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The Martyrology: Survivors' Retrospective

Guest-edited by David Rosenberg

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cover photograph of Ellie & Barrie Nichol by Michael Ondaatje

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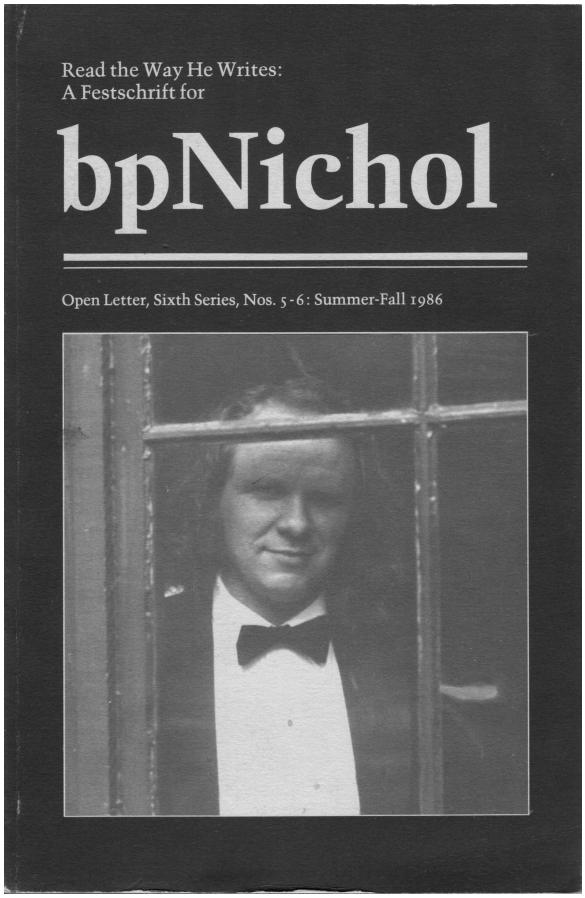
To Miro and David Smith
of Halifax: Makers



Cover of the 1986 *Open Letter* bpNichol festschrift, edited by Paul Dutton and Steven Smith.

Contents

Introduction: Body by Nichol

David Rosenberg

Surviving Space (London: Karnac) appeared in 2002, a festschrift for the great British psychoanalyst Esther Bick on the centenary of her birth. The Foreword by Donald Meltzer reminded me of how a posthumous homage for bpNichol by psychoanalysts might sound. However, although Nichol was a lay analyst as well as a poet, his lifelong work, *The Martyrology*, is a revelation of his thinking: we are immersed in following it, rather than striving and failing to "grasp her method and follow her thinking," as students of Esther Bick are described. Readers of *The Martyrology* might make perfect students for Bick, for it is Nichol's thinking his way from line to line -- or word to word and even letter to letter – that follows "the scent of love and hate" that Bick traveled.

But where is the hate in *The Martyrology*, one might ask? The apprehension of love may appear more obvious, comparable to the underlying theme song of the sixties generation, but the counterposed hate is represented by the saints, who are often in a state of resentment, bitterness and anger toward the catastrophe of their loss. What have they lost? Literally, their lives. For as they are forced from or flee their natural home in Cloudtown, their descent to new lives on Earth kills their spirit and leads them on a trail to their deaths.

Thus is established in the early books of *The Martyrology* the theme of a lifelong journey to an inevitable death – a journey of love in the remembrance of loss, and hatred of the false turns and false journeys that loss makes inevitable. But let's return a moment to *Surviving Space*, for it's about that very space on Earth in which the saints find themselves unable to survive in the first books of *The Martyrology*. Their major depressions and despondency is inhabited by Nichol's persona of 'bp' and at first it seems impossible that he will be able to work through this near break-

down, especially as we are made to realize that 'bp' is drawing upon Nichol's autobiographical experience.

Yet *The Martyrology* is stabilized by Nichol as it turns into a classically epic journey through the history of civilization, from Sumer to modern Canada, and through the personal history of a journey out of hell and into the saving methods, systems, traps and graces of human language and the cloudily grandiose thinking it puffs up.

> At the time of her death [1983, a few years before Nichol] Mrs. Bick was hardly known except to her pupils… She had very little use for evidence and linear, logical thought or causality. Her thought was unequivocally intuitive, lateral, and poetic. Consequently, the student never really could grasp her method or follow her thinking… Her keenness of observation made sparkling discoveries of psychic reality and its phenomena. In retrospect, these discoveries may seem obvious, even banal, like the functions of the skin, or fanciful, like the types of second-skin formation… She was a naturalist, observing and reporting phenomena and enabling others to see, to receive the vibrations, hear the music, and smell the scent of love and hate in its primitive forms.

To some, the saints and the poet's epic journey also "may seem obvious, even banal," but that is only because they are avoiding the underlying meditation on childhood and death – and it's been a long time in poetry since such a meditation was expected. The avant-garde has tended to repress it under an impressive veneer of hijinks and intertextual despair, which is precisely what Nichol reacted to and rejected in *The Martyrology*, though he inhabited all its gestures. Bick's "fanciful … types of second-skin formation" applies to the saints in the beginning, but by the later books of *The Martyrology* it has assumed a deeper resonance: 'bpNichol,' the putative writer and character, has emerged as the second skin of his real-time mortal author, Barrie Phillip Nichol.

To follow this progression of character in *The Martyrology* today requires reading through six published volumes, a hard purchase to make by the unconvinced reader. One of the underlying motives for this current issue of *Open Letter* is to galvanize movement toward a one-volume edition of *The Martyrology*. At under eight hundred pages, there is plenty of precedent. Roberto Bola-

no's bestseller, *2666*, weighs in at over a thousand. Curiously, it's less problematic to interest the reader in a 'story' than in individual 'books.' Even Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (published as a found text by "a Moor") was not conceived by him as one volume or published in that form until long after his death, yet how many want to buy an 'authentic' two-volume edition of *Don Quixote* today?

Yet we have to start somewhere, and for this issue I asked the American contributors unfamiliar with Nichol's epic to engage just one volume of *The Martyrology* for the first time, rather than be intimidated by a bushel full. Upon agreement, Frank Davey of *Open Letter* and I endeavored to get a copy of a single volume to the contributor, with the added help of Alana Wilcox at Coach House Books. So that's how this issue began. Yet it's clear from the results that the **USers** estimation of the poem suffers from being unaware of its other books. And as you can see from the opening paragraph of my initial letter to these contributors, I wasn't averse to provoking survivor's guilt:

> It's my surmise that the major 'unfinished epic' of the twentieth century in English is unknown among American poets, although it has remained in print for thirty years. Among several possible reasons, three are clearest: first, the author was a Canadian, and thus somewhat un-American; second, his public persona marginalized him as a 'concrete' poet and artist, a practice that disguised and protected the intense vulnerability he revealed in the epic; third, the range of historical and psychoanalytical reference that underpins the work can startle, though it is far more transparent and accessible than *The Cantos*. I almost forgot the most obvious: bpNichol died suddenly, in 'mid-career,' at 44.

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Now allow me to come at the crucial significance of *The Martyrology* for the 20th Century by taking it out of the Canadian context (where it beckons like an ideal Statue of Liberty: all immigrants welcome here) and placing it alongside the major movements in thought that paralleled its composition. These, I contend, are superseded by *The Martyrology*: French and continental theory and philosophy; psychoanalytic commentary; continental and

American avant-garde poetry, north and south; modern and ancient epic; and the nature of authorship and created character in Spanish and English-language literature, back to Cervantes and Shakespeare.

Sound heavy? But my interrogation is largely anecdotal and always comes back to Nichol and this issue's contributors, more toward the end especially, because that is when it becomes easier to talk about the once-living Barrie. For the general public until now, he has been largely measured by his diverse body of work, and is only just beginning to come clear as a vulnerable body behind the incandescent character he created, bpNichol, and most particularly the character of 'bp' as the 'writer' of *The Martyrology*. For behind the created auteur of bpNichol, who lives in a continuous but broken-off present, necessitating a constant anxiety about what was left behind with the saints from Cloudtown and what lies ahead when our species has moved on in evolution, lies the Barrie Phillip Nichol whose life and death we are occasionally and disarmingly allowed into the presence of, as he watches over the shoulder of his created writer/character, bp. This Barrie reflects the parenting of the text – and the eventual leavetaking of it, any given day in the middle of a dark wood where the poem ends (as compared to Dante's beginning). It was, literally, a blood-stained hospital table in Toronto rather than the comforting writing table where bp is oftentimes glimpsed. More than any other poet of our time, Nichol leaves behind, in addition to a body of work, a species-conscious body that refuses to transcend its mortality but rather is in constant preparation/rehearsal for it.

So it's only natural that Barrie's former friend and colleague in poetry, Michael Ondaatje, now primarily a novelist, would be drawn foremost to the 'character' of 'bpNichol.' Characters are Ondaatje's gift, and in a deadpan humorous piece he contributed to the "Festschrift for bpNichol" issue of *Open Letter* in 1986, while Barrie was still alive, Ondaatje refers to a short documentary he made years before of bpNichol in character as "Captain Poetry," and as well to a more up-to-date film, "Forked Tongue" by one Sleppo, who "is able to choreograph all the personalities who embraced Nichol or fled from him." The piece continues amiably, "Nichol as we know is one of the most versatile artists of our gen-

eration. He slides through his times laughing, singing, and writing." But although Ondaatje does not plumb very deep into bpNichol as a created character, he represents its public persona at stage center, with the author lost somewhere offstage. So offstage, in fact, that "fans of his popular songs such as … 'Old Dutch Cleanser Blues' never even know of his literary ambitions."

Ondaatje's riff may well be more uncanny than he knew at the time, as even today 'bpNichol' is hyped on the back cover of *The Alphabet Game: A bpNichol Reader*, daringly edited by Darren Wershler-Henry and Lori Emerson (Coach House, 2007) as "one of Canada's most eclectic, entertaining and enigmatic poets." Substitute "characters" for "poets" in that sentence and you get the idea. Do we really care to know that Shakespeare was "eclectic, entertaining and enigmatic" in his day? – though he undoubtedly was for many of his contemporaries, and "versatile" in addition. The author Shakespeare remains enigmatic to this day, but it is less himself and more the characters he created, such as Hamlet and Rosalind, who continue to disarm us.

Barrie Phillip Nichol is a different yet parallel case. He has created probably the major literary character of our time, akin to the depth and broader in width than Hamlet, and that character is 'bpNichol' the author of the epic poem *The Martyrology*. Within that lifelong epic, 'bp' is consistently a writer who sallies forth into all the corners of Canada, pursuing his and his family's history, the history and pre-history of Western Civilization, and the history of his childhood and impending death. He is accompanied by the saints of our species' pre-existence, who in bp's adulthood turn into first, interlocutors, and second, representatives of the origin and organism of human language. In several instances, bp refers to himself as acting the clown or fool, and at each juncture I thought of this writer-character bp as a Don Quixote figure. 'Don bp' upholds the saintly/knightly tradition of authorship as he tilts against all the windmills of poetic convention.

But then I realized that it is not the Don himself that bp re-embodies for us in Cervantes' great epic; in fact, far from it. Rather, the writer/character of bp in *The Martyrology* most closely resembles Sancho Panza – Sancho, who is the actual writer/commentator and observer of both the Don and the epic work itself. So if

'bp' is Sancho, then who is Don Quixote in *The Martyrology*? The answer is language itself, human language, which becomes an organic character full of comic fits and starts – and tragic falls and misdirection. 'bp' as Sancho is the writer in the present moment, faithfully following the adventures of his master, Don Language, as it leads him from Winnipeg to Sumer (Bks. 3/4), from Toronto's Annex to primitive rock-carvings (Bk. 5), from Plunkett, Saskatchewan to Oedipus, and from Berkeley, California to Jacob in the Bible (Books 7&), whose wrestling with an angel led to a painful, wounded leg.

bp as Sancho, language as the Don—but there still remains, mostly offstage, the author who brings them and the world together. Cervantes as Barrie Phillip Nichol. According to the testimony of Frank Davey, toward the end of Nichol's life, "The extent to which *The Martyrology* had begun to eclipse his other writing and to 'represent' bpNichol troubled him" ("ReMembering Thinking Rewriting *The Martyrology*..." in *West Coast Line*, Fall 1991). Yet this is just another instance of Nichol's intense parenting of his work, which is worked through more creatively within *The Martyrology* itself. There, 'bpNichol' is so immersed in the act of writing and the exploration of who he is and where he came from, that his own birth and death are impossible quandaries, lost among the possible 'i's.' Only the parenting author Nichol, watching over the shoulder of the bp who writes at a table in his room, comprehends the difficulty of separating from his created character – just as most parents and children experience.

It's just as easy to imagine Shakespeare in later life wondering if his plays had obscured his reputation as a poet, or if he should not suppress his early comedies and tragedies so they do not too much represent him, as opposed to the later, more complex genres of *The Tempest* and *Winter's Tale*. Davey in his '91 piece points out further that "his background in psychotherapy and group psychology gave him special interest in theories of dialogically constructed meaning and of linguistically determined subject-positions." So Nichol would have been quite conscious that his 'separation' from bp and his multiple i's was an open-ended and ongoing process. And in an essay by Douglas Barbour, "Some Notes in Progress about a Work in Process," also in the OL Festschrift is-

sue of ’86, Nichol’s “difficult honesty” is compared to those of “all great writers,” specifically William Blake and T.S. Eliot. We may also think of those modern epic writers like Pound and Olson, who in later days began to question the genre and structure of their work. However, unlike in *The Martyrology*, this form of questioning parenthood by Pound and Olson did not significantly enter the poems in themselves.

Even though Nichol was often speaking of recasting *The Martyrology* while he was alive – and as much as one’s personal canon is open while one is living, along with one’s good or bad decisions – once he had passed away the body of his work became a sacred oeuvre, in place of the living body. ‘Sacred,’ that is, inasmuch as we can establish it. For instance, *gIFTS: Books 7&* was published posthumously but with great attention to how Nichol would have wanted it, lovingly edited by Irene Niechoda. Yes, Nichol might have redrafted it were he alive, and we’re free to imagine it so. But there would be a howl if someone now went and remixed Books 1-4, for example, in a manner that Nichol once considered but never attempted. It’s fine for someone to appropriate Nichol into their own work, or even to satirize Nichol’s oeuvre by suggesting a rearrangement, but anyone who intended to change or obfuscate the oeuvre itself as it now stands would be avoided. So in the end, *The Martyrology* has become re-sainted, and all the questions outside the epic that Nichol himself had about what kind of poem it was become footnotes, mostly superfluous.

