# bpNichol + 10: Some Institutional Issues Associated with the Continued Reading of Texts Known as ‘bpNichol’

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This issue of *Open Letter* is intended to examine the ways in which the transition between September 1988—when Barrie Nichol is an active and influential member of the literary communities that receive his writing—and post-1988—when the extent to which the work known as ‘bpNichol’ is read depends entirely on the commitment of others—has been unfolding. Ultimately how and by whom ‘bpNichol’ is read will depend on the commitment of strangers—on strangers to Barrie and to all of those contributing to the discussion here.

Barrie Nichol was known by a number of signifiers: professionally by the trademark “bpNichol,” to much of his public as “bp”—the ostensible title of his first collection, to his friends as “Barrie” or “beep”, and by close readers by the letter “h” that he had adopted as his personal letter. Barrie and beep and bp are all gone, except as signifiers of memories, but “bpNichol” as the trademark signifier for all the various writings Barrie put into circulation remains, to be part of the names of archives, articles, papers, books, conferences, and journal issues such as this one. The “h” also continues, as a kind of cult remembrance—as in Billy Little’s current project of collecting poems written in Barrie’s honour without using words that contain an ‘h’. It and “bpNichol,” along with the ‘saints’ of *The Martyrology,* are one-trick, high-resolution signs of the institutional Nichol, the existence of which Barrie recognized—with somewhat mixed feelings—at least as far back as the early 1970s.

Unless a writer succeeds in developing an institutional persona, and in having his or her writings become, at least in some minor or transgressive way, part of the literary institution and its sign system, their circulation and readership will be minimal. Barrie seems to have understood this very early, witness his affiliation of his writing with various genre signs in the 1966 Coach House box *bp* (a veritable box of genres), with early modernist literary history in works like *Dada Lama* and “The ’Pataphysical Hardware Co,” and with canonical writers like Stein, Ball, Jarry, and Wittgenstein. In this issue David Rosenberg, in “Coach House Letters, takes special ‘note’ of the importance of his various transgressive and critical engagements with genre. Barrie also seems to have understood that the precise parts of the literary institution with which one affiliates one’s writing can determine what kind of readers one’s work will have, and how numerous they may be. Among these parts he chose the little magazine, the very small press, the visual poem, the sound poem, crossed genres, the ephemeral collectible, the difficult writer—making his own work seem edgy, exotic, difficult, productive of other writing, and desirable because of its scarcity, even as he multiplied these individually scarce items by publishing hundreds of them. As well he understood the requirement for the institutional persona to have hard-edges even if having many and ‘borderblurred’ edges—as in the predicably recurring ‘h’, or in the small bp’s invariably abutting the upper-case ‘N’.

While some of us may understand this awareness of institutional relations as a desire for some kind of canonical standing, and perhaps even for the humanist ‘great author’ status which

canonicity has often conferred (Rosenberg and Roy Miki engage the question of canonicity in different ways here), the issue for Nichol in his lifetime and for many Nichol readers today is more pragmatic: how can one ensure the continued cultural circulation of difficult texts that often interrogate cultural practices or subvert the conventions and proprieties on which canonicity has usually rested? As Pierre Bourdieu has argued in *The Field of Cultural Production*, canonicity has only *appeared* to be a humanist concept, appearing so because of the pretences long associated with it that literary standards are universal and that natural genius informs literary ability. In actuality, literary value, literary ability, and canonicity are concepts that are socially constructed amid fields of cultural and class conflicts which determine who can write, what texts are read, by whom, and by how many. Barrie's attempts to intervene in the packaging of his own persona, and this issue's concern with the institutional preservation of his writing, are more appropriately understood as recognitions of the material and ideological grounds of literary struggle, and as actions in that struggle, than as gestures toward gaining great-author status for 'bpNichol'.

Complicating such questions is the fact that Barrie has been best known—unfortunately, I would say, although Miki here would appear to disagree—as the author of a long poem, *The Martyrology.* The long-poem genre calls up the long association of the epic poem with great male authors and the Eurocentric, monolithic, and patriarchal character of high modernist understandings of canonicity. When we think of Nichol as primarily the author of *The Martyrology,* we are often forgetting that this long poem was for most of Barrie's writing career not a monolith but a work-in-progress, a field of research, and was published piecemeal, in eight-plus 'books,' six or eight volumes, that parts of those volumes were published as pamphlets and broadsides and privately-circulated photocopy before the books or volumes were published, and that accompanying and informing the early volumes were ephemeral pamphlets like those of the *Scrapture* series. We are probably also forgetting that it was published alongside a vast and vastly fragmented assortment of more radical texts, like those of *Dada Lama, ABC, The Adventures of Milt the Morph, Art Facts, Zygal, Truth: A Book of Fictions,* and *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer,* and collaborative works like those of 'TRG' and *Horse d'Oeuvres.* That is, we are forgetting that while *The Martyrology* is his most visible work it is not necessarily a 'central' work.

