. Thus Richard Cureton, who proposes a powerfully comprehensive model of scansion in his *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse*, defines rhythm as a cognitive structure based on 'relative prominence'.¹ Cureton sees prominence essentially in informational terms (198). Yet such an approach appears unsatisfactory when we consider that what is most prominent *poetically* may not take the form of 'information', notably if we recognize that 'poeticity' is primarily a question of the historicity of a discourse—by which is meant here the specific ways a discourse orders and associates words and the specific semantic values which, variously for readers, result. What one might call *poetic* prominence is not a matter of terms or units, like words or syllables, but a matter of relations between terms, of the way signifiers are associated by speechsound. Such relations cannot be measured or modeled according to strong-weak or marked-unmarked ratios since each term is essential *to* and marked *by* the relation. To say this is simply to apply Ferdinand de Saussure's concepts of system and value to discourse; and value in a system, being everywhere present, is not measurable as prominence.

Definitions of rhythm as prominence pose the further problem that they correlate with the most commonly formulated universal, essentialist theories of

¹ Richard Cureton, *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 121.

rhythm, those which understand rhythm as alternating movement, as the binary opposition of heterogeneous units, defined as strong and weak, or marked and unmarked.² What we call rhythm depends, of course, on what we are attending to, on a point of view: mine here is that rhythm is a crucial concept for poetics, and scansion a useful tool, to the extent that they show what is specific to a discourse. Accounts of rhythm as alternating movement in poems are usually focused on metre;³ yet even where the aim is to go beyond metrical description, as in Cureton's work, a more general, cross-category conception of rhythm is often supposed: Cureton borrows concepts, notably, from the domain of music; he scans rhythm in the binary terms of *s* and *w*. Such readings tend to efface the density of accent and the variety of movement in discourse at the same time as they make possible the identification of rhythm in language with cosmic and biological rhythms, thus erasing the point of view from which we may see rhythm in discourse as an enunciation of subjectivity, as social practice and historical activity, as a way of acting on a situation.

Reading rhythm as enunciation might then build on the concept of 'markedness' as used by Gerard Manley Hopkins: in a letter to Robert Bridges where he explains '[w]hy [...] I employ sprung rhythm at all', Hopkins argues that it combines 'incompatible excellences, markedness of rhythm—that is rhythm's

² A nice statement of what I am calling the universal-essentialist conception may be found in *Rhythm in English Prose* by P. Fijn van Draat, where the definition of rhythm in language is motivated by reference to natural phenomena: 'The first and essential condition for the securing of rhythmical movement is the avoidance of two stressed syllables in immediate succession. [...] Just as in breathing exhalation is followed by inhalation, so in speaking the strong stress is naturally followed by a weak stress. It is only with an effort that we can produce two successive stresses, just as it is only with difficulty that we can exhale twice without any intervening intake of breath, or in walking, advance our right foot twice without an intervening movement of the left foot' (P. Fijn van Draat, *Rhythm in English Prose* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1910), p.9). A similar conception characterizes Derek Attridge's approach in *The Rhythms of English Poetry*: 'It is a matter of common observation that we prefer to use our muscles in a rhythmic way for repeated actions, like breathing or walking, and we should not be surprised to find that a regular sequence of energy expenditure and relaxation forms the basis of our speech activities' (*The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982), p.71); 'rhythmical' and 'rhythmic' in these quotations clearly mean 'characterized by regular alternation'.

³ 'Scansion', in *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* is 'the analysis of verse to show its meter'.

self—and naturalness of expression'.⁴ The fact that 'markedness' is used of sprung rhythm would suggest that it is not simply a matter of clearly discernible beats, but involves the multiplication of 'marks'—a *generalized* markedness; and the reference to 'rhythm's self' suggests that what is at stake with markedness is individuation, 'distinctiveness' (Hopkins's expression, glossing 'inscape'; quoted *Poems and Prose*, p. xxii), 'selving'. In contrast to the idea that what is 'marked' or 'stressed' is so only in regard to a relatively 'unmarked' or 'unstressed', 'markedness' would be a way of talking about the interaction of multiple forms of marking, working, notably, through the pairing or association of meaning units, morphemes, words, phrases; and about the tendency, in certain discourses and the way we read them, for all such units of meaning to become bearers or vectors of specificity, of value.

Conceptions of rhythm as quantifiable prominence and the scansion they underlie tend to presuppose a view of language as composed of discontinuous units. Prominence is traditionally defined in accentual terms, as wordstress or pitch accent, and linked, as noted, with informational salience. Traditional accounts of rhythm typically have little to say about the relation between prominence and speechsound repetition, a form of prominence which, specifically associating signifiers and building the network of their relations, lends itself less well to treatment as discrete, discontinuous units; thus, in T.W.F. Brogan's bibliography *English Versification 1570-1980* the section on 'Alliteration, Assonance, Consonance' contains no reference to studies exploring the interaction between consonantal repetition, say, and accent. Here the concept of 'alliterative prominence'—as used, for example, by Fitzroy Pyle—might be useful, in that it supposes that alliteration not only correlates with accent, but itself accentuates,⁵ however seldom scanned. A

⁴ Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. by W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953, repr. 1963), p. 249.