Such is the literary price of death. Fudging the oeuvre of Hebraic writers of the Bible was so common in later periods BCE (before the final text was canonized) that some rabbis issued a death edict to anyone who reworked a biblical book without appending their own name. That is why these reworkings came to be determined as apocryphal, or at best were accepted into the canon as commentary or ‘midrash’ that carried an authored name, usually a rabbi’s. That didn’t stop others from either inventing or appropriating a rabbi’s name, often a dead one; nor did it stop students or disciples from getting their notes in before a personal canon was fixed. Rabbi Jesus was no exception. I’ve written a book about that, but the point here is that probably the most saintly

work being done to preserve the canon of *The Martyrology* along with the rest of Nichol's oeuvre, is the still incomplete "Beepliography" of jwcurry, which after many years runs into the hundreds or thousands of pages. To many, turning Nichol's almost daily ephemera into a cast-iron oeuvre would seem antithetical (and indeed, I'm not the only one worried that Curry will ever complete it). And that's just the point: death is a serious business, an 'ending' to *The Martyrology* that Barrie Nichol insisted upon like no other writer of our era, while at the same time empowering a bpNichol to struggle against it with boundless wit.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the posthumously published *Books 7&* contains an internal book, "Assumptions," that represents a lyric afterlife within the poem – as if it was written by Horatio upon Hamlet's dying instruction to tell it like it is/was, though bpNichol is quite alive and traveling the world in it. And even within this, the series of lyrics *bp:if*, written during Nichol's last days, continue to interrogate his life as if it were sacred. The life of Barrie Nichol, that is; bpNichol within *The Martyrology*, on the other hand, makes all kinds of incisions, loppings off, and rewritings of earlier books within later books – though even the earlier books were wounded in innovative ways by bp's anxieties about where to begin and how to proceed.

I would now like to suggest that we who were contemporaries and turned out to survive the writing of *The Martyrology* are guilty of a failure of historical awareness, failing to notice how our own ongoing oeuvres are imperiled by disbelief in survivor trauma. We've all been traumatized by *The Martyrology*'s ending, pricked by the knowledge that our own names are created characters chasing after forgotten saints of childhood, adolescence, and post-adolescence. But thanks to *The Martyrology*, we don't need to ask who these saints signify for writers. They are represented as survivors of cultural ruin – of the inevitable ruin of all cultures created by Homo sapiens. In other words, the species version of death, namely extinction. It was the condition Nichol plumbed in *The Martyrology*, represented by the survivors of a wondrous but extinct Cloudtown. Nevertheless, traces of them remain within language, and though their popping up appears to be sometimes

humorous and sometimes incidental, it is a deadly serious vision of history – our history – personal, cultural, and species-wide.

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Upon reading the contents of this issue in manuscript, one colleague wrote, "Overall, the non-Canadians disappointed me by concluding their essays just at the point when I thought they were going to make some amazing comments." I think this accurately portrays a kind of survivor trauma syndrome. One resists going too far into the realm of the yet-unburied dead, perhaps for fear that one might encounter oneself there. But it's a beginning, to say the least, of entering *The Martyrology* as a major poem of our era – quite opposite to how the poem was generally perceived in Nichol's lifetime. Back in the seventies and eighties, it was read as a timeless ahistorical work; and even at the end, Nichol was playing with this in the ethereal sub-book of *Books 6*, "The Grace of the Moment." But in fact *The Martyrology* pivots on the quest for history, asking for more and more history – pre-history especially – as if it meant more life. All protestations apart, it is time to read it as a finished epic: a unique journey with our hero bpNichol into history and origins, in a largely history-averse century. No other recent literary work parallels its psychoanalytic focus on origins.

On the way, we find ourselves in a dark wood, and with our postmodern Dantean guide, hell is language itself, steeped in our unconscious. bp and his lowercase i, in morally serious character, searches for traces of the lost saints, in memory and in language. Immersed there, he tries to orient himself in history, Western and personal (the 'i' in family). His progress follows a method of processual or serial writing, a disciplined free association that is as much rooted in Pound and Olson as in the broader methods of collage. And then, as bp is writing at his table, immersed in articulated memory or history, moving in it, he is stopped in his tracks, his thinking broken apart. It is Barrie, the living author outside the work, who breaks up bp's single-minded progress with puns. A pun derails thinking – it's the representative of the outside world of time breaking in. Yet in contrast, the writer/character bp strug-

gles onward in his timelessness, almost mastering the puns in moving past them.

The journey takes different forms in different books. In the sub-book of *Books 6*, "The Book of Hours," as bp contemplates death and hell in Hour 5, the puns that stop him grow stronger of necessity, uncanny: "Loose a fir/ gain a pine." Whether that pun is Dantesque or Nicholesque, the moral character of bp, our single-minded guide, never allows the pun to become a Satanic trap. It is the measure of the author outside, Barrie, that he draws bp onward to right himself in history; it's history that actualizes the journey and humanizes time. In it's most blatant manifestation, the epigraph to *Books 7&* reads: "for Ellie/ outside these books/ that life." Here bp speaks directly for Barrie Phillip Nichol, who remains outside the poem in "that" life. In his essay in this issue, Frank Davey recalls the out of character Barrie as is rarely done, and so too has the painter and collaborator with bpNichol, Barbara Caruso (wife of poet Nelson Ball) in her two volumes of *A Painter's Journey, 1966-73 and 1974-1979* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 2008).

> Bp came by yesterday, bringing the money from his sales at his opening and since. This is a real boost for Seripress, although I believe it's the last that we'll see for a while. We proposed having dinner out together with bp and Ellie in January – dinner on us. Bp set the date for January 8th; he'll consult with Ellie and confirm. We'll go to Vivaxis Restaurant at Therafields, bp said he will be managing the restaurant in the new year.

Such is the journey of the parental Barrie Phillip, moving from plans to sell his work to plans for managing a restaurant. But in the hands of singular journal stylist Caruso, this bp is as rarely mundane as the bp of *The Martyrology*. Both Caruso and Nichol are precise about who will pay and who will get paid, and precisely when and where. Their time is too valuable to leave unplanned (though the outside often breaks in there too) – in contrast to the timelessness they parent in their work. Unlike the journals of Susan Sontag, also published in '08, Caruso is nearly unquotable because her ideas and characterizations coalesce over many months and years – and pages. In the same way, the character of bp in *The Martyrology* develops in time and place, from book to

book. Consider the contrast in this review of Sontag's journals by Jonathan Liu last year in the New York Observer. The parental Sontag not only fails to appear in her posthumous journal but may also be missing in her life's work.

> As violently lucid as individual entries are, the path from here to there – the gradual maturation and piecemeal refinement of a single idea – goes untraced. These journals do not reveal the extended, strenuous working-through of problems.

Still, Sontag was her own sort of character, just not an 'epic' one. What strikes me is that the performative drive of her persona (she can't just think, she has to be someplace exotic for it, even a cancer ward) resembles bp's relish for performance. Yet due to the great epic of *The Martyrology*, we can never read or think of bpNichol anymore without a sense of Barrie Phillip Nichol (1944-88) hovering behind his shoulder. That is why bp in the poem is free to poignantly probe his own birth and death. He can't really believe in it or the solidity of his books because he's a timeless writer/character (and lost in time, as he also points out) – from one unfolding line of his poem to the next. There's always another line to the poem, another breath, until Barrie breaks in with the contrary puns, threatening the larger reality in which the breath stops, the body dies. So as bp in *The Martyrology* follows a kind of narrative or lyrical line of thought, always thinking, he is challenged by the limits of language, namely the puns. These bountiful puns, then, are the obstacles of language itself as his thinking overcomes them, a prodigiousness of punning *overcome* that can only be sensed as Shakespearean.

As Davey points out in his essay included here, "Thanked by Barrie," even the anxiety of beginning – let alone ending – is always a theme in *The Martyrology*: it's the anxiety that Barrie puts there for bp to overcome. Left to himself, bp is prone to melodrama and despair, or even sentimentality, as are we all. And after all, how can the timeless bp within the poem ever begin – he is timeless. Meanwhile, bpNichol the writer, performing in character outside of the poem, could not abide the preciousness of so-called timeless art! So once again, it's the parental Barrie at the margin, leaning in with a further pun, forcing his bp to overcome his

grandiosity. Because Barrie Nichol knows that 'bp' will survive him. Or, in a more classic form of discourse, his 'soul' will survive.

The soul of the character bp within the epic is represented by a desire to embrace the past, to hold on to history, 'as if' the history of art and its struggle for timeless writing was all that is 'real.' The soul can be lost, it can 'die' metaphorically – but what is most real in *The Martyrology*, to state it once more, is the ever-present shadow of the offstage author's body. For what is the worth of what a poem knows – next to the loss of one's own flesh? In his performative sound and visual art, it was easy for Nichol to act out poem and body as one; yet in *The Martyrology*, all the poignancy of being a created being, born into and dying in time, is fraught with a perilous journey through the hell of unknowing and the heaven of surviving.

Nichol's death in 1988 made survivors of us, and of more than one generation. The poet Margaret Christakos (*What Stirs*, Coach House, 2008) describes what it meant to her in the recent issue of *Open Letter*, "Beyond Stasis: Poetics and Feminism Today":

> My expectation that this scene would be welcoming was entirely due to the example set by bpNichol when as a fine arts student I met and worked with him at York University in 1981. He set a two-way throughway between the academy and 'downtown'… His work delighted and mentored my aesthetic and my citizenship. He was a whole artist, committed to creating a publicly relevant role for the Poet… My first book came out in 1989, and… Perhaps the lack of reception was an immediate symptom of the great gap that occurred in the poetry world when bpNichol died suddenly in 1988.

This "great gap" is still felt in the present as abiding loss by its poet-orphans. In significant ways it resembles the orphans of the New York School following Frank O'Hara's sudden death in 1966. Ever since, that trauma of O'Hara's loss has turned his colleagues and progeny away from death (and also childhood, love comic and tragic, despair, authorship, and community). Not only has there been nothing since like the heart-stopping "The Day Lady Died," but the parental loss continues as it often does for a child losing a beloved parent: more than forty years later, I still

find it hard to open the City Lights edition of *Lunch Poems* or to listen to his recorded voice. Maybe it'll be easier when/if I get to be an octogenarian.

Meanwhile, where are the survivor testimonies? They are still awaiting old age (or the 'second generation's' old age) just as proved true for the survivors of the Holocaust. The latter could not speak for decades, nor was anyone ready to listen; most only began to open up in their seventies and eighties.

Unlike O'Hara, whom I had never seen alive, I wasn't able to acknowledge the trauma of losing Barrie until the mid-nineties when Michael Ondaatje passed through Miami and told me of the posthumous books of *The Martyrology*. I had last seen Barrie when I left Toronto in late '71; I had not kept in touch with his work. Like Barrie himself in '71, I still thought Books 1 and 2 were the end of it. I thought I had gone off in another direction in that decade, leading me to the post-despondent voice of Ecclesiastes crashing on my head as I translated it. So much of the Bible I engaged was written in or against despair, yet I barely asked myself why I was drawn there. I thought it might seem 'heavy' to Barrie, even though the first books of *The Martyrology* were just as much on the edge of despair. I had read them cursorily, however, and the shock of re-encountering them along with the rest of the books that followed (thanks to Victor Coleman gathering them all up and hijacking the Coach House postal meter for me) became a shock of recognition: I had lost Barrie not only in 1988 but all the way back to 1971, and I had been living with the trauma unknowingly.

This was not a 'personal' loss, nor the loss of Barrie as a friend, since I only knew him briefly. No, it was actually the loss of 'bpNichol,' that great poet-character inscribed in *The Martyrology* who journeys onward with his motley Canadian crew, Moses-like, wondering where his poem was going to end. Unlike O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* or my real father's shoebox of letters to me, I can't stop reading *The Martyrology*, because Moses, like 'bp,' was not only large enough to embody past and future, birth and death, he was in the midst of articulating the journey as if it was already in memory. In my own recent book, *A Literary Bible*, I describe a lifelong search for the 'lost writer' as if this

ancient poet – these poets – could only conceive of the Poet as creating his own audience from scratch. And as Christakos has just said of Nichol, he was "committed to creating a publicly relevant role for the Poet." Well, Moses-like, who had to die for the Torah to end, Nichol was bound to fail, bound to die in the midst of the desert, yet that "creating a role" for the writer is found – was finished – in the wandering writer-hero of *The Martyrology*.

But lest you think I wander abstractly, my forever solid point is that we must have a one-volume edition of *The Martyrology*, so that not only foreign-born generations can read it but also a thousand psychoanalysts who rarely read poetry.

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One day online I somehow got sent to the *New York Review of Books* website, a site I normally avoid. There I was faced with the current table of contents, a veritable tail-gating party of intellectual preening. I don't say this to sound superior; it makes me sad, since there was a time back in grad school when I thought this publication could be the cat's meow. Anyway, this article on Keats I was sent to was so dreary that I pressed on the podcast link, thinking I might stand it by listening as I checked last night's box-scores.

But going to the link I was presented with the whole grimy archive of the Review's recordings of intellectuals-on-parade and one jumped out: a discussion of Frank O'Hara, who was certainly antithetical to the venue. So I pressed on that, and it took hardly two minutes to search for the pause button. What tripe! Frank O'Hara's poems were elucidated as if written by Rudyard Kipling in his over-enthusiastic youth – and thus made worthy of the canon. Yes, the author 'got' the humor: "Lana Turner Has Collapsed!" read the headline. It wouldn't occur to him, however, that it was not an ironic putdown of the popular media (in which the Review's metrosexuals specialize) but actually as dead serious a notice of time passing as the headline "War in Europe Ends!" For O'Hara's poetry, like bpNichol's, depicts the war between the present mind and memory/history.

