

Roger McGough, “My Busconductor” : A Few Remarks

Roger McGough’s “My Busconductor”, published in *Collected Poems* (2003), offers a deceptively unassuming portrait of a bus conductor whose illness appears to bring him close to the end of his working life. Through colloquial diction, graphic compounds, compressed syntax, rhyme, and simile, the poem transforms an ordinary journey into a meditation on physical exhaustion, ageing, social detachment, and mortality. Its apparent simplicity is therefore not a sign of limited ambition: rather, McGough’s economy of expression enables small linguistic shifts to carry considerable emotional and interpretative weight.

The poem’s central movement is perceptual. Objects and places that have long belonged to the conductor’s habitual environment begin to appear newly distinct. McGough represents this change not through an elaborate or elevated vocabulary, but by making familiar language behave in unexpected ways. The poem’s word formations, idioms, sound patterns, and comparisons all contribute to a gradual movement from comic observation towards pathos.

Physical exhaustion and the body as workplace

The poem opens in a conversational, almost anecdotal register, as though the speaker were passing on information gathered during an ordinary bus journey. Yet the conductor’s physical condition soon acquires a significance extending beyond the immediate facts of illness. The expression “go on strike” is particularly suggestive. Ordinarily associated with industrial action and the deliberate withdrawal of labour, the idiom is transferred to a bodily organ: the kidney becomes a worker refusing to continue. This metaphor constructs the body as a workplace governed by the demands of labour and productivity. The phrase “through overwork” strengthens the analogy, implying not simply malfunction but exhaustion caused by excessive demands. The conductor’s body appears to reproduce, in miniature, the industrial logic that structures his working life. At the same time, the metaphor generates dark comedy. The kidney’s strike is an absurdly literal application of an established idiom, but the humour does not diminish the seriousness of the illness. Instead, comedy and vulnerability remain in tension, allowing the poem to approach mortality without abandoning its characteristic lightness of touch.

Defamiliarisation and the renewal of perception

The word “now” signals a decisive alteration in the conductor’s relation to his surroundings. The familiar has not necessarily changed in itself; what has changed is the manner in which it is perceived. The bus ticket, an unremarkable component of the repetitive mechanics of public transport, acquires a renewed material presence. The nouns “shape” and “texture” appeal to visual and tactile awareness, making the ticket seem more individual and substantial than it would under conditions of habitual inattention. This renewed attention may be understood as a consequence of the conductor’s awareness of his own physical vulnerability. The prospect of loss renders the material world newly legible. McGough thus dramatises defamiliarisation: an ordinary object is made strange, not by being transformed into something fantastic, but by being apprehended with unusual intensity. The poem’s linguistic method mirrors this perceptual process, since its compounds and idioms also encourage readers to reconsider expressions that might otherwise pass unnoticed.

The aesthetic elevation of the ordinary

The simile “as if it were a rose” elevates a routine transaction into something approaching a ceremony. A fare, normally defined by its practical and commercial function, is handled as though it possessed the delicacy and beauty conventionally associated with a flower. The rose may evoke beauty, affection, and fragility; its appearance therefore introduces an aesthetic and emotional register into the utilitarian world of the bus. The comparison does not imply that the conductor has escaped ordinary life. Rather, it suggests that he has begun to encounter that life differently. His dignity emerges through attention: the everyday acquires value because it is no longer taken entirely for granted. The poem’s lyricism is consequently grounded in the material world, and its emotional force depends on the transfiguration of familiar objects rather than on abstract declarations.

Social observation, marginality, and emotional restraint

The conductor’s encounters with his passengers produce a compressed portrait of an urban social world. The factory girls, the drunken passenger, and the disoriented old man are sketched through brief, economical details rather than developed as fully individuated characters. Such shorthand is consistent with the conductor’s occupational position: he encounters a succession of people, but the repetitive structure of his work does not necessarily permit sustained intimacy. His silence is especially significant in a poem by McGough, whose writing often exploits verbal play and comic liveliness. The phrase “His thin lips / have no quips” links bodily frailty to the absence of wit. “Thin” may suggest physical depletion, while “no quips” indicates the suspension of the conductor’s customary social performance. Nevertheless, the poem does not establish a single explanation for his detachment. It may arise from illness, fatigue, inward preoccupation, or an intensified awareness of mortality. The restraint of the portrayal preserves this ambiguity.

Mortality and the possibility of a final journey

The adverb “gently” introduces a tenderness that contrasts with the earlier vocabulary of labour and overwork. It slows the poem’s movement and lends the conductor’s actions an almost ritual quality. The question “perhaps for the last time?” is pivotal because its interrogative form preserves uncertainty. The poem does not confirm that this journey will literally be the conductor’s last; rather, the possibility of finality alters the significance of the journey and of the world through which it passes. The shops, pubs, and streets belong to a recognisable everyday landscape. Their familiarity becomes poignant precisely because the conductor may soon be separated from them. The comparison “as through new glasses” offers a compact account of this altered consciousness. It can be read as a literal image of improved sight, but it also functions metaphorically: the conductor sees his environment with renewed clarity because he has become conscious of its precariousness. The surviving text ends with “And the sky”, a syntactically incomplete phrase that leaves the poem’s final perspective open. The sky may suggest an expansion beyond the confines of the bus and the familiar urban route, but the fragment does not warrant a definitive interpretation.