⁵ See Fitzroy Pyle, 'Pyrrhic and Spondee: Speech Stress and Metrical Accent in English Five-Foot Iambic Verse Structure', *Hermathena* 107 (1968), 49-74. Analyzing a line from Shakespeare's sonnet 30, 'And with old woes new waile my deare times waste', Pyle remarks that the words 'old woes new waile' must be read as two spondees: 'old' and 'new' receive contrastive stress, while 'woes' and 'waile' are made prominent through alliteration and the semantic identification it entails. Given these words' 'alliterative prominence', notes Pyle, 'The only right and proper thing is to stress all four syllables equally' (p. 54).—A similar point is made by W. H. Gardner in discussing Hopkins's rhythms: 'The isolation of purely prosodic elements is valuable and, indeed, necessary up to a point; but when we are estimating the total effect of all the rhythmic elements, not only in

study of *poetic* prominence would then have to show how different modes of prominence determine and specify each other, how sound patterning, syntax, and accent function inseparably in a discourse continuum.

In this perspective, then, rhythm is a matter of multiple interacting forms of prominence which cannot be organized within a single ‘hierarchy’: given that what a poem makes significant is entirely unpredictable and depends primarily on how it is read, the *relative prominence* of its effects with respect to each other cannot properly be gauged. We touch here on another central problem with Richard Cureton’s approach to rhythm, the idea that grouping hierarchies must not allow ‘overlapping’ in order to be ‘well-formed’ (186); Cureton concedes that such overlappings exist, but protests that they ‘are not the norm’ (*ibid.*). On the contrary, multiple, ambiguous possibilities of organization appear to be essential to our conscious or unconscious apprehensions of the rhythms of poems; such that, as Gérard Dessons and Henri Meschonnic suggest, rhythm must rather be understood as ‘internal plurality’⁶. It then seems useful to follow their contention that rhythm is better understood as a continuum of discourse (41)—as ‘generalized markedness’, then, in the sense of a generalized ‘distinctiveness’—than as an alternation or opposition between marked and unmarked units; for if we read a discourse *as* a system, we are reading the way rhythm tends to mark, that is to specify, all of its multiply and mutually determined elements.⁷

It is in this perspective that I would like to look at some of Lorine Niedecker’s poetry: the value of Niedecker’s poems, I would argue, resides in the fact that they complicate traditional conceptions of rhythmic prominence through their practice of speechsound patterning, thus pointing towards a theory and practice of rhythm as continuum. Niedecker (1903-1970) grew up and lived most of her life on the flood-prone shores of Black Hawk Island in southern Wisconsin; little of her work

Hopkins but also in his traditional prototypes, we find that the relations between prosody and such devices as alliteration, assonance, rhyme and the repetition of word and phrase must be constantly emphasized’. *Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889): A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 98.

⁶ Gérard Dessons and Henri Meschonnic, *Traité du rythme: Des vers et des proses* (Paris: Dunod, 1998), p. 74 (my translation).

⁷ Much of this essay builds on Henri Meschonnic’s work on rhythm, as developed notably in *Critique du rythme* (1982).

was published in book form during her lifetime. Yet her writing was known and appreciated by many of her poet contemporaries, notably Louis Zukofsky, Cid Corman, Ian Hamilton Finlay. While her poems appear fundamentally preoccupied with the relation between local landscapes and the human lives led in them, with the interaction between natural place and social organization, they are also a way of investigating how thought and feeling are organized within the sound pattern of English. As such, Niedecker's poems might be read in the light of Wilhelm von Humboldt's conception of sound patterning in language, as where he describes the word as a 'sensible form' which 'through its changeableness and its analogies with the other linguistic elements prepares the system of relations which thought sets about to find in the world'.⁸

The continuities of Niedecker's language are inseparable from a reflection on the biological continuities of life forms, on the relations between physical environment and human individuation, explored, notably, in her late poems 'My Life by Water' and 'Paeon to Place'; water functions here as a generalized metaphor of such osmotic interaction. Building on the numerous references to water and watery places in Niedecker's poems, critics are led to describe her writing as 'river-like',⁹ or to characterize it as a 'poetics of flow'.¹⁰ Niedecker herself has recourse to similar analogies. In 'Paeon to Place', a late autobiographical poem describing the watery environment of Black Hawk Island, she writes:

In us sea-air rhythm
'We live by the urgent wave
of the verse'¹¹

⁸ *Latium und Hellas*, 1806; in Humboldt, *Werke in Fünf Bänden. II: Schriften zur Altertumskunde und Ästhetik; Die Vasken*, ed. by Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961), p. 63; my translation.