And this war – or depiction of it – is continued up to the moment in the poems of John Ashbery, who was the only other name on this endless archive to stand out (a list I was depressingly scrolling down like the boxscore of a Florida Marlins blowout). For some reason having to do with a benign kink in the brain [this just in: as keynoter of NBCC anniversary in 9/09, Ashbery reveals editor Barbara Epstein is bosom buddy from Harvard days] of the Review's editor, John Ashbery has published over forty of his poems there (next on the list is probably Robert Mezey at twelve). Last month, Ashbery was invited to select and read sixteen of these poems, so intones editor Epstein after I pressed on the link, and Ashbery was also kind enough to offer some helpful comments and explanations (which one rarely expects from him).

But only after the sixth hilariously dark poem he read in succession did Ashbery say anything. He told us that "Pavanne for Princess Twelvetrees" referenced Ravel's "Pavanne for a Dead Princess" and that Twelvetrees was the name of an early sound actress long forgotten, a suicide. The movie in question, quite crucial to the poem, was a 1930 Tay Garnett film that nobody has seen since the fifties when the Paris Cinemateque where Ashbery saw it managed to lose its rare copy. The point, of course, is that we really don't need to know this, interesting as it may be, just as we don't need to know the backstory of the saints in *The Martyrology* or the provenance of many another biographical or historical detail that may seem 'obscure' there. What we need to know is that in the war of the present mind against memory (to where any live event or thought has been consigned one millisecond after it 'happens') it is the only hope of memory to *disarm* the mind – and with any weapon at its disposal, from Lana Turner to Emma Peel, who appears several times in *The Martyrology, Books 1 and 2*. Needless to say, for Ashbery or Nichol, movies, comics, and the visual and aural arts can be more effective than highbrow markers of 'thought' because their place in memory is less guarded by grandiosity (or else – when it comes to great art for Ashbery or ancient Mesopotamian or Chinese art for Nichol – fatuously guarded, or poorly defended).

Disarming is key. The fact is, Ashbery's poems consign the anal retentive grandiosity of the rest of the *New York Review of*

Books to the wastebasket. But they do not win the war; the facts of life march on, even in Ashbery's life. In response to a quasi-historical piece I had written about a long-ago trip with him and others to Vermont, Ashbery wrote me with a list of corrections "according to my journal," down to a soup that was served. So it remains that both sides of the war – present mind and memory – need to be guarded. And it is my estimation that both sides are represented to extraordinary degree in *The Martyrology*. The Ashbery who wrote to me personally, parentally clarifying the record, is represented by Nichol in his writer's room, inscribing the character of 'bpNichol' and setting the record straight about what went down in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Plunkett, Halifax, Berkeley, Torino, and Toronto. And yet these 'places' are also battlegrounds, sites of disarming the endless frames-per-second of the present mind – inasmuch as we are made aware of Nichol reading/writing the martyrs of himself, the various bp's and i's, saints who fell to earth and into language.

It is the reading/writing – the writing as reading – that disarms grandiose thought and yet parentally reminds us that a martyrology of "lived moments lost" can be written for every life. Once again, *The Martyrology* does this by reflecting the finite body of Barrie Nichol outside the poem, a man who is dying but whose mind cannot in itself conceive it. The character of bpNichol and the epic poem has had to become so identified with this bodied Nichol that when he dies, Barrie becomes the "bright blade of history cutting into itself," as Davey reminds us in his "Thanked by Barrie." The death remains a shock to us all, but signifying the lifeblood of the poem in this case, not death.

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One day in New York in the mid-1990s, not long after the death of Felix Guattari, I was invited to interview Jacques Derrida at Cooper Union, along with David Shapiro and the Israeli writer Michal Govrin, who were collaborating on a book with him. I asked Derrida why he had not felt a need to explore evolutionary theory and he disarmed me by answering that he was ignorant, even ashamed. But why so humbly grand a statement? At the time I as-

sumed it was bound up with a kind of Woody Allen-esque attachment to urban life, so I invited him to visit the Everglades wilderness with me, near where I had moved in '93. This was not a throwaway gesture on my part; I'd had the experience of guiding Jacques around Jerusalem one day in the 1980s, during his first visit there. It is only recently, however, that I have read Guattari's late work of 1989, *The Three Ecologies*, and learned among other things that he had run in 1992 as a political candidate in Paris, positioning himself between the Green Party and the Ecology Party. No doubt Derrida was charmed and intimidated by Guattari's plunge into the latest thing, and possibly he assumed that my question also came from this fashionable new wave of ecological thinking. A few years later, Derrida began his book on the lives of animals.

But my question was not rooted in acquaintance with the latest philosophy; my wife and I were studying the Everglades ecosystem with young biologists in Miami who probably never read Derrida or even heard of Guattari. When I read Guattari on ecology now I recognize a particular odor of the humorless philosophe in need of a dose of *Candide*. Yes, there are plenty of feints at humor and knowing irony, but not the palpable thing itself. Even in 1989, Guattari is still building his case around a notion of "otherness (*l'alterite*)" that has not caught up with the scientific probe into species consciousness. And then, just last week, we were watching a dvd ordered from Netflix of Bresson's *Au Husard Balthazzar* that also contained a one-hour French TV show devoted to that film, supposedly about a donkey's consciousness, and made up of live interviews with Louis Malle, Godard, Marguerite Duras, and especially Robert Bresson himself. It was already the 21rst Century and I now found the solemn, even grim homages to the religion of *cinema* offensive, especially when the donkey was used more for its symbolic value – what bpNichol would call 'heavy' – rather than a natural probe. It reminded me of how unavoidably ignorant all of them were of bpNichol and the divine, species-conscious comedy of his epic poem, *The Martyrology*.

Of course, how could they help it? There was no one to translate it into French for them (even the thought of it becomes heavy)

and besides, it was too late for these already doddering artist-intellectuals to learn just how tangible, how palpable was the faculty of humor that underlay the exhilarating 'thinking' in verse (as in the terser concrete or sound riffs that paralleled it) of *The Martyrology*. They could allude to the donkey-star Balthazzar as a Chaplin figure, yes, but of its thinking life, whatever it was, they were uninterested. And at this point, they themselves became Chaplinesque: the profundity of their deeply nuanced rhetoric began to take on a hee-haw lilt.

You should not think I'm being hard on the aforementioned celebrities of our higher media culture; they're famous and they can take it. Even bp read and critiqued them intensely. The spirit of my dismissal of them here, in this context of an issue devoted to *The Martyrology*, is in fact buttressed by one of the contributors, David Shapiro, who starts off his piece with the startling first impression that bp was a humorist. It's not the kind of thing I'd come across in the critical literature. To be sure, the comic side to Nichol's concrete and sound oeuvres has been somewhat elucidated, and the performist stance that connects all of his projects required a bass beat of levity to survive. Further, the centrality of punning to his processual formalities has been often pointed out – as recently as in Steve McCaffery's essay in the "bp plus 21" issue of *Open Letter* earlier this year. Yet bp's punning in *The Martyrology* is more tragicomic than humorist, more Shakespeare than Wilde, and it is precisely the tragicomic nature of Nichol's epic poem that pulled me into its depths. And it's part of what impelled me to edit this current seminar of poet-critics in *Open Letter*, many of them reading Nichol for the first time.

David Shapiro goes much further in his essay toward comparing the humor of Nichol's *The Martyrology* to Apollinaire, Proust and Borges, and to describing a level of darkness there as Kafkaesque. There are wonderful hints of this as well in the essays of Chris Tysh, Tony Tost and Victor Coleman. I believe it's in the nature of bpNichol portraying an 'heroic' figure or 'good guy – both in the physical circumstances of his life and the struggle with the cultural margins he was limited to – that some critics come close to noticing the abyss he danced around (even in the best of good humor). For Nichol's cultural milieu rooted in the sixties

was one in which ambition was critiqued rather than inhaled– unlike in France, where Deleuze and Guattari, Lacan and Levinas, were at the heights of post-Marxist and post-Frankfurt School intoxication. Instead of back to Heidegger, we were going 'back to the land,' which Nichol embodied literally at Therafields, a farm outpost for lay psychoanalytic exploration of a therapeutic rather than intellectual nature.

It's not easy for me to imagine the European philosophes sharing a joint, let alone group therapy, because their ambition was to achieve an intensity of focus that approached superhuman critical lucidity, if not madness. They were going forward to the ivy-covered academic halls (take the current University of Pennsylvania avant-garde program for example, on our side of the Atlantic) and not back to the muck of spring rains on the land. But our North American sixties was so saturated with deconstructing ambition that 'power' itself was to be shunned. The power of Jimi Hendrix's guitar had to be shattered on stage, and the intellectual power of John and Yoko was confined to a public bed in New York. The best of our 'acting out' was done in the service of art – and in fact, it mostly was an acting out, rather than a concerted thinking.

So how could you be anything but anti-heroic when you critiqued ambition, whether it was Ginsberg or Burroughs, or James Schuyler melting into the countryside of Vermont and the New York painters' Long Island, or George Bowering barreling the Trans Canada Highway through the Rockies, Williams's variable foot to the pedal? I don't believe there has ever been a clear answer to this, which is why no poets have claimed greatness since Sylvia Plath proved decisively that it wasn't worth it. If such ambition can be applied to Ashbery today, it's only in a shadow-way, for his mark has been to critique and sublimely sabotage every avenue to grandiosity he can smoke out. The same might be said for such aging residents of Canada as George Stanley, the late Robin Blaser and, most iconically, George Bowering, Victor Coleman and David W. McFadden – but I am listing, and better stop before I sink. I can think of many more, and may my worthy friends, male and female, forgive me. So again: What is the answer to treading a different path to the anti-heroic, one that would lead to an epic hero lost inside his finished' poem?

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In many ways, one might think *The Martyrology* had absorbed Georges Bataille's *Theory of Religion* (1973 Gallimard; 1989 MIT). But even if bp could have read the French edition fluently, he possessed a practicing psychoanalytic awareness foreign to most French philosophy, especially social philosophy. The violence that Bataille claims is the source of intimacy he goes on to wield as a club, in place of the subtler weapons of verbal nuance that characterize Freud's drama of intimacy. There, in the family drama, the eroticized object does not need to be literally devoured, or the father killed, once the oedipal conflict is sublimated. And thus, no violent substitute for animal sacrifice is necessary (such as war), which is the basis of Bataille's idea of religious socialization. (Of course, the prevalence of war underlies modern society for Freud as well, but he attributes it to the more personal discontents of civilization.)

I would say, then, that it was bp's education as a Freudian-based lay analyst that protected him from the Marxist theorists who deconstruct the individual as well as the poem into its pre-civilized lingual components. Clearly, bp barked back at the Marxists in his sound poetry, but in *The Martyrology* in particular, he proved the epic poem of history was the most worthy sacrifice – which he reduced to the Dantesque, from social history to the personal history of a single author. Like the animal offered up, the investigation of the personal serves only a psychological agenda, not a social program. But all the complexities of such thought are worked through in *The Martyrology*, where the author bp and his many permutations of 'i' represent the sacrifice itself. That is why loss is the dominant theme – loss of life, of history, of literature itself – which the poem imagines from the beginning, in "The Chronicle of Knarn," when "the sun is dying" and "the language I write is no longer spoken."

bpNichol can be sacrificed in the making of his epic poem and his life for one good reason only: unlike all preceding modern 'failed epics,' the physical author exists outside the text, as we have seen reflected in the poem; and even if it's an unnamed Barrie Phillip Nichol, it is nevertheless a presiding presence in the

poem. The character of 'bp,' the putative author within the poem, meets every kind of sacrifice in losing his name, his childhood, his family, his friends, and almost his sanity. It begins with his childhood fantasy 'friends,' the saints from Cloudtown, and it ends with the poet on the final operating table, writing "bp:if," as it signifies the death of the author. The writer/character of 'bp,' however, who has seemed to sacrifice so much in order to continue his lifelong poem, lives on as the author within the poem for as long as anyone shall read it – and this too is a subject that bp often ponders, asking if there is any meaningful difference in time between now and the end of the solar system.

It's a species conscious question, and yet it's also a question that the bp writer/character cannot answer within his 'timeless' poem. In effect, then, 'bp' has dramatized the sacrifice, the death, of the physical author Nichol (1944-1988) by a continual awareness, an anticipation, and an anxiety about it that suffuses the poem. For bpNichol, timeless in his poem as it lunges sublimely after the present moment and constantly falls back into history, cannot conceive of dying; instead, he conceives of the seemingly fictive end of the species, "a star going nova," or the lost epics of prehistorical cultures.

So what is the cause, the necessity, of that 'sacrifice?' It lies in the service of more than art and literature; more than religion and social engineering. It's the cause that Freud deemed the "creative principle," as it leads to becoming an interpreter of history, whether of the individual's history or the civilization's. The Nichol outside the poem is the interpreter of my generation's presence on Earth, while the character of bp within the poem is as great a human character in English literature as any in Shakespeare, in my estimation.

Freud, like Plato, envisioned such a potential character – a visionary interpreter – as a scientist or philosopher, not a poet. I would tend to agree, inasmuch as bpNichol within the poem also is tied to the reflected physical author, Barrie Nichol, who is the closest instance we have of a scientist-poet. His gaze over the lifelong epic poem is deeply analytic, and yet we're never chilled by this fact (in comparison to *The Cantos*, for instance) because he has given us a character in bpNichol who reflects everything hu-

man about himself except his own physical death. That loss is so stunning – as it 'finishes' *The Martyrology* – that we still have not absorbed it. I have read no subsequent poem that removes the status of orphan we the survivors endure – it can't be done, until *The Martyrology* is well enough read.

Yes, bp in the poem may seem to anticipate his death, in the manner that any 'I' in a contemporary poem is expected to, yet it remains a meta-death – only rescued in time by the gaze and ear of the presiding presence of Barrie Nichol, alone in his room (or his occasional train roomette) with his writing self, moving through time and space toward the even smaller room of his coffin, and who is reflected back to us thanks to his bodily death.

One thing more about Bataille's thesis of the animal sacrifice in religion. Dead in 1962, Bataille was unable to absorb the push into species consciousness, post Levi-Strauss, that came with the Darwinian revival in ecosystem theory. But it is there in *The Martyrology*, represented by meaning as self-awareness of the author behind the writer in the poem. The catastrophe of Cloudtown that the writer bp refers to, is constantly brought back: even the visit to Plunkett, Saskatchewan in *Books 6* is a type of lost cloud town. Like Cloudtown, Plunkett is a place of origin that is almost Gnostic in its "catastrophe of creation." Still, *The Martyrology* goes beyond Gnosticism into species consciousness, situating the loss of the human niche in our original ecosystem as catastrophic if ignored – yet redemptive if its location is pursued in an epic journey, fueled by a love of origins.