The contributors here appear to disagree, sometimes vigorously, on the 'centrality' of *The Martyrology*. For Barbour it is implicitly the most thematically important Nichol text; for Wershler-Henry and Bök the thematic attention critics have given it threatens to render his more radical work invisible; for Miki, *The Martyrology* can yet be saved as a radical text, if critics will only 'turn the page' on the illusion of bpNichol presence within it and attend instead to its paragrammatic play and textual excesses. Whether Miki himself "turn[s] this page" readers can decide.

As well as being inventive in creating his institutional persona, Barrie was also tireless—and unselfconscious—in educating readers in how to read or hear or see his various work. Much like Robert Duncan, he tended to present himself in workshops and reading tours as a curious reader of his own writing, and as more informed about that writing than about anyone else's. The audiotape record of such moments shows him discussing other writers' work in terms of his use of it, or discussing literary history in terms of his relationship to it. Essays in this issue are frequently punctuated with such commentary and explanation. Thus one of the questions the ten-year anniversary of his death brings us is what is happening to 'bpNichol', the body of texts, now

that Barrie, the person, is no longer able to publish pamphlets and broadsides, to create new collaborations, to place poems in periodicals, or to travel across the country to answer questions about his work—or as Miki phrases the question, how do we read his writing after "the removal of its prime mover"?

What often happens on the death of an author is that an institutional group of textual custodians comes into being—scholars and editors who present themselves as caring as passionately about that author's text as the author once did. Sometimes this happens within an author's lifetime, as in the case of Margaret Atwood, where there are presently many more items being published about her work each month than new work by herself, including this fall two biographies. Sometimes there is a flurry of editorial, biographical, and critical work on a writer immediately after the death, mostly by former associates, as there was in the case of Charles Olson, but little activity, and few new scholars, afterward. Much of this kind of activity, whether done on a living author like Atwood or a deceased one like Olson, is celebratory rather than productive or critical, even, or perhaps especially, when it purports to offer no more than readings or explications. There is also some push to keep the deceased author's work in print, as there was after the deaths of both Olson and Spicer. Something of this happened with Barrie's writing, with Irene Niechoda publishing her *Sourcery* to *The Martyrology,* Coach House publishing the remaining books of *The Martyrology,* Miki editing and publishing *Tracing the Paths,* George Bowering and Michael Ondaatje compiling *An H in the Heart,* and later Coach House Books undertaking to keep *The Martyrology* in print.

When the mortal author dies, readers become the new authors or author-functions of his or her work—become its editors, advocates, and publishers—that is, if the work is to have an author-function. Some of Barrie's work—his visual poems, his 'pataphysical poems, his strange fictions—appear no longer to have an author-function. *The Martyrology* probably has too many. *An H in the Heart* had overly fond authors.

The situation of Nichol's work, and to some extent that of Olson's, is complicated by the fact that the past decade has seen a decline in cultural and scholarly interest in poetry per se, and a rise of interest in fiction, and in minority writing which white male heterosexual writers are usually perceived not to be part of. For example, Barrie's writing hasn't appeared in any historical anthologies of Canadian poetry since David and Lecker's anthology of 1982, but then there have not been any new historical anthologies of Canadian poetry since 1988. In the same period there have been numerous other kinds of anthologies in which his work does not appear. A pre-1988 situation in which it was relatively easy to get his work into an undergraduate or graduate Canadian Literature classroom because one could get Barrie himself into the classroom, or at least a dozen or so copies of his latest inexpensive chapbook, has been followed by a decade in which has been exceedingly difficult to get his work into a classroom. The bpNichol writing most available for classrooms has been that which is most open to explication and humanistic reading, and therefore least radical, *The Martyrology,* or it has been the institutionally de-radicalized writing of *An H in the Heart.* That is, it has been his writing which is most open to readings which do not disturb the ways literature has normally been read in twentieth-century North American classrooms.[1]

Most of those interested in continuing to author Nichol texts have been other writers. Most of these have been writers of his own generation, and most have been his friends. There has been little sign yet of scholars who hope to focus their careers on Barrie's work; although there have been some doctoral dissertations (Gene Bridwell in his note here on Simon Fraser University's

bpNichol Archive lists scholarly projects that have made use of that resource). There have also been a number of younger writers—Peter Jaeger, Jeff Derksen, Christian Bök, Darren Wershler-Henry among them—who have begun authoring his work less by writing about it than by writing from it—by writing texts like Wershler-Henry's *Nicholodeon* that operate to extend Barrie's most non-humanist gestures. Interestingly, this is the way writers like Nichol have kept Stein's work alive. I think the work of these writers is much more important than any that can be done by career scholars, many of whom will attempt to recuperate whatever they study to whatever decorums are current in the academy, and likely much more important than that of my generation of writers, who are at best friendly and interim inheritors.