⁹ Mary Pinard, 'Niedecker's Grammar of Flooding', in Willis, Elizabeth, ed., *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), pp. 20-30 (p. 26).

¹⁰ Jonathan Skinner, 'Particular Attention: Lorine Niedecker's Natural Histories', in Willis, ed., pp. 41-59 (p. 42).

¹¹ Lorine Niedecker, *Collected Works*, ed. by Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002), p. 265.

This passage posits a continuity between man and nature in terms of rhythm, and more particularly the rhythm of the poem. The sentence in quotation marks is a reformulation of a passage from Robert Duncan's essay 'Towards an Open Universe', where, in the words of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Duncan discusses 'cosmic rhythms entering the pulsations of poetry';¹² in speaking of poems as characterised by the 'rise and fall, the mothering swell and ebb' (cited in Blau Duplessis, p.170), Duncan is evoking the binary formulations which are central to the universal, essentialist notion of rhythm, in language suggestive of the movement of floods, often alluded to in 'Paean to Place'.

The notions of flow and wave are particularly significant in this context because they point to a central problem in traditional discussions of the etymology of rhythm, as studied, notably, by Emile Benveniste in a 1951 article entitled, 'La notion de *rythme* dans son expression linguistique'.¹³ Benveniste notes that the derivation of Greek *rhythmos* from the verb *rhein*, to flow, is explained in reference to 'the regular movements of the waves of the sea'.¹⁴ Yet, as Benveniste points out, it is not at all clear how our common notion of rhythm, the idea of an alternating, wave-like movement, might derive from the idea of flowing: Greek *rhein* is never used of the sea, and in its earliest occurrences Greek *rhythmos* is never used to refer to the movement of waves, or for that matter, to what we commonly term 'rhythm'. Having posed this problem, Benveniste goes on to show that Greek *rhythmos* first appears in the context of pre-Socratic philosophy, where it refers to distinctive form, characteristic arrangement, disposition; more particularly, in contrast with Greek *skhēma*, 'fixed "form"', *rhythmos* designates 'form in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid' (285-286, translation modified). It is then Plato, Benveniste shows, who invents the concept of rhythm which is still current in our culture, by identifying *rhythmos* with the measured, harmonious movements of dance and music—thus making possible our universal-

¹² Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Lorine Niedecker's "Paean to Place" and its Reflective Fusions', in Willis, ed., pp. 150-179 (p. 170).

¹³ Emile Benveniste, 'La notion de "rythme" dans son expression linguistique', *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 327-35. English version in *Problems of General Linguistics*, translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: Univ. of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 281-88.

¹⁴ *Problems*, p. 281.

essential conception of rhythm, which embraces biological and cosmic phenomena, modes of social organization, music, metre, as well as language—but which tends to override the singular and specific ways that rhythm and meaning are organized in and as discourse.¹⁵ What is at stake in Niedecker's writing, then, is the status and specificity of rhythm in discourse, rhythm as the central determinant of what Dessons and Meschonnic call the 'radical historicity' (47; my translation) of language; that 'distinctiveness' which is synonymous with a poem's value.¹⁶

The poem's theory of rhythm, however, can only be determined in relation with its practice of rhythm. In what follows I will attempt to read the poem's practice of rhythm as system, that is, as the continuity and mutual interaction between grammar, syntax, and speechsound, both as linear progression and as network of associative relations. By looking closely at how syntax and speechsound patterning work inseparably in 'Paeon to Place', my discussion will seek to show on the one hand how Niedecker's writing, by multiplying stresses, puts into question the traditional concept of rhythm as alternating movement; and how, on the other hand, it invents ways of suggesting interactions between natural environment and human individuation.

Stanza and stress

'Paeon to Place' opens by deriving identity from origin; it proposes, through a description of place, a summation or gist of the speaker's life, beginning with a narrative sketch of her parents' first encounter. The 'place' involved is identified, through the poem's epigraph, as 'water'; and the passage makes 'water' a figurative origin through the speechsound association or quasi-rhyme between 'water' and the central terms of family relation 'mother', 'father', and 'daughter':

¹⁵ My intention here is not to replace one definition of rhythm—rhythm as alternating movement—with another—rhythm as continuum. The problem is one of point of view: what conception of rhythm best allows us to attend to what is poetically significant—to discourse as enunciation of subjectivity? Conceptions of rhythm which seek to account for all manifestations of rhythm may well imply a level of abstraction incompatible with the search for how a discourse, specifically, means.