Nichol locates species consciousness first in the Gilgamesh epic he echoes, in the king's journey to find his lost ur-human love, Enkidu – to the bottom of the ocean, where the original plant of eternal life is hidden. But what that ancient plant represents is the Eden in which humans evolved: the perfect niche in the ecosystem that opened to create us. We've carried that lost harmony of our origins with us through all the foreign ecosystems we've colonized, just as the saints of Cloudtown do – except they never quite know it. Yet the fragments of their existence that surface in language remind bp that their origin, like our own, was in a lost natural harmony. Further, in the sharp contrast to the saints as an-

other species, human language itself reinforces species consciousness.

Bataille's sacrificial thinking is not exactly superseded, however; it resonates back to the historical tradition of biblical writing, of poets quoting poets, 'sacrificing' themselves. It's still our cultural origin today. But is bp's 'l or d' such a quotation? Certainly we haven't seen it before, yet to invoke the Lord is to quote the Creator – who is both quoted and mimed throughout *The Martyrology*, in the form of Father, Mother, and most crucially, author. So the pun of "l or d", like so many others in *The Martyrology*, while partly an analytic gaze upon our origins in language, is so much more: it characterizes our 'guide' through the poem, the writer/character 'bpNichol,' as a man engaged in history, including Judeo-Christian, psychoanalytical, existential and linguistic.

In his foundational essay of *Martyrology* criticism, "Exegesis/ Eggs a Jesus," which also appeared in the Festschrift issue of 1986, Frank Davey wrote:

> When the saints "fall" here, from Cloudtown to this world, it is the saints as transformations of self, of a self that is the site of language, that actually fall. The fall of the saints is also the fall of the 'i', the humbling of the 'i', and allows language to encounter "we" and "Lord" and Other.

And within the present issue, Chris Tysh's sense of the author as character is wonderfully evocative, especially as we realize she has not read earlier books of *The Martyrology* and the saints she addresses are of late fragmentary vintage. In their own essays, Lewis Warsh, Tony Tost, Susan Wheeler, and Alice Notley engage the work in ways we can only call 'post-academic.' Each turns a personal encounter with the text into a semi-autobiographical view of 'bpNichol' as a fictive author, although this is rarely a conscious intention. Instead, their depictions of him as one with his poem are almost strangely exaggerated – Notley goes so far as to imagine him as disembodied, lost in consciousness.

Frank Davey, Victor Coleman, George Bowering, and Fred Wah veer closer to the biographical than the autobiographical. They dramatize their memories as memory-as-atrophy – mirroring

bp's own emphasis on the disintegration of human history and our need to reencounter it wherever we can. Of course, the 'disintegration' our essayists most reference is bodily, their own aging as poets of linguistic disorientation, and here Bowering's piece is most striking in contrast to his deeply integrative essay, "bpNichol On The Train." Also included in the OL Festschrift issue of 1986, Bowering evokes in that piece the sub-book of *Books 6*, "Continental Trance," as "the first poem of middle-age, when one becomes father and leaves 'i' behind." Now, looking back the long distance from an age bp was never allowed, Bowering recalls the first books of *The Martyrology* with a fierceness that parallels memory's – and youth's – poignant inability to conceive it's own death, yet fully conscious of the suffering in being lashed to the present moment, fatherless.

Wheeler, Tost and Warsh in their pieces are not yet ready to contextualize their experience of encountering bp's authorship as that of an anti-contextual character, the eternal writer. Their experience of reading doesn't acknowledge the context in which they are being influenced; in other words, as they play with their own role as critic, they refuse the parental role and instead engage bp as if in extended/eternal youth. I find this strangely moving, inasmuch as it validates the unprecedented literary character of bpNichol created by Nichol. Of course, it also strengthens the argument for a one-volume *Martyrology* as soon as possible! For now the progress of a character's full life – the writer/character bpNichol – outweighs the progression of books and styles, rewritings and reconceivings of *The Martyrology*. Our Odysseus, bpNichol, in his constant yearning for home and origin, for originality, returns to us after the death of the author – with all his books intact.

Fred Wah and Victor Coleman struggle too with the wish to keep *The Martyrology* alive. Coleman evokes Robert Duncan's engagement with H.D. as eidolon of what *The Martyrology* requires from us – drawing us to its ongoing life. Nevertheless, the poem of the life of bpNichol remains as alive as the life of Abraham and his journey from the Ur of personal gods to the voice of the Creator speaking to him. The author-of-creation in that biblical epic remains as alive in his text as bpNichol does in *The*

Martyrology; what we have lost is the *father* of the texts, Barrie Nichol, along with each of the ancient biblical writers, male and female, whose names were erased – in the name of a later canon or 'tradition.'

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Robin Blaser died last week, followed by the first eulogies. It's a source of sadness that Robin did not read or write about *The Martyrology* with great sympathy, though surely he conveyed his admiration to Nichol. That would be apparent from bp's "The Moth," dedicated to Blaser, in *Books 7&*, and in the prose of *Meanwhile*, a selection of bp's essays and interviews. But just a year ago, reading the recently collected essays of Blaser (*The Fire*, 2006) I tried to imagine how Robin would have written of bp as a 'companion' – as he did of Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan and others.

In "The Violets: Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead," Blaser puts *The Maximus Poems* beside Williams' *Paterson* and Pound's *Cantos* as "a major poetic world." Although five books of *The Martyrology* had been published when Blaser wrote this in '83, no mention of it appears. Had Blaser not already become a Canadian citizen, I might not have expected him to know of *The Martyrology*. Yet he had met bp in Vancouver and followed his work. What might have been confusing to Blaser, among other close readers, is that *The Martyrology* steps out of its poetic world to continually critique or reject it. But it's the stepping outside that is most unique, for it's only possible because Nichol created a writer in bp who is strong enough to do so.

Although even the transgression of outside signifies loss for bp, continuing the Judeo-Christian tradition, for Blaser it is still the pagan energy and power of Pound/Olson that drives him, though often modified by the renegade Catholic skein of Robert Duncan and his acting-out or fictive authority of the sacred. Duncan speaks truth to power by charming it, rather than – like a Hebrew Prophet – demystifying it with sacred authority. For *The Martyrology* and for us, sacred authority is all about loss, as in its greatest disappearance during the Holocaust, rather than the

counter-Holocaust existential riff where nothing is sacred and charm is all. My sense is that in *The Holy Forest* Blaser plays against a gorgeous but false straw man of not being able to 'go back' to conventional Judeo-Christian humanism. It reminds me how he remained the lifelong survivor of Jack Spicer's *After Lorca*, and how he must keep Spicer's work more literally alive than the uncanny Spicer himself was required to do for the already canonized Lorca.

The Martyrology, on the other hand, proposes a species consciousness that includes the Creator: bp's exploring/creative power is in service to a lost Creator, found in glimpses of one's own death outside the poem. What I would call "Ood" (One's Own Death) is always there in the poem, in service to a higher natural process – one unknown to the modernist/postAvant axis – that is responsible for consciousness: the species creator, maker of the nonhuman saints of Cloudtown and the dog buried in the backyard, namely the natural ecosystem to which Plunkett is in the deep process of returning.

Beside the almost religious wordplay of Blaser, Nichol's puns are earthly, even muddy. Surely Joyce went deeper with his punning, and perhaps Pound too, but the difference is that the puns of the precocious 'bpNichol' become stronger as we become aware of the *necessity* for them. Nichol's necessity does have a spiritual sense, parallel to the nature of the classical Greek epic, and even more suggestive of the Hebraic, or biblical. Nichol's necessity is the eventual death of the author, which he may not forget, and it touches almost every page of *The Martyrology*. Finnegan of the *Wake* may be such a character, but his death has already happened while the living author reacts.

For the author's eventual death to remains starkly present – while bpNichol himself, who appears to be writing the poem *within* it, is free to ignore the ignominy that physical death casts – he, the Nichol outside, strengthens the presence of death and its poetic parallel, the end of the poem, by dramatizing an equal presence of *birth* – of childhood and youth. The other such childhood in modern literature that comes to mind, Joyce in the *Portrait*, is full of reaction to adult pathology, especially the priest's, but in *The Martyrology* we are grounded in its childhood apprehensions of

the saints of Cloudtown, which later grows into a mature apprehension of language as both a confining hell and releasing heaven of Homo sapiens.

When it comes to our own dying as writers, surely it will make little difference if we are buried in the 'avant-garde rebel' section of the cemetery or the 'authoritarian modernist' one – just ask Gertrude Stein on her deathbed ("What is the question?"). Today, once again the U.S. poet I think of comparing to Nichol is John Ashbery: the narrator of Ashbery's poems is broad, complex, and wild. The journey of Ashbery's narrator, however, is never as clear as Nichol's; he might be traveling through life in a powerful dream or in a great meditation. Yet Nichol's 'bp' is on an epic journey from childhood to death that keeps the classical epic (and thereby the history of poetry) always in mind. No poem in English since Wordsworth's "The Prelude" has evoked and critiqued childhood in such depth. And perhaps no poem since the England of Blake's "Milton" has located a geography as dense and poignant as Canada in which to face our natural history and our relative brevity as a species. Whitman's east coast America, Dickinson's New England – perhaps close, and that's why we need to look more closely.

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When I arrived to a run-down apartment on St.Mark's Place from Toronto, in the fall of 1971, the term "New York School" still applied to the great painters, and only extended a bit to the lesser-known poets who wrote about these painters: O'Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler, Guest and Koch. It's still a bit jarring to see the term "2nd Generation NY School" applied to poets who don't write art criticism as a serious aspect of their persona. Back in Toronto, my poet colleagues and I not only wrote art criticism in Canadian journals but applied for and received grants as "artists" ourselves – after our grants in poetry ran out.

Recently, I ran into Naim Kattan, the Jewish-Iraqi-Canadian writer who headed the Canada Council in those days. We were representing the diaspora at the "first international conference of Jewish writers" in Jerusalem in '07 (he, Iraq; me, U.S.) and I re-

minded Naim that he was helpful in getting me Canada Council grants back in the brief counter-cultural heyday for poets and artists. He smiled but really did not remember, even when I name-dropped Coach House Press. And then I tried out bpNichol on him: "Of course," he replied, "the concrete artist."

So it is painful to note that bp's renown at this late date is still red-shifted toward concrete. That was fine for us back in the day, because that's where the 'money' was – and even moreso now, though I doubt much accrues to bp's estate. In Miami where I now live, I came to **visit** the renowned collectors of "international concrete," Ruth and Marvin Sackner, by virtue of my interest in **their** 'bpNichols' – including 'canvases' that are hung handsomely among some really expensive stuff in their exclusive home-museum (with a huge website, Sackner Archives, that includes *Martyrology* spin-offs: http://www.rediscov.com/sacknerarchives.)

Yet that is not what bp had in mind for himself as 'artist.' It really meant a genre-busting term to us then, a sign that we were open to any direction our writing might take; but there was no question that bp was foremost a 'writer' and that he had epic ambition. Drawing and visual poetry came natural to him, but that's what it remained in comparison to the great canvas of his poetry in *The Martyrology*. There his great invention, the character 'bp,' a poet perpetually sitting in front of a blank piece of paper, journeys widely in memory. He is an heroic reflection of the epic's true anti-hero, the author himself, always outside the poem "where living was."

But allow me to return for a moment to the New York Scene I found back in the 1970s, where unlike in Toronto, poets were poets and artists were artists, even though they collaborated. The avant-garde genres were already taking root in academe and the blue chip artists were going to art school – unlike the pioneer generation of De Kooning and Pollack. The younger artists, say Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger, were getting into photography and 'word art,' blocking the path I'd found uniquely open (for a moment) in Canada, and more fully blazed by bpNichol.

Only in 1972, however, did it became generally known that bp was devoted to writing a complex epic or anti-epic poem that was polar opposite **to** the apparent 'ephemera' of his concrete and

sound experiment: epic was as ancient as you could get among the poetry genres. Olson's *Maximus* was extant and bp was probably exposed to it before he arrived in Toronto, still in his teens, but he found Olson short on self-awareness. (A quick scan through Tom Clark's penetrating biography of Olson, written in the '90s, will cement that notion.) Zukofsky was closer to Nichol's heart, but even there, self-conscious experiment in the epic *"A"* could trump self-awareness. In contrast, bp seemed to split off self-conscious experiment into his visual, sound and ephemeral writings, enabling a devotion to self-awareness to flourish uninhibited in his epic poem, *The Martyrology*, as it also overtook a prior ambition to write novels. But I don't mean to impute a split personality to Nichol; instead, I refer to a depth of ambition in him that outstrips all expectation.

The common way of describing this ambition in Canada is to emphasize his facility with every genre known to man, in essence turning him into a showman. bp may have liked to perform, but he was anything but a public prodigy. No, I think the attribution of prodigious variety to his work and persona is misguided. Gallery and performance exposure, such as it was, brought him a modicum of access to income and travel, but it also insulated him from having to expose the vulnerability that was essential to writing *The Martyrology*. In essence, his 'public' art protected the private space in which he explored the nature of authorship, creativity, and society's addiction to cultural product, with a ruthlessness and "difficult honesty" unknown to any poet in the late 20th Century. It's hard to think of any important modern poet who learned enough from Freud, after H.D., to take on his or her origins in childhood exhaustively – we have to go back perhaps to Wordsworth and Blake for that.

The loss that the *The Martyrology* records, the inevitable loss of history, is precisely what the epic poem seeks to restore. From the *Cantos* to *Paterson* and *Maximus*, a fragmented history was attempted in its place, and from "*A"* to *The Holy Forest* (with Lowell's *Life Studies* and *History* along with Ginsberg's *Howl* and *Kaddish* at center stage) a personal history stretched to the limits also failed badly, neatly mocked by Kenneth Koch's *Ko* or Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust*. The epic requires – or is a kind of – the-

ater, and as we move further and further away from the theater (is anyone today reading Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*?) we make do with mock-operas and faux dramatic meta-poems.