Graphic compounding and lexical compression

McGough’s linguistic inventiveness lies less in the creation of wholly unprecedented lexical items than in his manipulation of familiar words and their visual presentation. Forms such as “busconductor”, “busticket”, “factorygirls”, and “sameold” bring together elements that would

conventionally be written as separate words. These formations are best described as instances of graphic compounding or orthographic compression, rather than automatically treated as neologisms in the strict lexical sense.

“busconductor”

The closed compound compresses an occupational title into a single graphic unit. The effect is to make the man appear almost inseparable from his function: his work becomes a defining identity rather than merely one aspect of his life.

“busticket”

The fusion of “bus” and “ticket” produces a compact visual unit associated with repetitive transactions. The ticket is emblematic of routine, yet it is precisely this familiar object that acquires renewed “shape / and texture”.

“factorygirls”

The compound groups the women into a collective social category rather than presenting them as individuals. It evokes a recognisable industrial and urban type and may reflect the conductor’s habitual classification of those who travel on his route.

“sameold”

The compression of a familiar expression condenses the sense of routine and predictability. Its significance increases when the streets described as familiar nevertheless “look different”, bringing habitual recognition into conflict with renewed perception.

These compounds perform several related functions. First, they create compression: occupational roles, objects, and social groups are condensed into compact units. Secondly, they suggest habitualisation, as though the conductor’s world had been organised into ready-made categories by the repetitive demands of his work. Thirdly, their visual compactness corresponds to the poem’s economical style. Finally, they produce defamiliarisation by prompting readers to notice the internal structure of familiar expressions. The semantic surprise of “go on strike” follows a related principle. The expression is not new, but its application to a kidney creates a collision between two conceptual domains: bodily vulnerability and industrial labour. The organ is figured as an exhausted worker, while the body becomes a workplace whose labour force may refuse to continue. “Overwork” reinforces the analogy, referring both to excessive labour and, more broadly, to the cumulative expenditure of a working life. McGough’s originality therefore resides in contextual displacement and recombination as much as in lexical invention.

Rhyme, sound, and comic rhythm

The sound patterning of the poem sustains its balance between comedy and pathos. In “His thin lips / have no quips”, the immediate rhyme between “lips” and “quips” creates a clipped, playful effect. Yet the rhyme is not merely ornamental: it binds the conductor’s physical appearance to his

verbal behaviour. His lips are described as thin, and they produce no witty remarks. The line itself, with its neat acoustic correspondence, almost performs the kind of quip that the conductor no longer makes. Similarly, the rhyme “ignores / the drunk who snores” links two economical observations and produces a lightly comic, almost nursery-rhyme cadence. The regularity and brevity of these sound patterns make the descriptions memorable, while their playful musicality contrasts with the implications of the conductor’s illness. The humour is therefore partly acoustic: the reader is invited to enjoy the verbal pattern even as the situation becomes increasingly poignant.

Simile, imagery, and the transformation of ordinary objects

The similes “as if it were a rose” and “as through new glasses” articulate complementary aspects of the poem’s method. The first transforms an ordinary object into an image of beauty and fragility; the second provides a familiar analogy for a fundamental change in perception. One recasts the object being seen, while the other clarifies the altered condition of the observer. Both comparisons rely on accessible, everyday vocabulary, yet both invite the reader to perceive the ordinary world anew. Their effectiveness depends on the contrast between the modesty of the language and the scale of the implications. The rose introduces a moment of lyric elevation into a commercial exchange, while the glasses translate a potentially profound change in consciousness into a recognisable everyday experience. McGough thus avoids abstract philosophical exposition: the poem’s reflections on mortality emerge through concrete objects and acts of seeing.

The negotiation between comedy and pathos

The poem’s emotional complexity derives from its refusal to choose between comic observation and serious reflection. Expressions such as “go on strike” and “no quips” belong to colloquial discourse and invite an immediate response to their verbal play. Against this register, the simile of the rose and the question “perhaps for the last time?” acquire a heightened poignancy. The poem moves towards contemplation without relinquishing the plainness of its diction. This tonal balance is central to McGough’s representation of mortality. Humour does not simply relieve the seriousness of the subject, nor does pathos erase the comedy. Instead, the two modes remain interdependent. The ordinary world is at once familiar and newly precious; the conductor is both a figure of everyday routine and an individual whose illness makes that routine appear finite. The poem’s emotional force arises from this unresolved coexistence.

“Busconductor” demonstrates how a seemingly modest vocabulary can sustain a complex poetic argument. Through graphic compounds, semantic displacement, rhyme, simile, and shifts in register, McGough transforms the routines of public transport into an exploration of labour, perception, social isolation, and mortality. The poem’s word formations are particularly significant: rather than depending on an extensive invented lexicon, they alter the visual and semantic relations between familiar words. This linguistic compression mirrors the conductor’s habitual world even as the poem gradually unsettles it. Ultimately, the conductor’s altered perception suggests that awareness of finitude can renew attention to what has previously seemed commonplace. The poem does not offer a definitive account of his fate, and its final fragment preserves that openness. Its achievement lies instead in showing how the prospect of loss can make ordinary objects, streets, and journeys newly intense—and how comedy can become one of the means through which such vulnerability is recognised.