¹⁶ As we shall see, aspects of Niedecker's rhythms—the use of compounds, the prevalence of consecutive stresses—may well be seen as characteristic of twentieth-century poetic practices after Hopkins and Pound. Their 'radical historicity' lies rather in the way they specifically interact here, as generalized markedness, with syntax, speechsound patterning, and context.

Fish
 fowl
 flood
 Water lily mud
My life

in the leaves and on water
My mother and I
 born
in swale and swamp and sworn
to water

My father
thru marsh fog
 sculled down
 from high ground
saw her face

at the organ
bore the weight of lake water
 and the cold—
he seined for carp to be sold
that his daughter

might go high
on land
 to learn
saw his wife turn
deaf

and away
She
 who knew boats
 and ropes
no longer played

(Collected Works 261-62)

The most immediately apparent form of rhythmic organization in 'Paean to Place' is the stanza pattern which Niedecker adopts. The poem is composed of five-line

stanzas, of which the third and fourth lines are commonly, and the second and fifth occasionally, linked by end-rhyme or consonance. These stanzas are arranged in several sorts of visual patterns: often the third and fourth lines are progressively indented, the fourth line twice as far as the third, so that lines 2, 3, and 4 sketch a downward movement (as in stanza 3 above); in other stanzas only the third line is indented (as in stanzas 2, 4, and 5); sometimes the second and fourth lines are indented one step, the third line two (as in the opening stanza). By reason of its rhyme pattern, the five-line stanza vaguely evokes the limerick, a prominent variant of the 4x4 stanza (four-lines of four metrical beats each) which Derek Attridge has shown is characteristic of ballad, song, and popular forms of verse generally. Niedecker, significantly, was interested in folk literature: in the late 1930s and early 1940s she worked on a volume of 'folk poems', entitled *New Goose* (372). A metrical beat (often two beats per line) is perceptible, or plausible, in certain passages of 'Paean to Place'. In the analysis I am attempting here, however, I will pay more attention to the specific grain of speech rhythms and to how the meter, when discernible, modifies and specifies 'natural' stressing.

Of Niedecker's stanza form one might also claim that it is a visual figure of a wave or flood: it sketches a horizontal advance across the page, followed by a withdrawal; most particularly where lines three and four are indented, the poem's rightward extension coincides with the rhyme, figuring a highpoint or climax; last lines are often composed of one or few words, marking a return leftward. The stanza thus figures a basic rhythm, a cyclical movement with return to a starting point, in the same way that the first and last lines of the poem's second stanza end with the word 'water'; one of the poem's last stanzas closes: 'all one in the end—/ water', with the isolated word 'water' brought back to the left margin. Through this wave-like 'rhythm' of circularity, a story is told, with development, change, transitivity; yet a story whose overall pattern of life and death, love and withdrawal from love appears to correspond to that of water rising and receding, what the speaker calls 'the rise and sink/ of life' (264). The stanza form, then, is itself a theory of life and living things and of the relation between human affairs and natural process.

Yet this form also functions in relation with a syntax; rather than producing an alternating, wave-like movement, its short lines and line breaks interact with syntactic constructions in such a way as to multiply stress, and to stress what might ordinarily not be. Writing of her childhood, Niedecker introduces what appears as a description of her poem ('Pewee' echoes 'Paeon'):

Maples to swing from
Pewee-glissando
 sublime
 slime-
song (265)

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis shows, Niedecker's evocation of the pewee's call is fundamental to the 'critique of the romantic lyric' (169) embodied in 'Paeon to Place', which alludes to the work of Shelley and Yeats but puts into question a poetics which seeks to transcend materiality. The hyphen in 'slime-/ song' is essential, because it links what the line break divides, the material body and the poem. More importantly, it models 'slime-/ song' on the compound structure found in 'love-song' or 'swan-song'; yet phonemic echo and line break lead, I would argue, to stressing each word equally, thus cancelling the subordination implicit in compound structure: the poem accompanies its description of song by inducing a specific, phonologically 'unnatural' vocal performance on the part of the reader.

Mythical origins

Compounding is an essential linguistic process in Niedecker's evocation of place. The syntax and development of the opening passage suggest a mythical origin of the human species phrased as a mythical origin of speech. The text opens with three monosyllabic singular nouns, lexical words, names of essences: 'Fish/ fowl/ flood', associated by alliteration; each noun is placed in a separate line, thus isolated. The three terms point towards *Genesis*, another narrative of mythic origin ('fish' and 'fowl' appear together in the King James translation of *Gen.* 1:26 and 28, verses where God's creation of man in his own image, and his commandment to

man to subdue the earth are mentioned). These three nouns are at the same time marked off as a syntactic unit by the capital letter which begins the fourth line, which also introduces three singular nouns, also lexical words; these, however, immediately suggest a syntax, or syntagmatics, through the grouping of ‘water lily’, a recognizable compound noun, and likewise a higher-order, though unlexicalized compound, ‘Water lily mud’—by the same token opening up the possibility that the first three lines might also function as a complex compound. In this way, the poem mimes traditional accounts of the beginnings of language, with words linked first by speechsound, then coalescing into syntax.