Yet what *The Martyrology* has done, besides giving us the first modern character equal to Hamlet – 'bp' and his 'i's' – is to also dramatize a 'new world' geographical landscape that equals civilized history. Strangely enough, after all that American ambition, it is not even in America; rather, it's the landscape of Canada that stands in for the origins of Western Civilization. Instead of ruins, it comes upon buried personal history: the psyche in childhood – the child as the link back to Judeo-Christian tradition.

The history of the journey through that landscape in *The Martyrology* is thus one of saints and the loss of sacred language, as it shadows the Canadian journey of the author's oeuvre. But the real history supporting it, its cosmic theater, is the mortal life of the author and the threat of death to authorship. It could only be done if the author's death was constantly in front of us, as in no other poem: Time itself, marked in the syntax of a sentence or the musical notation of a line, is always front and center as loss.

In the bpNichol archive at Simon Fraser University where I spent some days a few years ago, there are still boxes piled along the wall, containing folders with uncatalogued manuscripts. Above them are shelves of books, letter-files and mags, while scattered about on floor and chairs are small cartons of paraphernalia and tchochkes, the computer disks and cassette tapes, and the now-antique hardware of computer and tape recorders themselves. All of it disembodied from the context of a home office and library, sitting like parts salvaged from junked used cars. And yet the author, Barrie, was present, though not within the assemblage of texts and objects, not in the lines of poetry and prose, the drawings and notations. There, it was bp who still walked and talked – the great character of a writer Barrie created. But the real-life Barrie was a different presence: Barrie was the observer of the entire scene, from the first scratchings in teenage notebooks in Vancouver and Toronto, to the piles of artifacts in this locked storeroom adjacent to Simon Fraser's rare manuscripts collection.

That is to say, the author Barrie Nichol created himself as an observer to the poet bpNichol, and thus we become aware of him

by reflection, as extra-solar planets are discovered by the refractions they cause in visible objects. In most writers, these refractions are too dim to notice, but uniquely in Barrie Nichol, they etch him into our consciousness as uncannily as Kafka.

Still, it's already our postmodern penchant to think of ourselves as the observers of the text – the reader as to some extent co-author. Yet when we're made aware that there is another, larger observer reading over bp's (and our) shoulder, it is startling. We sense him observing with us; in fact, urging us to observe. For it's our nature not so much to observe the living scene before us, but rather to enter it, as 'reader' of it, either as judge or participant. To be the observer seems cold to us, too deathly a stance. It took Barrie Nichol to breathe warmth into that stance, as he measured his own birth and death in every blank page he confronted.

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CODA

In 2006 I spent a weekend in Toronto listening to jwcurry read the entire *The Martyrology* to an audience averaging about twenty, including David W. McFadden, who told me the poem was like a forgotten dream come back. The stage of the primitive, unheated avant-garde theatre held the madcap bespectacled figure of curry, reading as if he embodied 'bp' the writer/character of the poem – and not in any way the author Nichol. It was the best and most obvious confirmation that Nichol had created a more dynamic character than any in current English-language literature. That curry looked and talked like a character out of a Pynchon novel was unimportant, since his deeper, surprisingly accomplished thespian's voice took over the text.

He read in a headlong, driven tone that suggested bp's self-knowledge of being imprisoned in the present and dedicated to outrunning it – albeit knowing the only exit was in its finishing. Clearer and clearer, we begin to see that his writer/character has the insight to know that only death can be the finish. Yet he can't stop writing, the way we can't stop breathing. The poignancy of this was driven home by curry's otherworldly stamina (as if he had physically prepared for this feat for months in advance) and his in-

character stage presence, refusing any congratulation. In fact, it often seemed his bp approached anger in his struggle with the language that would not allow him to stop. In those moments, the language appeared an opposing character with a life of its own, and this was perhaps as close as curry could come to representing the presence of the author. Yet it was a disembodied presence, rather than the comforting shadow of Barrie Nichol that falls over the shoulder of the reader in the poem. It was not especially relaxing to be reminded that we, the audience (an impoverished one at that), were representing the dying author in our physical endurance of a three-day play (Ancient Greece, anyone?).

I've sometimes heard Joyce read that way by actors, from *Ulysses* (Molly Bloom sequence especially) or *Finnegan's Wake*, but there we experience the attempt to represent a character's stream of consciousness, whereas in *The Martyrology*, the character being the writer, the consciousness is the actual writing – the writer's thinking his way forward in an almost unbearably moving, cosmic drama of his birth, youth, parenthood and death. If it were simply a great serial poem, being moved by the performance might be enough, as in *The Cantos* or, in another sense, Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*. But it is an epic that resonates against prehistory as well as literary history, and in the most disarming way, for it's only in the continual reading of it do we become aware of the writer as an imprisoned character. His poem is under threat of decomposition; the struggle with the monster of language is to overcome it, to survive through species consciousness – for that is what the thinking of Homo sapiens represents, survival of culture.

Species consciousness allows the body in process of decomposing – corresponding to every variety of punning and discontinuity – to be disarmed by composition, namely reorganizing the epic journey to the body's origins in natural and human history, in having evolved and in myth. Every little trap of a pun is overcome by a kind of analysand's pushing onward, often in epic good cheer, in the greater drive to narrate the fall from childhood into human time, which both allows and ends all personal history. I didn't make it to the end of jwcurry's dramatic monologue, so I don't know how he presumed to end it. I imagine it was in the spirit of

the sponsors throughout, who were constantly plying the audience with free and freshly made food and drink: pastas, omelets, and 'grog.' It was as if they knew what a tender trap we were caught up in.

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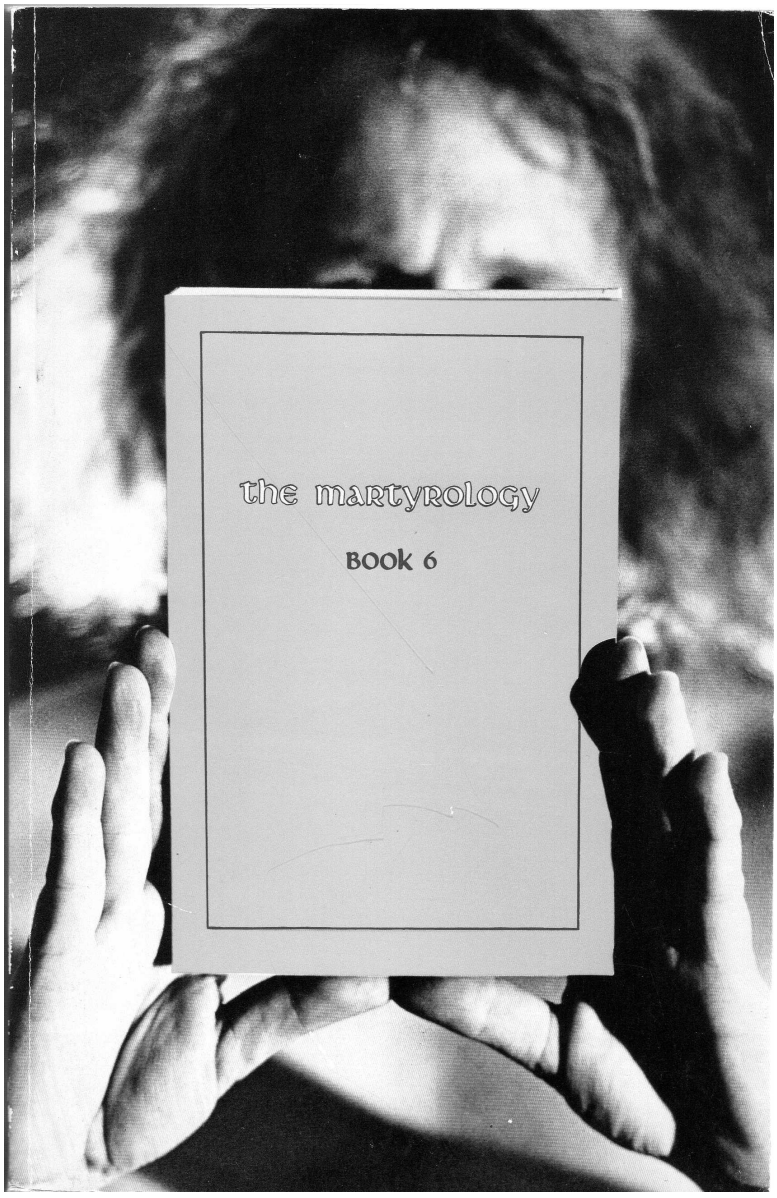
Singular Footnote:

The first six volumes of *The Martyrology* are reproduced in loving facsimile online, at the Coach House website, www.chbooks.com, under "Online Archive." They are completely free to access, though printable at only a page or two at a time. Before I owned all the volumes I didn't find this a problem; I needed to print out only eight or ten pages at a time, as that was the most I could absorb in a single sitting. Uncannily, this online edition helps slow you down to the proper frame of mind in which to absorb bp's epic journey to the end of time.

I had suggested to Alice Notley in Paris, who asked, how she might find *The Martyrology* at the Canadian Cultural Centre but this is a much better solution, albeit temporary, that only requires Alice to visit the nearest library with a public computer, in case one is not wired at home. Still, one is at least compelled to purchase a bound volume, *Gifts: Books 7&*, which can be ordered at the same Coach House website. Until a one-volume edition of *The Martyrology* becomes available, *Books 7&* will be essential, I predict, to the poet in the future, as it's essentially the ending of the first modern or postmodern epic to have an ending (*Book 9* is Coda).


the martyrology
BOOK 6

Getting to "The Grace of the Moment" (Reading *The Martyrology* Book 6 on One's Knees)

David Shapiro

David, it is as if you made me climb the Yellow Mountains and then forgot to tell me that we would also be going down on foot, and across a rope bridge you hadn't mentioned, and finally a gigantic terrace of ruins we would climb up on poor knees.

I have not understood all his humor, but we must know from the beginning that bp is a humorist, which may mean more aggressive than others have read him. But this poet of humor reminds us too that Ad Reinhardt was not only the painter and poet of blackness, a true martyrology in the era just before bp, but Reinhardt was also a master cartoonist. Putting together the darkness tradition and the comic antitode is complex. I would paraphrase Koch on piety and say that both bp and Reinhardt use darkness and humor to attain a flexibility that pietist tones cannot.

We also recall the sixties pleasure in language as body itself. Isn't it the almost exiled Norman O Brown, hardly read today, who said humor and comedy and laughter should remind us of the time when we did not need jokes to be happy? Reinhardt., bp, and Glenn Gould too embody the anti-lyrical lyric.

I wear this language
Dangling from a stick

The damn nouns & verbs
Let's just say I love you…

We carry the red ribbons mark us for death
The blood of being flooding out or
Leeched
        Brief bright ribbon we wrap the present in
        This human grace…

Tongue of consciousness upon the face

Licked awake
Dream world sank t' us
Sunken world we walk thru…

[N.B. key to all punning in The Martyrology: "sank t' us" to be read literally*, "sanctus", not for the joke.]*

Each line a life

Everything resides in…

It is all personal
All person &
Per the son that dies
Still born or
The son you never were but wore…

…Leave it
This pain words wear
Carry within them like a spine
Involves the very line…

Last blessings
Last writes
Death tracks the very line he rites
Writ large
That letter of
The law waltz
Just you

& the language too…

Cendrars has a beautiful poem for Sonia Delaunay. The body – she wears her body on her dress. This is to remember the surrealism of it all, our own l968. The language dangles down, and with a shaman's wand. The ornamentation here is again the humor of the macrocosmic language and the microcosmic stick. Like a Northern Renaissance artist, he needs both perspectives. The mighty language tamed by a stick, the damn is part of an almost macaronic texture. "Oh white-breasted martin, goddamit, since nobody else will carry the lesson to La Cara Amo." Perhaps this is not the time to underline *The Cantos* and the periplum of that spa-

cious journey and *The Martyrology*. But one can't really conceive of either Olson or bp without the human ear of Pound. No matter how much we love the magnificence and the troubadors of Pound, we also cannot forget that he it is who tames Cathay into a convincing translation machine. Without Poundian affection, we do not have the Pisan protests. The bp epic it is fair to say is an analogue, but for me that much sweeter because of its wide lack of a fascism or a home-made theodicy.

Pound is triumphant in his own Hell, like Celine and so much more French fascism, undisturbed, but even a murderer has his human moments, and so it is with Pound's self-pity and self-accusations. Pull down thy vanity is not a fascist cry. Bp's epic is also always on the side of a family love – like Paterson, it is suddenly interrupted by the prose of a biography so real it strikes one like Ginsberg's letters. I once complained to Frank O'Hara that not every word (I was fifteen) in *Paterson* was perhaps in the right Aristotelian order (interesting that I would think of *The Poetics* at the wrong time) and O'Hara looked at me within striking distance and demurred: Who cares? (That saved me many years, as Pound says of Hueffer laughing on the floor.) And like Kafka's sense of the comedy lodged in what seems like a smooth abyss, we see *The Martyrology,* even in its title, as a parody, homage, and flexible Poundian shadow. Every philosopher has his shadow, says Merleau-Ponty, but let us call bp's epic the poetry in shadow. It is secondariness we must approve of or be damned in pride. These are secondary but with the joy of secondariness. Melancholy as Virgil's warrior when he spots, on the walls of Carthage, a fresco-like narrative, and it is a narrative of his own life. This is where the cartoons as boxes may come in, like Sol LeWitt's magical minimalism of nested boxes.

> Let's just say I love you…
>
> We carry the red ribbons mark us for death
> The blood of being flooding out or
> Leeched
> Brief bright ribbon we wrap the present in
> This human grace…

It is hard not to think of the radiant pluralism of this work, of its radical statements of how we must experience the poem itself. Aboutness is dessicated. What remains, as Dewey puts it in his ode to art as love – what remains is the experience. This is what was granted to my generation in the work of the radiant abstractionists. They were not abstract. They were not abstract impressionists with a heritage alone of France. They were not Hudson River painters any more than bp is a Canadian illustrator as even Winslow Homer was, once. The experience of this radical concreteness we might indeed call grace. "Grace to be born and live as variously as possible." Even if we must add: "Grace to be born and die as variously as the impossible." In this poetry and inartful artfulness, bp is not hiding a face, hiding a resemblance. The poem might be said to be filled with obliterated numbers, as in deKooning, or the radical displacement of anything BUT experience. Like the Sanskrit God of whom all we can say is Not this not this or You're it (Neti Neti or Tat twam asi) so we take delight where we can. In deKooning we even see the rooted way in which he returns to a Woman. A woman, however, so strange and full of grace, a woman so horrifying and so out of place, like the women in this poem, always sticking out like language on a stick, always loved and part of the family. DeKooning's women were hated by Greenberg. He had told Fairfield Porter, as one might 'tell' Pound or bp, that the great poem of the century would be abstract. In truth, the truthless glory and grace of our poetry shines in the destruction of these dogmas. *The Martyrology* is in part, I think, an elegy to dogmas (meaning), an ode also against those who have trammeled poetry as a whole gender is eaten up.