In fact, I suggest that many of us in my generation need to release the texts known as 'bpNichol' from our friendships with Barrie the bpNichol author, and from the privileged place those friendships have given *The Martyrology* in many of our views of his writings, because of our continuing to read it as autobiography or as metaphors for autobiography. If we don't do this, the elements of friendship and uncritical acceptance already evident in some of our work will proliferate and come to contaminate more and more of those more recently come to reading bpNichol. Lori Emerson writes in this issue about the effect such well-meaning views of Nichol can become obstacles for a student who wishes to read 'bpNichol' (although interestingly her use of words like "holistic", "organic," and "intimacy" suggest that she too has been moved by the textual illusion of the 'human' Nichol). Elsewhere in the issue there seems to me to be considerable tension between those whose preoccupation is their memory of the person Barrie Nichol and those whose preoccupation is the body of texts known as bpNichol. This isn't a simple tension, for among the former awareness is often evident that the person they remember is now at best a set of textual constructions to which their own writing ironically contributes. Memory and affection are facts, and hardly to be discarded because they may also become critical obstacles. It would be more appropriate to seek ways of textualizing affection—as I think Barbour, Hogg, Little and McCaffery do here—so that far from being an obstacle it might become productive of both writing and reading.

In general, I'd like to see more attempts also to release the writing known as bpNichol from its own ambivalent humanism, and from our own weakness for this humanism—the weakness that lurks behind the title "An H in the Heart," where instead of fragmenting and deconstructing the humanist message, the wordplay re-institutes it as empathy, as pain. I note that one of the most useful readings of *The Martyrology* for critics who address Nichol's humanism continues to be Steve McCaffery's 1986 essay "*The Martyrology* as Paragram." As part of this critical standing back from Nichol's humanism, there could be less emphasis on explications and textual decodings—less of the hermeneutics and exegetics implicit in a title like *Tracing the Paths.*

I thus agree with many of the arguments here, such as Wershler-Henry's, that Nichol scholars should reduce their focus on *The Martyrology,* and on finding meaning or paradoxical coherence within it, or at least, as suggested by Christian Bök's essay, secularize their readings of it. *The Martyrology* has been transformed by many of its readers into Nichol's most consumable, didactic, and conservative text, because—unlike in most of his other writing—its wordplay seems to have repeatedly been read as invitation to discover meaning, and to re-instate humanism, the sentient subject. The poem even seems to 'end' now on such wordplay, the increasingly famous "bp: if" — "body paranoia: initial fugue ...." with the partly fragmented words read as foregrounding the pathos and courage of the once still-living author.

There is also a need for Nichol readers to do what they can to keep the bpNichol texts from

being taken over by careerists. There may be little future for his work within the mainstream literary institution, much as there was little place for his work there in his lifetime. Barrie's scathing dismissal in the 1985 Marlatt and Bowering interview of publication by McClelland &Stewart (recalled in this issue by both Jaeger and Wershler-Henry), a dismissal which should probably have been remembered when the 'H in the Heart' project was first considered, needs to be especially remembered now when biographies are mooted and when doctoral theses on *The Martyrology* begin to appear. If there is anything that academic work on *The Martyrology* to date can tell us, it is that the poem too often draws the commentator to theories of totality and coherence, the very things Barrie's most innovative work suspended, and to the illusion of an unfractured subject. These are illusions which we do our culture no service by continuing.

One area for scholarly research into *The Martyrology* and its humanism that I think should be undertaken soon is their relationship to Barrie's Therafields years and his work there as a lay psychological therapist or "theradramist." The basic understanding of psychological therapy offered by the Therafields Foundation was Freudian, and depended heavily on dream analysis and the recovery of body memories of early childhood experiences, on the dramatic enacting and re-experiencing of passions and rages that had been stifled in the person's early years (hence "theradrama"), and on the possibility that—by coming to understand these passions and rages—the person might become 'free' of their domination of his or her everyday life. It also contained strong elements of Roman Catholic theology, from the large number of ex-priests and nuns among its co-founders and future theradramists.[2] Barrie's poetics, it has seemed to me, were often both resurrectionist ("POETRY BEING AT A DEAD END POETRY IS DEAD ... THE POEM WILL LIVE AGAIN..." [*ABC: The Aleph Beth Book,* 1971]) and liberationist ("I place myself ... with them ... who seek to reach themselves and the other thru the poem by as many exits and entrances as are possible" [cover "Statement," *bp,* 1966]). Until these elements in his poetics are understood more fully, critics may find themselves as often as not making wishful readings (of whatever kind) of *The Martyrology.*