This suggestion of the origins of speech is at the same time, I would argue, a rhythmic figure, in that it echoes one of the basic modes of rhythmic organization in English. The four opening lines might be read as two groups of three beats, corresponding to traditional four-beat lines with a final unrealized beat; the passage from stressed monosyllables (making up the first line) to disyllables or disyllabic groups evokes certain nursery rhymes, and moreover, one cited in a letter from Gerard Manley Hopkins to R. W. Dixon as an example of sprung rhythm: ‘*Díng dónq béll Pússy’s ín the wéll*’;¹⁷ Niedecker’s interest in Hopkins is shown by a poem roughly contemporary with ‘Paean to Place’, titled ‘Otherwise’ (284) which is based in part on another letter to R. W. Dixon.¹⁸ The poem’s nursery rhyme manner serves to undercut its mythical atmosphere, as does the word ‘mud’, which evokes the biblical dust out of which man is created, yet apparently does not appear in the authorized version of the bible. It also suggests that Niedecker’s rhythmic practice is informed by sprung rhythm, which for Hopkins was inseparably ‘the native and natural rhythm of speech’ and ‘the most rhetorical and emphatic of all possible rhythms’.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Poems and Prose*, p.188; Derek Attridge proposes a different analysis (*The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982), p. 95).

¹⁸ Hopkins writes, begging his friend not to publish a poem he has sent him: ‘the scanning is plain enough, but people cannot, or they will not, take in anything however plain that departs from what they have been taught and brought up to expect’; Niedecker’s poem reads, in part: ‘the scanning’s plain/ but who will veer/ from the usual stamp and pound’. The quoted letter also appears in W. H. Gardner’s Penguin edition of Hopkins’s *Poems and Prose*, pp. 191-92.

¹⁹ Letter to R. Bridges; *Poems and Prose*, p. 249.

It seems appropriate to speak of ‘sprung rhythm’ in connection with Niedecker’s poem because the poem multiplies consecutive stressed syllables. Compounding is a central aspect of her practice of sprung-rhythm: ‘He knew dúckwèd// fáll-mígrates/ toward Múd Làke bóttom’ (263; diacritics mine). Niedecker’s practice of compounding is specific, and bears a specific relation to its context, in that it tends to avoid subordination, stressing its units equally, leaving them semantically independent, at the state of unorganized elements: thus ‘Mud Lake bottom’ plays on the overlap of two constructions, ‘Mud Lake’ and ‘lake bottom’, so that the compound does not coalesce (it could designate either a bottom, i.e. a swampy area, or the bottom of a lake). Two compounds from the beginning of the poem, ‘Water lily mud’ (l.4) and ‘marsh fog’ (l.12) appear to function in this way: the first parallels the three juxtaposed nouns ‘Fish/ fowl/ flood’, the second does not seem to specify a category of fog, and might be read ‘marsh, fog’. At the same time, these expressions reinvent an elemental cosmology along with its traditional gender coordinates. The opening section’s elaboration of speech continues in the second stanza with the introduction of verb forms: participles are used in relation with the speaker and her mother (‘born’ and ‘sworn’, l.7-8), while the poem’s first finite and active verb (‘sculled down’, l.13) is attributed to the father. Phonemic echoes here associate ‘mother’ (l.7) with ‘mud’, ‘father’ (l.11) with ‘fog’; the poem thus revises the traditional association of earth with the feminine, air with the masculine, inventing the mythical components of a world impregnated with water.

Scene and agent

The poem’s self-description as a ‘sublime/ slime/ song’ clearly suggests an intermingling of language and natural process; this intermingling is perhaps suggested in the notion of ‘slime’ itself, and, it would appear, from the way Niedecker calls attention to the phonemes, the sibilant, \s\, and the so-called liquid, \l\, which organize the passage’s word associations. In a variant opening to ‘Paeon to Place’, conserved in a 1968 manuscript, Niedecker attributes specific characteristics to certain speechsounds, cited as if they were musical keys: ‘F natural/ and the sensuous s/ Fish, fowl, flood’ (441). Certain ostensibly repeated

consonantal groups are associated with features of the physical environment: thus, at the beginning of the poem, initial /sw/ links ‘swale’, ‘swamp’, and ‘sworn’ with ‘water’ (1.6-10); similarly, the coordinated pair ‘slide and slant’ (264) prepares ‘sublime/ slime/ song’ and is echoed at the end of the poem by ‘the sloughs and sluices/ of my mind’ (269). It seems, then, that what Blau duPlessis calls Niedecker’s ‘aggressive’ use of speechsound repetition (171) seeks to obtrude consonants and groups of consonants that are conceived as imitative of natural process: taken on the poem’s terms, \sl\, it seems, is suggestive of lability and indefiniteness, of the passage from one state to another, of ‘slippage’—just as, in European tradition, the river Nile’s slime was a site of spontaneous generation.