> Tongue of consciousness upon the face
> Licked awake
> Dream world sank t' us
> Sunken world we walk thru…

bp is the incandescent thing itself: the snooze or sleep alarm that was invoked by Ginsberg: the poet as an early defense system. The slippage of consciousness from its usual moorings makes this a love poem to attention. The slippage is in the line of the surrealists who found what Paul Schilder called "the internality of the

body." The voice too is a wandering part of the body, and no one more than Meyer Schapiro, friend of abstraction AND representation, art and sociology, a Trotskyite without limits – the wandering face is erotically charged. The sunken way is the way we must go to avoid the Guermantes. Proust has not been written about for his Jewish sense of humor, and I noted recently a so-called savant (an idiot savant), Alter, who tried to alter my own sense of Proust by suggesting that the epic is not Jewish. What, after all, is Judaism if it is not within the epic of Wasted Time? I must agree with Edmund Wilson that Proust is a prophet. If God exists without Proust or Kafka, then I am no longer even faintly a believer.... In our century, the chaos of Proust in social vertigo, and the darkness of Kafka in internal vertigo, and both 'switched [???] and so much coming out of a simple reading of Jewish ethics – this is what disturbs the poets of our 'abstract' surrealism. Ashbery was read as if he mostly deleted. He himself inquired how to make a poem that put everything in – the poem as novel, the poem *Europe,* still undermined by many critics who find it too cubist (to be kind.) Ashbery is now known as an epic poet in *Three Poems,* in *Self-Portrait* (perhaps too classical for many), and for so many more. He is in a way a feminine Milton without any of the sentimentality that Ann Douglass finds in the word 'feminine.' After all, the highest praise of Ted Berrigan is that poetry in general will be found, like a living being, "feminine marvelous and tough." That is, a triumph of human concreteness, strength in grace, and an utter love between the sexual and the metaphorical. Ted Berrigan remembered that even the word literal was, after all, a metaphor.

Throughout the epic retorts of bp I find the same effort to bring together body – the body of magic, the body of the real as magic itself, the marvelous that the surrealists failed sometimes in finding because they were, as Ashbery has noted, so involved with the holiday. The everyday was the marvelous. This was a lesson discovered a generation or two before, when Henri Lefebre wrote a critique that could stand for bp's advantages: If a person wrote out an entire day with all the details we would have the greatest philosophical book. This book, by the way, was written in the last century by the collaboration of bp and Olson, of Olson and Pound, of Pound and the unwasted land, so surreal, and of O'Hara's counsel-

ing sun, and so many more collaborators from many global centers – Lorca displaced in New York with a fever of sexual guilts and advances, the great migration to Israel of a whole generation, and the resuscitation through Scholem of mystic prayer itself, and Benjamin, and Peret, and as Koch says: Pasternak, Jouve, Perse. etc. What I would try to suggest is that all of these poets renounced the dogmas against abstraction AND realism. This bp book seems to stand with this renunciation of taboos and decadence too – distanced.

Actually, what is moving is the amount of pro-meaning restraint that such a poet forces himself to entertain. One finds very little obscenity here. Bp has rapports with the rawest poets, but like Roberto Bolano, he finds it impossible to break for too long from the serious tour he is taking. It is not a tour of snobbish eighteenth-century wanderlust. It has a lot of the lostness of Wenders at his best in Alice of the Cities. Lost in Canada as one is lost in Europe. Lost without ancestors, as Rimbaud announced himself to have no grand predecessors. This lack also misleads one as one is surprised by the architectural elements of bp's sense of grace. The forces of the given lured Johns to the pre-designed Flag. But he cut the flag in sections that are surprising, and he placed the flag thoroughly under his scrutiny with newspaper collage and a depth of encaustic and oil. This might be the closest to a vision of bp in *The Martyrology*.

> Each line a life
> Everything resides in…
>
> It is all personal
> All person &
> Per the son that dies
> Still born or
> The son you never were but wore…

Here too the critics closest to bp have underlined for me the literal sanctus of this poem of grace and of shared grace. Do not forget that the family as one center is then bolstered by the uproarious religion of the community, so close to Goodman's cry for a poem of the occasion. O'Hara took up this personal greeting of every poem. He also wrote from what Morty Feldman spoke of as

the unique perspective of the dead. Hegel says Dante plunged the real into the unreal. It is an ego trip (as I once parried a feckless flawed critique of Dante himself) but this poet invented the ego. Bp also plunges the real into the unreal, the holy coming closer and closer to being defined as the profane. Here purity and danger, Mary Douglas's great structural oppositions, can be seen to create singularities, event horizons as it were. How does one wear the garment of the parent? How does one wear the garment of the offspring? Without an Ishmael, but not without the Hagar of his own poem, it is all personal. It is the experience of birth and, in its natural way, stillbirth, that electrifies these lines. "Each line a life." It is not the commandment to create compulsively, each day a line; it is the sense of the "lines of life," a life which Pasternak took to be so collaborative, so multiple, that death itself could not really be counted upon to finish the human story.

Even Jesus's last words are a quotation, an homage, the impossible possible extension of the Judaic tradition – a martyr who speaks and gives the old texts some magical re-dedication. The last words of Christ, evidently close to the last words of Kafka's hero: "like a dog, he thought." The poet is willing to look at how we die, in lines, in crowds, in inauthenticity. It has been said that everything that lives is holy, but I would add, for the sake of our poet and poetry itself, even the smallest things that are not alive, are holy too. Thus, sacred geology. Thus, sacred situationism. Thus, sacred the drive through the holy martyr's "down with the bloody baby" and into an always personal poetry, even if personist. The poem must be as large as life, Koch said. Make a long poem because it will not be smelling badly — it will be large enough to contain garbage cans.

The long poem! The Keatsian desire to be naturalized in the space of the long poem. Stevens's endless thinking about what is not straight in the Sorbonne. The lyric is not enough. The epic is beyond us, but with the drama so present, the lyric must unite itself to all modes. It becomes, after all, like *The Martyrology,* a novel almost historical, highly reliable though built of dreams. As reliable as the narrators in Benjamin's essays – the lyrics we now know them for. Walter Benjamin the poet might have found his

one-way street opened by the realism and the sinuous strategies of our poet.

> …Leave it
> This pain words wear
> Carry within them like a spine
> Involves the very line…

And we go toward unbearable or seemingly unbearable suffering. And even suffering is likened to the spine, that architecture of the body that entranced Gaudi enough to make a holy family out of the curves of the body. I have been intrigued too by Johns's recent obsession with what seems a very simple curve: the catenary. The catenary is where the string dips to its unsupported deepest. The catenary, as one researches it, is a miracle of modernism. Gaudi's own assistant has presumably a great meditation just on the catenary. When one goes looking for catenaries, even avoiding the great bridges that come close to it, one begins to find it everywhere, as Johns wreaked his changes: a catenary between a mother and a child connected by medical tubes for blood; the catenary of butterflies I tried to create once as an homage; the catenary of colors; the catenary all in white, though what does total white mean? The catenary with its Latin derivation from chains. The catenary seen on so many Buddhist robes. The catenary of the US military: a bridge of sighs and airplanes.

The catenary of *The Martyrology* in which the pain is borne in the very center of the body, as Picasso's weeping women seem to displace all hope. Prayer Without Hope is a phrase that Derrida and I and Michal Govrin batted back and forth in our book. It was to dark for some, it was not dark enough for others. It was like those great primary words Freud loved, where love and hate, black, white and other colors, cleave and cleave, are all together with their opposites embedded: passion and passion. This is a final impossibility of reading. Bp's poetry is large and novelistic, and it concludes often and always, like a great Chaplinesque – the comedy of the child, said Eisenstein – just one of the comedies.

A quest ends Hart Crane's catenary of Charlie Chaplin. A quest is in the understatements (puns) of bp, Johns and Buster Keaton. The object comes to life as shoelaces and is eaten. The object co-

mes to life – a locomotive, and suddenly burns the screen. Bp like Buster Keaton has a comedic tone that seems to take as long as "The General" to be admired. That is how a dark comedy should be. It is a martyr who understands just how rigorously and rigidly an audience behaves. "The General" was revivified by a college audience with passports in their pockets in the 60's. While Godard is losing almost all his audience except for poets in his grandest new simplfications and his shticks – for example, a blind girl becoming his assistant in filing. What is more moving than the Martyrologies of Godard, where the accidents pile up like a nightmare beside us of a catenary of cars. In bp there is also such a turning towards the receptive eye.

Northrop Frye warns us that we think the neglected poet is understood in another time. But, he avers, regarding Blake, it is often true that the poet misunderstood in his or her own time is fated to be misunderstood for all time. This is a severe omen and a condensation of comedy worthy of bp, the cartoon writer. The Chinese speak of arrows of one's enemies being taken in by manikins and used against the enemy itself. There is this self-reflexive charm, of course, in all our most beloved films and their terrible conjurations. It is not just the Hollywood Hell that O'Hara harrowed. It is the martyrology that occurs without support, without echo. Of course, there is now an audience almost in place, there is also a street named after certain poets like this poet's lane in Toronto.

But for his truest audience of poets – one thinks of the editor of this issue and his ongoing homage, one cannot really have this audience anymore than Kafka could find a good job.

Is it Blanchot who says Kafka did not need a better job, he needed Eternity, This book of martyrology is best seen as a fragment of a miniature. Those of us who have been condemned as miniaturists should take heart. In the great fresh epics, every particular counts. Even the letter A or the number 9 (see Johns) takes on fresh emotional particularity with each change, as a lover searches for the beloved's face. This is the work that tried before us to destroy false totalities. The naked face remains and the blood of each line. Forgive me for the melodrama, though such a large journey of small particulars seems to demand a cry.

…donkey tricks

I wear this language
Dangling from a stick

The damn nouns & verbs
Let's just say I love you…

We carry the red ribbons mark us for death
The blood of being flooding out or
Leeched
Brief bright ribbon we wrap the present in
This human grace…

Tongue of consciousness upon the face
Licked awake
Dream world sank t' us
Sunken world we walk thru…

Each line a life
Everything resides in…

It is all personal
All person &
Per the son that dies
Still born or
The son you never were but wore…

…Leave it
This pain words wear
Carry within them like a spine
Involves the very line…

Last blessings
Last writes
Death tracks the very line he rites
Writ large
That letter of
The law waltz
Just you
& the language too…

What a lamentation and summing-up without summary. The puns remain and stain. The death that is blessed, the writing that is the law, is seen as darkly as the Tango in Celan. The tango is the entanglement with radical evil. The tango here, also said to be the

more circular waltz, is the end of time except for the Buberian ending: you ... and the ending too. You and the marvelous view within language extended. You and the popular song and that music.... You Jessica, sit and see the starry orbs and their Pythagorean string theory of you.

The point is not to know where to end, but where to begin, each time. That is the concreteness of John Cage the philosopher, who said something close to: Every day is a good day. And this must be repeated even in “the worst century so far.” Now, in a new century, with a new blessing and unalterable curses, we try to see with the altering eye. We may indeed be misunderstood forever, but we, like Apollinaire, can die and smile as well.

Thanked by Barrie

Frank Davey

There's an author's note at the end of *The Martyrology Book 6 Books*, one that I didn't read until David Rosenberg queried me about it this year. The note begins as the usual acknowledgments page, listing the periodicals in which parts of the book had been published, and goes on to list the sources of various quotations and to thank arts councils for the "occasional" grants that gave the author time for some of the writing. But toward the end there's my name: "Particular thanks too to Frank Davey who has gotten me going again on *The Martyrology* twice now: once in 1974 with a comment on Louis Dudek's work that launched me into *Book 4*; again in 1978 when i had barely begun *A Book of Hours* & an observation he made put the work back on track."

Did he ever tell me about my putting *A Book of Hours* "back on track?" I don't think so, although I must have made the "observation" very early in its writing – "Hour 1" is internally dated "February 11th 1979." Evidently I saw and commented on a late 1978 preliminary draft of the "Hour 1" that Barrie later replaced with or re-worked into the February 1979 one.

I remember a little more about Barrie's beginning of Book 4, which he first published as *A Draft of Book IV of The Martyrology* in 1976 in Edmonton as a pamphlet to help an audience follow the text while he read. He signed a gift copy of this pamphlet –

> for Frank & Linda
> the beginning grows out
> of a conversation back
> in time re Dudek
>
> so
>
> this is, needless to say,
> with love & thanx
>
> bp

But again I don't believe that Barrie ever told me specifically how our conversation had affected or helped grow his writing – only that it had. What I remember most is that he had thought *The Martyrology* had ended after Book 3, much as he had thought it had ended after Book 2, and would later think that it might finish after Book 5. And I remember hearing after one or more of these re-starts that Steve McCaffery had muttered "a phoenix too frequent" – and wondering, at least half seriously, whether Steve was unhappy with me for having had a part in Barrie's heading off in directions he thought unwise.[1] Did I care whether Barrie continued *The Martyrology?* He was writing a lot of interesting things, and while the concept of a continuing poem was seductive because of its implications of succession and scale, and its echoing of modernist long poem aspirations, I saw works such as *Still Water* and *Two Novels* and *ABC: The Aleph Beth Book* as at least as engaging.