In bpNichol publishing, there is an urgent need to bring Barrie's most radical work back into print, and to make more publicly available the work that is in print. Nichol readers who teach should be willing to prepare custom anthologies locally printed rather than use commercial anthologies that have excluded his writing.[3]

The best hope for continued cultural relevance for the writing known as 'bpNichol' lies with writers like Barrie himself, who I hope will increasingly read beyond *The Martyrology,* and take that work not as embodying Barrie's presence but as a set of textual starting places much like he took Stein's or Sheila Watson's or Wittgenstein's writing, or Frank O'Hara took Zukofsky's, or Victor Coleman took Spicer's. In this issue of *Open Letter* this hope lies both with his contemporaries, like Douglas Barbour, Steven Smith, Billy Little, David Rosenberg, Roy Miki, and Robert Hogg, whose continued mourning of Barrie the person often shows through their texts; it lies also with new generations of writers, like Bök, Wershler-Henry, Jaeger, Lori Emerson, and Steven Cain, who didn't know him personally, and who are burdened neither by a friendship with him nor by a need to struggle against it.

Notes

1. We need to be careful, however, not to create a binary between 'conservative' and 'radical' bpNichol texts and to idealize one at the expense of the other, while eliding the political implications of his writing generally. Almost all of Nichol's writing is disruptive in some way of literary convention and reading practices, although its resistance to meaning-recuperative and

biographical readings is stronger is some texts than in others. I would argue therefore that introducing students to Nichol through his most disruptive texts would in the long term create more perceptive Nichol readers—thus for me the urgency of keeping such texts in print.

2. While the Therafields approach was radical in its use of long-term "house groups" and of group labour projects to stimulate the person's identification of psychological "blocks," and in the hopes of many of its members of establishing communal living spaces, it was individualist in the frequently professed goal of "freeing" the person from the influence of unrecognized transferences. Writing in the second of her seven projected "Therafields Books," *Secret Places* (1976), which includes Nichol in its acknowledgements, founder Lea Hindley-Smith described the Therafields method of "theradrama" as "the art used by the workers of Therafields to help the lost individual retrace his steps and, in due course, gain a chance to reclaim his birthright." She described its goals as "to deliver man to himself and to liberate his creativity and humanity" ([vi-vii]). At the centre of its therapies were the person's regular private meetings with an assigned theradramist. (The word "centre" here is appropriate—the theradramists spoke frequently of the need for a person to be psychologically "centred," and together with their clients referred colloquially to their main building, on Dupont Street in Toronto, as "The Centre.") A liberationist preoccupation of many of theradramist/administrators of Therafields was preventing it as an institution from taking on the same oppressive role in its clients' transferences as family members often did or as the Roman Catholic church had done for many of the Foundation's founding members—most of the latter, many of whom became Therafields therapists, had been priests or nuns in the process of leaving their orders. One of the reasons Barrie advanced for advocating the dissolution of Therafields in the late 1980s—speaking as its Vice President—was that such transferences to it, in which it became experienced by the client as a monolithic 'parental' institution, were becoming increasingly obstructive to therapeutic progress (he showed to me little of the distress over the dissolution that Steve McCaffery speaks of elsewhere in this issue, and seemed to regard community suspicions of undue profits from Therafields real estate sales, which McCaffery also mentions, as merely a vivid instance of this problematic transference). The fact that Barrie had joined these particular people, under the guidance of Lea Hindley-Smith, also suggests a source for the Roman Catholic theology that colours the first books of *The Martyrology,* and why it was specifically "saints," rather than a lay concept like 'doctors' (as in the parodic suggestions of Bök and Wershler-Henry in their essays here), that became the poem's first sign of linguistic instability. A possible outcome of research into Nichol and Therafields is a reading of *The Martyrology* as less significant in itself than as a therapeutic text that enabled the ever-expanding variety of Nichol's later writing.

3. In this regard, Nichol on several occasions spoke to me in his later years about collaborating with him in editing an anthology of contemporary Canadian poetry which would be satirically titled "Mere Anarchy" and contain poems which offered—contrary to Yeats' "The Second Coming"—no illusion that somewhere there might be a "centre" that should "hold" or be holding.