More significant, however, than this interpenetration of language and nature is the fact that Niedecker’s poem is saturated with phonemic echoes, and that these echoes link words in networks which specify their semantic values and develop their implications. Thus, ‘slide’, ‘slant’ and ‘slime’ enter into a series of words combining /s/ and /l/ which includes, notably, ‘Place’ (which is found in the title and the epigraph) (261); ‘loneliness’ (264), a word which sums up the father’s life; ‘solitary’ (265, 266), a word applied, twice, by the speaker to herself (she identifies herself as ‘solitary plover’ (265) and ‘solitary bird’ (266)), and ‘less’, used here as an expression of relation to dead relatives: ‘how much less am I/ in the dark than they?’ (267). These expressions of personal feeling and circumstance are then linked to two passages which retrace the evolutionary history of man: ‘Effort lay in us’ and ‘In us an impulse tests/ the unknown’ (267). Echoing ‘place’ with ‘impulse’, this series of terms suggests that it is the proximity with natural process which makes possible human self-understanding; the very obliqueness of phonemic echo appears to correspond to the mostly inchoate, unconscious formation of attachment to place.²⁰

²⁰ The series of words in the poem which contain both \s\ and \l\ is the following (words are repeated when repeated in the text; I also give, in parentheses, words combining \z\ and \l\ where \z\ is spelled ;; some phrases; and other words associated syntagmatically to words of the series): *place* [title]—*place* [epigraph]—(*leaves*)—*sold*—*stole*—*sell*—(*marigolds*)—*blast-off*—(*rails’s*)—*waterglass*—*scale*—*celery*—*fall-migrates*—(*leaves*)—(*leaves*)—*slide*—*slant*—(*Maples*)—*Penée-glissando*—*sublime*—*slime*—*solitary* (*plover*)—*pencil*—*solitary* (*bird*)—*blue-striped*—*Solemnities*—*unless*—(*lilies*)—*less*—(*lay in us*)—(*religions*)—*impulse*—(*floods*)—(*floors*)—*long-stemmed speedwell*—(*renew*) *itself*—(*save love*)—*sloughs*—*sluices*

Niedecker, in this way, brings to bear the paradoxes which organize 'Paeon to Place'. The poem is about how physical places or 'external' circumstances affect us, about what Kenneth Burke calls the scene-agent ratio; yet, through a notable reversal, the line 'In us an impulse tests/ the unknown' makes agent scene, while circumstance becomes internal. The quoted passage visibly echoes and reinterprets the previously cited line 'In us sea-air rhythm', notably in that the word 'impulse' contains 'pulse'; while 'pulse' designates a biologically pre-determined, traditionally binary rhythm sometimes considered as the basis for verse,²¹ 'impulse' seems rather to correlate with the spontaneous and unpredictable, and is here associated with 'the unknown', thus pointing towards rhythm as invention and historicity, as inscription of a linguistic unconscious. The passage links 'In' and 'us' to 'impulse' and 'unknown'; the *poetic* prominence of both grammatical words means that one might read 'In us' or 'In ús', with the result, I would argue, that both might be stressed; while the proximity of 'In us' and 'impulse' reinterprets the latter term, against etymology (Latin *impellere* means to push against), as an 'inner' process, the 'unknown', imaged as 'ocean's black depths' (267) as an 'inner' space.

The grammatical imagination of place

The foregrounding of the phrase 'In us' in this passage points to a general characteristic of Niedecker's writing in 'Paeon to Place': reference to place determines a grammar, one aspect of which is the tendency to begin lines with prepositions, to construct sentences out of chains of prepositional phrases, and to make line and prepositional phrase correspond. It might be argued that this configuration is the logical consequence of placing nouns and verbs at the ends of lines, according to the most usual practice, thus facilitating rhyme. One result is

²¹ Paul Claudel, in *Réflexions et propositions sur le vers français* (1925): 'Expression through sound unfolds in time and consequently is subject to the control of an instrument of measurement, a counter. This instrument is the internal metronome that we carry in our chests, the beating of our life-pump, the heart which says indefinitely:

One. One. One. One. One. One.
Bang (nothing). Bang (nothing). Bang (nothing).