There were two main things about *The Martyrology* that were troubling Barrie in 1974. One was that there were many passages in Books 1 and 2 that he no longer liked or identified with.[2] Should he leave them behind and go on to a new work? Or could he write further *Martyrology* books that qualified or critiqued them? The second was that he was having difficulty distinguishing what parts of his writing had been parts of *The Martyrology* and what were separate projects. Was *Monotones* (1971) an early unrecognized part of it? Had he begun it as early as *Journeying and the Returns* (1967)? Journeying, after all, both literal and poetic, had become a repeated motif of *The Martyrology* – and would later appear in "Hour 1" of *A Book of Hours* as the concurrently literal and poetic *utanikki*. Or perhaps it had begun as early as the *Scraptures* sequences (the "second sequence" first published in 1965) with its similarly ecclesiastical title metaphor – Barrie wasn't sure.[3] An extreme possibility was that *The Marytrology* encompassed everything he wrote – the notebook page that makes up most of the seventh page of Book 3 had introduced the possibility that his visual poems could all belong there – and that the challenge he faced might be to work out the particular interrelationships between very different kinds of text. He gave a hint about these questions in his introduction to that Edmonton pamphlet

when he wrote "I have, for a long time, been working toward the unification of what have seemed to many, if I am to believe some of the reviews I read, as the disparate areas of my concern. The focal point of that unification process remains *The Martyrology* – primarily because of the journal-like structure that has evolved in its writing."

It took the rest of his relatively short life for Barrie to offer answers to these questions, to himself and to his readers. In the posthumously published *Gifts: The Martyrology Book(s) 7 &* he interwove sections of *Monotones* and *Scraptures* with new texts, visual poems, and a musical score. Did this answer work? Was an attempt at "unification" necessary? What about his numerous other creations – visual and 'pataphysical writing, his writing for children, his novels, his criticism – that were not integrated into *The Martyrology*? Did they also belong within it? Would he have worked at ways to include them? Was the goal of such a unified and arguably monumental work consistent with the deconstruction of fantasy and illusory intentionality that much of *The Martyrology* accomplishes?

Certainly the 1974 uncertainties he had about such matters evolved. In his afterword to *Continental Trance* (1982), for example, he observes that when he began *A Book of Hours* he had not realized that it was part of *The Martyrology* but thought rather that it was part of new work to be titled "A COUNTING" (45). When he decided it was part of *The Martyrology,* he realized that he had been writing two books of that poem concurrently – something he hadn't thought possible because of its processual nature. Apparently one compositional 'rule' for him up to this point had been that the parts of *The Martyrology* had to be written one after the other; concurrent work was necessarily something else. But after *A Book of Hours* that rule no longer held. He suggests that it was the various 'chains' of Book 5 – which did not have to be read or printed in the sequence in which they were written – that had "set him free to work with chronology" while being "no longer bound to it processually." Chronological sequence – which had been a given of Books 1 through 4 – is acknowledged by the meticulous dating of texts in *Gifts: The Martyrology Book(s) 7 &* but no longer determines book structure.

*

Barrie began writing Book 4 in January of 1975. In the summer of 1974 I had begun a Canada-Council-funded sabbatical leave at my home in Toronto to write a book on Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster, two Canadian poets who in the 1950s and 60s had collaborated on several editorial projects, most importantly on founding and operating Contact Press, the main Canadian publisher of poetry in this period. Dudek was of particular note among Canadian poets because of his complicated friendship with Ezra Pound and their lengthy correspondence – he had in fact just published earlier that year an annotated edition of Pound's side of this correspondence as *D/k: Some Letters of Ezra Pound*. He was also the only noteworthy Canadian modernist writer of book-length poems, all three of which – *Europe* (1954), *En México* (1958), and *Atlantis* (1967) – had been narratives of journeys. Moreover in 1970 he had begun a life-long poem, *Continuation* – "an infinite poem in progress" (*Collected* 322). He had begun publishing sections of it 1971, and would publish the last one in 1998, the year before his death.

Barrie was frequent visitor to my house that year – he was helping me assemble the collection of Sheila Watson's writing that would be the spring 1975 issue of *Open Letter*; we had recently completed the fall 1974 issue which contained the 3rd of his and Steve McCaffery's 'TRG' reports. One of the many things we talked about was Louis Dudek's long poems and of my understanding of them as constraint or 'task' poems in which Dudek committed himself to making literal journeys into lengthy writing journeys. As I was writing in the Dudek/Souster book I eventually published in 1980,[4] he had committed "himself to the poem without knowing the outcome" (79). The new continuing poem "Continuation" was a similar commitment. In my discussions with Barrie I suggested resemblances between Dudek's book-length poems and William Cowper's *The Task* and to serial poems such as Robert Duncan's *Medieval Scenes,* and remarked on Dudek's preference for the open – for accident and surprise – over the intended or anticipated. "Purpose is a porpoise" Barrie would write as he opened Book 4. Is there a connection? I don't know. I do recall

that in conversations that we had later in 1975 Barrie quoted that playful, slippery and sea-going line several times.

We also talked that fall of 1974 about Dudek's theorizing such open poetic possibility as resting on nature's "architecture of contradictions and inexorable chances" (*Atlantis* 148) – its "wild turbulence of possibilities. / A spiral nebula. A sea of milk" (146) – lines I was quoting in my chapter on his long poems. "A cloud against the dark mountain. / The white of the moon. / There – is reality. A white flame (149). And of the poem's last line – "There is the sea. It is real." Barrie writes in lines 3-21 of the new book

> is there a sea
>
> yes
>
> is there a cloud
>
> yes
>
> everything elemental
> everything blue
>
> the precision of openness
> is not a vagueness
> it is an accumulation
> cumulous
>
> yes
>
> oceanic
>
> yes &
> anything elemental
> anything blue is
>
> sky
> sea
> the heart of
> the flame

Sky, cloud and *sea* are fairly frequent words in Nichol's writing, but it is curious to see such an overlapping in vocabulary and theme here between Dudek's epilogue to *Atlantis* and Barrie's opening to Book 4. In fact I don't think it's a stretch to view Barrie's poem as a kind of swerving 'continuation' of *Atlantis* – "There is the sea" Dudek writes in its last line. "Is there a sea? /

Yes" Barrie counters. There's also the word "accumulation" which occurs in the plural in the second line of Dudek's new life-long poem "Continuation," where Dudek uses it to characterize the process poem itself – "These vast accumulations / not without reason, that may have a use / or none"

> 'Putting together lyrics'
>
> With sex, talk, contact
> between eating and excreting,
> a process you do not need to understand (*Collected* 322)

"Accumulation" was a poetry methodology for Dudek, much like "the precision of openness / is not a vagueness / it is an accumulation / cumulous" was a declaration of methodology in these opening lines of Barrie's Book 4.

Why were we having these discussions? I think the main reason was that the popular Canadian critical view of Dudek's work had been that it was derivative of Pound's. What I was confirming and telling Barrie about was that Dudek had moved beyond Pound much the way Duncan and Olson had – that in a sense he had discovered and practiced 'open' composition and 'serial poetry' independently and without using those terms. We had both known that Dudek's work had in several ways discursively and prosodically prefigured our own, but it was a surprise to find that it had also foreshadowed (and was now accompanying) our writing epistemologically.

What else could I have mentioned to Barrie regarding Dudek? There is one other thing – Dudek's acceptance of prosaic passages in his poems that others might regard as 'failed poetry.' Viewing rhetorical decoration and formally constructed language as dishonest writing, Dudek aimed to write what he called in his major essay on prosody "functional poetry." In my book on him and Souster I was writing such comments as "Many passages in *Europe* appear commonplace; they refer to moments when Dudek was not greatly moved by his experiences but was merely recording his passing reflections. Such passages are truly 'functional.' They are analogous to the undecorated structural parts of a Gothic cathedral" (56). Both Barrie and I had been intrigued by the role of failed poems, as well as that of poems we had published but which

we now viewed as weak. “My revisions are my new works, each poem a revision of what has gone before. In-sight. Re-vision” Robert Duncan had written in a note widely circulated in Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* (400). My 1972 long poem *King of Swords* had begun as a long riff on three unsatisfactory poems I had written in the early 1960s – three of many. In my 1973 collection *Arcana* I had included what I viewed as failed poems as “manuscript” poems and placed them within quotation marks so that they could be part of the book and form a context for the other writing – a strategy Barrie and I had discussed in which the poems could both ‘be’ and not be, in which they could read as once-intended poems but not as carrying the endorsement of their writer. Barrie also talked about how, now that he was writing Books 3 & 4, he was coming to regard Books 1 & 2 of *The Martyrology,* as well as some of his discarded poetry from that period, as material for its later books – that his re-readings of them could become part of the present-tense “journal-like structure” of the later ones.[5] I would do something similar in my 1988 collection of critical essays, *Reading Canadian Reading* – dedicated to Barrie and published a few months before his death – in four essays in which I re-viewed four of my earlier books of criticism: rather than rewriting the books, or trying to ignore, forget, or ‘move past’ them, I had chosen to qualify and contextualize them.

Irene Niechoda in her afterword to *Gifts: The Martyrology book(s) 7 &* characterizes Barrie as someone who had a “tendency to revise.” She is probably thinking about the first book of the *Martyrology Book 1,* which he tells her he “was revising ... in galleys!” – that he “was trying to rip things *out* more or less the day they were trying to go to press” (*A Sourcery* 48). In later years he rarely went back and changed the lines, vocabulary and syntax of older or recently written work. The passages from *Monotones* and *Scraptures* within *Gifts* are largely unchanged from their first publication. The Edmonton text of Book 4 is very close to that of Book 4 of the 1976 Coach House Press edition – in the latter some lines of the Edmonton text have been deleted but very few altered. But what I was aware of him attending very closely to was which texts were to be included in a book, and where they would be placed within it.

*

Putting *A Book of Hours* back on track. And was it good thing for it to have a 'track'? As I re-read "Hour 1" it seems to me today that it becomes most on track, in the sense of becoming consistent with its later sections, when it reaches the word "utanikki" and moves to the contrasts between Basho and Nikko in 1689 and 'Nicky' Nichol in 1979. Did we talk about something that accidently linked the medieval 'book of hours' with the 'linked verse' written by travelling Japanese poets? – that linked travelling through a day with a journey through poetry? Possibly. But Barrie – who had written in chain 9 of Book 5 of his poem as a "journeynal" and in chain 3 of reading Shiki's *Verse Record of My Peonies* in Edmonton in 1976 – could have made such a link on his own. In my creative writing classes at York University I had been using Donald Keene's introduction to Japanese literature to expand the students' existing interests in haiku, and using Barrie's 'blob-plop' translation of Basho's 'ancient pond' haiku (from his 1970 box of typewriter visual poems *Still Water*) as part of those classes.

There's a remarkably strong awareness of mortality in the later sections of "Hour 1," as there is in parts of Book V – especially the lists of friends who have died. Here in "Hour 1" these deaths are linked to the death of the life-long poem and to the possible weariness of the poet. The abrupt introduction of the word "utanikki" stands for the years remaining for one's life-journey: "years you have left for your / utanikki." Notably it also now equates the poet's life with a life-long poem – when the writing dies, the poet dies. The poem continues –

> what the hell
> it is
> after all
> a long* work
>
> (for long* read 'continual')
>
> – looking for ways to give it up?)

The first parenthesis is another sign of Barrie's reluctance to revise, preferring to let the tension between "long" and "continual" do its own work. Life has been a long work. But the poem doesn't have to be much longer, nor the life journey. The "looking for

ways to give it up?" suggests self-destruction, the "bullet in the head" a few lines later, or "'the easy way out'" at the foot of the page, both associated perhaps with one of the listed deaths. And why doesn't the parenthesis of this "looking" clause have an opening? – is it because the utanikki's beginning was a given but the ending a possible choice?

My late wife Linda and I between 1970 and 75 had collected a small number of George Braziller's lavish facsimile reproductions of 15th-century books of hours, the *Visconti Hours, The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry, The Grandes Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry, The Belles Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry,* and *The Master of Mary of Burgundy,* all of which Barrie – an admirer of page design, bindings, and text as visual object – had taken a strong interest in. The originals of these volumes had been the culmination of a medieval tradition of intense worship, by lay people, on an hourly monastic model, to prepare the soul for the body's death – a tradition which had become particularly strong after the Black Death of the 1360s. A major element in many of them was a litany of saints. I recall this not to suggest that our having these particular books influenced Barrie's writing (although I suppose it is not impossible that it could have) but to note the popularity of such opulent facsimile editions in the late 1960s and early 70s, and to note as well that Barrie's 'book of hours' was conceptually linked not only to the Roman Catholicism that was the initial ground of the lay psychotherapeutic institution Therafields,[6] in which he had been a founding client, therapist, and Vice-President, but also to the more commercialized cultural interests of the 1960s. Linda and I had 'read' these books for their page design and evocative illustrations. Barrie's understanding of the book of hours genre, however, was as a site for also contemplating mortality –

i.e. life death
unhappy happy

The subsequent 'hours' of his book (a 28-hour book which it took him a surprising nine years to finish) are troubled by numbers of deaths – particularly those of Barrie's stillborn son, his grandmother, and his sister Donna, who died before he was born – and

by the fragility of life that the poem associates with the birth of his daughter, which in "Hour 14" he figures as one of the "passages from death into life." In "Hour 16" he has a vision of "millions who die violently" and describes himself as a figure "that clings to its mate in the darkness weeping / frightened of death and its own mortality." In "Hour 17" he laments the writing he will never finish:

> i have this wish to write the world i can never realize
> ...
> i have this sentence i must finish
> i have this poem i must write

moments before visiting Archibald's Lampman's gravestone and reading there – evidently with some epiphanic pleasure – that dying-young poet's reassurance that "there shall come / Many great voices from life's outer sea." Yet in the final hour of the book it is still death and mortality which provide the most visible continuations.

> there is more madness than any one of us can deal with
> more tragedy
> the deaths, daily,
> nothing new in the news
> only the endless cycle
> bright blade of history cutting into itself

Such a conclusion is, I suppose, consistent with the medieval genre, which usually concluded with the resurrection, a martyrdom, or with prayers for the dead or for the feast of All-Hallows – Barrie's "Hour 27" is, in fact, dated the eve before All-Hallows Eve. But in place of the medieval hope of resurrection and afterlife, Barrie offers in the text titled "in place of Hour 28" these lines:

> the old notion of immortality seen for what it is
> a preening in the bleak light history reflects
> – READ ME – READ ME –
> the weight of words shifts

and then concludes this hour and the book with what appears to be a footnote – a paragraph that is begun by a full line across the

page which could, however, also indicate not a footnote but an end, the end of a life, or a 'shift' from life to death. In this note whatever one has written (above?) turns out to have been mere materialty – "ink on yellowing pages, disappearing into this wait of words, the unvoiced endless hours." The "weight" of words once thought 'weighty' is here only an endless "wait" for acknowledgement.