The fundamental iamb, a weak *beat* [*temps*] and a strong *beat* [*temps*].' (Claudel, *Réflexions sur la poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 11; my translation).

that prepositions are marked when, infrequently, they are placed at the end of the line. Thus Niedecker writes: ‘All things move toward/ the light’ (267), and the August 1968 draft of ‘Paean to Place’ contained the variant: ‘In us an impulse toward/ the unknown’ (442). Dissevered from its complement, the preposition ‘toward’ here takes on the value of a metaphysical principle, the construction suggesting that orientation, or direction, is essential to life.²²

Prepositions are also weighed and chimed against each other by their line-initial position, through the coincidence of phrase and line, where they are marked by onset; their semantic importance likewise translates into rhythmic prominence. The construction ‘sworn/ to water’ (1.9-10) implies a complex relationship caught up in language and based on meaning; the prepositional phrase ‘to water’, where ‘to’ both echoes the poem’s title and alliterates with ‘water’, anticipates or fore-echoes the preposition ‘toward’; the construction makes attraction absolute.²³ Speechsound patterning likewise marks line-initial prepositions. In the sequence ‘My father/ thru marsh fog’ the preposition echoes the consonants of ‘father’, and the initial consonants of the second line (\th\, \r\, \m\, \f\) echo those of the first (with voiced \th\); ‘thru’ appears then to define the father as agent and patient simultaneously, suggesting the father’s course of movement but also how he is seen in imagination by the speaker.

At the poem’s close what appears to be a two-beat metrical pattern (with some variation) contributes to the rhythmic value of line-initial prepositions by assigning them the metrical beat, or at the very least brings a kind of metrical pressure to bear on them. This is not simply a case of ‘promotion’: it is a systematic intrication of meter and syntax, which associates prepositions and prepositional phrases according to a repeated three-syllable pattern (diacritic marks indicating stress are mine):

²² ‘Toward’ is treated similarly in a passage from ‘My Life By Water’, where it is associated with ‘two’: ‘One boat//two—/ pointed toward/ my shore’ (238).

²³ Similarly, ‘My Life By Water’ opens with ‘by’ in line-initial position (‘My life/ by water’); the fact that the phrase is disjoined by linebreak from the noun it modifies suggests that it signifies both location and agency, that water is both a place and a means (while ‘by water’ with initial stress might almost be read as a noun in apposition, a portmanteau combination of ‘backwater’ and ‘byway’).

Ón this stréam
my móonnight mémory
 wáshed of hárdships
 manéuvers bárges
thrú the móuth

óf the ríver
They físhed in béauty
 It was not álwáys só
 Ín Físhes
réd Márs

rísing
rídes the slóughs and slúices
 óf my mínd
 with the pérsóns
ón the édge (269)

The poem's close develops the interaction of physical place and mental space: 'On this stream' appears to refer at once to a remembered place and to the stream of consciousness; 'through the mouth' isolated at stanza end evokes the speech of the poem. The prepositions of the passage mark and organize the relations between these two domains of meaning. The poem closes with three prepositional phrases whose relations are difficult to discern: does 'on the edge' localize 'persons' (whoever they may be) or does it serve to qualify them (the persons on the edge, as opposed to others)? The organization of spatial expressions at the poem's close appears as a comment on place as a condition of meaning, on the way spatial representation informs metaphor, and permeates our notions of the immaterial.

Generalized 'markedness'

The interaction of syntax, line grouping, and speechsound repetitions, the multiple and specific modes of prominence which the poem constructs, invite us to read rhythm in Niedecker's poem, not as a matter of alternating strong and weak pulses, but of generalized 'markedness'. Several examples might suggest here how the poem resists and puts into questions readings or scansions based on quantifying prominence. The line 'I mourn her not hearing canvasbacks' (263), which evokes

the deafness of Niedecker's mother, offers a well-balanced, well-spaced three-beat reading: 'I móurn her nó't hearing cánvasbacks' (canvasbacks are a North American wild duck); but the fact that 'her' may be read either as object pronoun or as genitive suggests another reading, for the genitive will be distinguished by a stress on 'her'. This alternative reading is also suggested by the wordplay associating 'her' and 'hearing', which calls for alliterative stress on 'her'. The ambiguous construction along with the phonemic echo leads to a sequence of four successive 'stressed', or 'prominent', syllables: 'móurn hér nó't héaring', a rhythmic series which cannot be reduced to an alternating pattern without sacrificing one of the syntaxes. (A 'natural' performance may do so; but perhaps accounting for the multiplicity of rhythm here will require us to read otherwise.)

Niedecker's poem is a way of revising the linguistic imagination of place by transforming the linguistic structures that automatize place; 'de-automatization' involves both grammar and rhythm simultaneously, and works by multiplying syntaxes and thus multiplying stresses. In the passage evoking her childhood, Niedecker writes: 'I grew in green/ slide and slant/ of shore and shade' (264). The association of 'grew' and 'green' identifies the speaker's growth with that of plant life, while the linebreak, which makes it possible to read 'green' as a noun, and the consonance linking 'in' and 'green', thus suggesting an inner 'greenness', adumbrate, perhaps, a transitive phrasal verb 'grow in', with the sense of absorb as in the adjective 'ingrown': the invented phrasal verb, describing the way environment is assimilated, would determine a stress on 'in', and a series of three stressed monosyllables: 'gréw ín gréen'. The line break, then, I argue, has an effect on meaning: the passage develops what it means to be 'born/ in swale and swamp and sworn/ to water' suggesting how one's sensitive responses to the physical world shape one's nervous constitution; 'in' marks localization and simultaneously indifferentially outside and inside the body.

This discussion brings us back to Niedecker's evocation of a human condition participating in natural rhythms: the construction 'In us sea-air rhythm' (265) likewise multiplies stresses by means of ambiguous syntax working in interaction with speechsound patterning. The prepositional phrase 'In us' allows for contrastive stress on 'us' (as opposed to other living beings, perhaps) or 'In' (as a

way of marking essential character), while the construction ‘sea-air’ does not function like a compound, despite the hyphen linking the two nouns: ‘sea’ does not specify a category of ‘air’, rather the expression appears to designate both the rhythms of sea and air, understood as identifiable: both nouns, it seems, must be stressed. The reader is further invited to articulate them by the fact that the same consonant appears in initial and final (‘us’-‘sea’), then final and initial position (‘air’-‘rhythm’); as such the line suggests a continuity between ‘us’ and the combined substance ‘sea-air’. The rhythmic composition of the line, then, Niedecker’s rhythmic practice, bears no relation to the conception it evokes, the harmonious wave-like movement of essentialist rhythm; rather, it invents a specific linguistic form to suggest a natural world which escapes from the linguistic and cultural patterns by which we apprehend it.

In this paper I have tried to show that Niedecker’s writing about place and about the relations between place and person determines a specific grammar, working, notably, with prepositional phrases and compounding; and that the rhythms of her poems may only be described if one takes this grammar into account. Further, I have tried to show that grammar and rhythm both determine and are determined by the patterning of speechsounds, and more properly the serial association and semantic specification of words linked by phonemic echo. Niedecker’s writing in ‘Paean to Place’ might, then, as Blau DuPlessis notes, be described as a ‘total system of sound’²⁴—if, that is, we understand ‘system’ not as a totality but as a network of relations between words which, as rhythm, specifies Niedecker’s language; a system which is indefinitely open to new modes of organization, through acts of reading. This generalized ‘markedness’ makes it impossible to reduce the rhythm of a discourse to the binary opposition of strong and weak, prominent and non-prominent, marked and unmarked—irrespective of whether it is mentally perceived (or vocally pronounced) or not, irrespective also of whether it may be considered as consonant with the ‘natural’ rhythms of speech.

²⁴ Rachel Blau Duplessis, ‘Lorine Niedecker’s “Paean to Place” and its Reflective Fusions’, in Willis, ed., pp. 150-179 (p. 172).

Works cited.

- Attridge, Derek, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982).
- Benveniste, Emile, 'La notion de "rythme" dans son expression linguistique', *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 327-35. English version in *Problems of General Linguistics*, translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: Univ. of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 281-88.
- Blau DuPlessis, Rachel, 'Lorine Niedecker's "Paeon to Place" and its Reflective Fusions', in Willis, ed., pp. 150-79.
- Brogan, T. V. F., *English Versification 1570-1980* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981).
- Claudel, Paul, *Réflexions et propositions sur le vers français*, in *Réflexions sur la poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).
- Cureton, Richard, *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse* (London: Longman, 1992).
- Dessons, Gérard, and Henri Meschonnic, *Traité du rythme: Des vers et des proses* (Paris: Dunod, 1998).
- Fijn van Draat, P., *Rhythm in English Prose* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1910).
- Gardner, W. H., *Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889): A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley, *Poems and Prose*, ed. by W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953, repr. 1963).
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von, *Werke in Fünf Bänden. II: Schriften zur Altertumskunde und Ästhetik; Die Vasen*, ed. by Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961).
- Meschonnic, Henri, *Critique du rythme* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982).
- Niedecker, Lorine, *Collected Works*, ed. by Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002).
- Pyle, Fitzroy, 'Pyrrhic and Spondee: Speech Stress and Metrical Accent in English Five-Foot Iambic Verse Structure', *Hermathena* 107 (1968), 49-74.
- Pinard, Mary, 'Niedecker's Grammar of Flooding', in Willis, ed., pp. 20-30.
- Skinner, Jonathan, 'Particular Attention: Lorine Niedecker's Natural Histories', in Willis, ed., pp. 41-59.
- Willis, Elizabeth, ed., *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008).