In the context of David Rosenberg's question, what engages me most about this final and evidently ersatz hour is what it says about that "track" of *A Book of Hours*, as in Barrie's statement that something I had said had helped put it "back on track." Whatever I had said had helped put it back on a track that ended here, at end of a life-journey, at the end of someone's utanikki, and with a refusal of the hope of transcendence with which the medieval 'hours' conventionally concluded. The library of canonical texts such as books of hours or *The Marytrology* turns out to be another eventually vanishing corpse. As compensatory reassurance, *ars longa, vita brevis* promises only a long "wait" for nothing.

If Barrie were to show me "Hour 1" today, what I would probably observe is that the first three pages have much more punning and wordplay[7] than do the remaining three, and seem much more the narrative of a writing than "(for the purpose of / comparison (comparidaughter))"do the passages that follow "the real rhythm is / the rhythm of the hours / progression of the days / years you have left for your // utanikki" – which are a writing about a "progression" of both anxiety and writing. Did I tell him that? Again I am drawn to that metaphor "utanikki" – and how it converts life ("the real"?) to a text whose writing is ended by death and whose materiality is ended by neglect and entropy. In that conversion, as well as in the concluding regret for the words that "disappear" from their "yellowing pages," looms the tension that numerous critics have now noticed between the liberal humanism of Nichol's thematic desires (the emphatic "THERE" in "Hour 17" with which he follows Lampman's assurances that there are indeed "glimpses of eternity") and the postmodernism of his articulations.

The "immortality" which Barrie sees as unattainable is, however, not Lampman's "eternity" – even though Barrie's words here, "the old notion," would appear to contain or at least displace

such a concept. Instead, Barrie's is a material immortality, one that consists of inks that do not fade and paper that does not yellow, and of readers that keep reading one's texts despite the what ever "bleak light." Such "immortality" depends on the institutions of literature, including the library of that concluding footnote in which "the stacks grow fuller." (I am reminded that when Barrie was first in Toronto he worked in the University of Toronto library as a runner who retrieved and reshelved books from "dusty" stacks much like those he describes here.) It depends also on the careers of professional scholars who make their livings by reading and writing about a few chosen texts which are reprinted, anthologized, and taught in classrooms.

The medieval books of hours – each created as a single copy – had also languished in libraries, largely unseen and unknown, until such reprints as Braziller's. However, those reprints were part of a much less attractive commercialization of alternativity which marked the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s. Linda and I bought our copies from the Mystic Arts Book Club which was also profitably selling reprints of Tarot cards and editions of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and the writings of Aleister Crowley. *Hair* (1967, 68) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) were playing on Broadway. Those and similar musicals were staged in Toronto and by the late 1970s had effectively overshadowed the much more locally alternative Canadian-authored plays that had been produced at small theatres such as Theatre Passe-Muraille, Tarragon, and Factory Theatre Lab. At Coach House Press, where since 1975 Barrie had been one of the leaders of an editorial board that aimed to publish mostly difficult and ground-breaking literary writing, more worldly editors would soon be arguing that the press should publish more profitable titles – and some even asking whether the press was publishing books such as *Zygal* or *The Martyrology* only because Barrie was on the editorial board. That desire to be commercially 'responsible' led to the press's seeking a more mainstream image in the late 1980s and early 1990s and to its financial collapse by 1996.[8]

At Therafields the response to commercialization and institutionalization had been different but just as dramatic. The value of its real estate holdings had increased exponentially during

these years – it had become a valuable 'thing.' Its analysands' sense of its perhaps being an institution and business as much as it was a community or a process had also grown. An institutional structure that had been created to enable process and change had begun by the middle-1980s to be perceived by some as having acquired a powerful reality of its own. As Barrie explained it to me, the asking of questions such as "What does Therafields believe" not only reflected a misleading idealization and totalization (similar to the idealizations of the Catholic Church and its authority that had troubled some of the Therafields founders), but suggested that the institution as a structure might have outgrown its usefulness or taken on a rigidity that blocked therapeutic progress. Founder Lea Hindley-Smith had written, in an article co-authored by Barrie and others, that "[t]he struggle can never end because, even after exercising courage about one creative move, it remains easier to repeat the old, fearful attachment to the familiar by inwardly claiming that we have done enough, now we have arrived. An openness to the unconscious requires in the end a recognition that there is no possibility of arrival" (15). Presumably the Therafields structure had – like a long poem that surprised no one – become too "familiar." Barrie became a part of the group that dissolved Therafields and transformed it into a foundation that rented space to individually practicing lay therapists.

These were of course the years of Thatcher, Reagan, and Mulroney, who had their ideological followers among university governors and library bureaucrats as well as Coach House Press editors – the years in which administrative 'responsibility,' 'bottom line,' 'rationalization,' 'harmonization' and 'accountability' became the buzzwords of a creeping philistinism. This is the source of Barrie's parodic subtitle "a counting" and graph paper background on the half-title page of Book 6 – implying that there are other things to count than institutional beans. It is against this background, in which cultural budgets are being repeatedly cut, that Barrie writes that sentence of the last hour of *A Book of Hours* in late 1984:

> (in the library stacks the shelves grow fuller, the buildings forced to expand, the budgets cut, nonexistant [sic], of course the voices become more muted, even tho they are screaming, even tho they

> have things to say, things you might want to hear, the words disappear into the dust, the darkness, the books closed and noone here to read them, noone here to take them from the shelves, anything any one of us might say becoming simply what it is, ink on yellowing pages, disappearing into this wait of words, the unvoiced endless hours)

The endurance of art – and perhaps even humanity – is conflated here with the endurance of particular voices – much like at the end of Barrie's life his understandable anxiety about his own mortality were mixed, as Niechoda's afterword to *Book 7&* narrates, with anxieties about the enduring shape of his writing. Some books of hours end with the Christian apocalypse. When the poets die, the world has died. "If you are not planning the new you are on the side of death," Hindley-Smith's article on Therafields had continued.

But the text of the footnote, though expressive, is in some ways mistaken. There is no agency in a library's books, no voices there that "have things to say." One can not bring Barrie 'back' by working to keep bpNichol texts in bookstores and on reading lists, nor do such things 'for him.' This is cultural work that one does for those still living. While this ending of *A Book of Hours* laments the end of particular "voices" and their agency, what it implicitly foresees and fears is either the end of humanity or the end of cultural work. Apocalypse indeed.

*

I was skeptical about Barrie's hopes to achieve the "unification" of his writing by enclosing it within *The Martyrology.* I admired "the disparate areas of his concerns," much as I did the variety of non-standard book shapes produced by Coach House – even if they wouldn't fit on chain bookstore shelves, and brought little commercial profit to those who made and distributed them. I remember Barrie and I joking about Yeats' lamentation that "[t]hings fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," and making tentative plans to create an anthology – boxed rather than bound – of 'open' poetry pointedly entitled "Mere Anarchy." Why should there be centres that hold, we wondered, when forcing centres to hold has caused seemingly

endless warfare, the persecution of difference, and was about to bring about the banalities of financial globalization. It was concern about this kind of totalization that had led Barrie to support the dissolution of Therafields and to resist the standardization of design and search for "market reality" titles that marked the Coach House Press turn to "responsibility" in the year of his death. Much of Barrie's writing was designed to fall apart – from the envelopes and boxes of unbound texts and drawings to the scraps of paper he asked to be interleaved into copies of *Book 7&*.[9] That falling apart has been part of its continuance.[10]

Barrie's note in *A Draft of Book IV of The Martyrology* on the possible "unification" of his work concludes with a remark about death and the literary institution that is curiously similar in some respects to what he suggests about them in the sentence that ends *A Book of Hours*. He writes:

> This poem will undoubtedly change further before final publication. Indeed the nature of THE MARTYROLOGY makes any term like "final" useless. It is a deliberately open-ended sequence that could terminate at any moment or could, in fact, go on until the author's death. If it goes on that long many book column editors will undoubtedly cheer my passing as they will no longer have to agonize over who to send the latest volume to for review.

Two deployments of the word "undoubtedly" precede "final publication" (in which the poem was not significantly changed), the news of his "passing," and the portrayal of cultural workers who, like the absent readers in the library, view writers and their books as difficulties they would be happy to have disappear. The two repeated words constitute an overdetermination of certainty (and of desire for certainty?) in which each instance tends to subvert the other. Yes, the passage – addressed to a University of Alberta student audience – appears designed to be humourous – but it nevertheless hails those students toward Barrie's side of a tension he perceives between writer and Literature. Posterity (certainty) and the literary institution are on Barrie's mind – and are accompanying his musings about "unification." Perhaps this "unification" is a strategy for continuing the agony of various editors beyond the "final" of his writing. Did he need to be concerned? – or was his

concern merely a textually productive anxiety? Are David Rosenberg and I now among those "agonizing" editors?[11]

Notes

1. McCaffery and I had very little contact except through Barrie. As far as I know, he had little interest in Canadian literature, or in Pound, Olson, or Duncan, and may have been skeptical about the usefulness Barrie perceived in Dudek's writing and conception of the long poem.
2. Nichol tells Irene Niechoda in 1987 that his main reason for publishing Book 1 was to try to regain "some objectivity over the work" – that he had become so confused about its shape that "the only way I could see to get it objectified was to *publish* it" (Niechoda 48).
3. He writes in 1979 about *Scraptures, Monotones,* and other early texts "Where do those earlier works fit? That is the question that still troubles me. In a sense they are subtexts to *The Martyrology,* and as such do not so much come before it as they do lie under it" (in Ondaatje, 337). He tells Niechoda in 1987 that he now understands *Scraptures* and *Monotones* as parts of the *Martyrology* but that back when he was writing them he "didn't have the sophistication as a writer ... to understand that" or to create the kinds of "interleaving" and juxtaposition (such as in the 'chains' of Book V) that would be needed to combine them (Niechoda 31). He says that he is thinking of re-issuing *Monotones* as "Book 0 (or -1) [of *The Martyrology*]" (31). That was a idea he also mentioned to me sometime in the 1980s. Niechoda's searches through the Nichol archives discover early drafts of *The Martyrology* that contain *Monotones*, notes (ca. 1969) for a "triptych" that would be made up of *Scraptures, The Martyrology,* and *For Jesus Lunatick,* and notes for an alternate triptych that would include "'The Captain Poetry Poems,' 'The Martyrology,' and some third text – perhaps ... 'The Plunkett Papers'" (34). See also my 1991essay "ReMembering Thinking Rewriting "The Martyrology" in which I recount some of the discussions I had with Nichol in the late 1980s about even more elaborate possibilities he was considering for reorganizing *The Martyrology* so that it could include and/or contextualize earlier writing.
4. I completed the manuscript of *Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster* in the summer of 1975, but the publisher that held the contract (Copp Clark) went out of business and sold its criticism series to McGill-Queen's University Press, which then re-sold the series to Douglas & McIntyre. These changes in turn delayed the manuscript's successful

progress toward a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada publishing subvention.

5. Barrie had numerous folders of what he considered early "failed poems" – ones that he had discarded or abandoned as unsuccessful. These included the sequences "The Journey" (1962-63), "The Undiscovered Country" (1966-67), "The Plunkett Papers" (1979-71), *Journeying and the Returns* (1963-66, published 1967), and *The Captain Poetry Poems* (1965-68, published 1971) that in a note in Michael Ondaatje's *The Long Poem Anthology* (1979) he speculated might belong together under the title *The Books of the Dead* while the more recent of his writing might be considered part of *The Books of the Living.* He comments that in his twenties he had considered reorganizing his writing under those two titles but "temporarily abandoned this notion and began working on *The Martyrology*." He also writes that "The Journey" and "The Undiscovered Country" had "failed" because he had not yet understood the "principle of the utanikki ... & as a result i romanticized my experience to a disgusting degree" (335).
6. Katherine Govier, in an otherwise skeptical 1978 article in *Saturday Night*, offered this account of Therafields – that lay therapist Lea Hindley-Smith (to whom Nichol dedicates books 1-5 of *The Martyrology*) began the events that led to it when in 1964 "she started a 'Catholic group,' thought to be the first group therapy experiment anywhere with nuns and priests. Over its eight years of life, the Catholic group had close to 100 members; of these close to 80 dropped their vows" (54). She added that 'Therafields' "generally refers to a community begun in the early 1960s by a group of persons in therapy who decided to live together and continue their pursuit of sanity as an enlarged family. It received its name when forty members of that group bought its first rural property in 1967 (53)." Barrie's wife Ellie Hiebert was a part of the group. Many of its members, like Barrie, went on to become lay therapists who worked under the Therafields umbrella. At its height Therafields owned not only the farm, where it conducted work-group therapy, but two office buildings on Dupont Street in Toronto and twenty-five or more houses in the Annex area of Toronto where many of its members lived in 'house groups' in which the aim was to become more understanding of everyday social interactions. Clients of Therafields paid fees for its psychoanalytic services as well as rent if they lived in a house group. Lea Hindley-Smith's partner, Visvaldis Upanieks, to whose memory "Hour 23" is dedicated, was an architect and designed many of the renovations to the various buildings, renovations which were also used as opportunities for work-group therapy.

7. "met a physic / on the road" the first hour begins, and a few lines later pushes ahead with "med a tation / on de road". One of the reason Nichol is having meditations "on the road" and considering metaphysics "on de road" is that in the 1970s and early 80s his work at Therafields required him to make regular drives back and forth along Airport Road between Toronto and the Therafields farm at Mono Mills, near Orangeville. These drives also explain the frequency in *The Martyrology* of phrases such as "driving north" or "driving south." In the early 70s when I lived in north Toronto he would often visit en route. A photo of part of the Therafields farm appears on the cover of *Monotones*.
8. See my summary of the collapse of Coach House Press, "The Beginnings of an End to Coach House Press," *Open Letter* 9:8 (Spring 1997): 40-77.
9. His request to interleave that "final" writing and random places in copies of the book was arguably more open, radical and defiant of death than was his publisher's understandable response, to place it in an envelope inside the back cover.
10. This paradoxical continuance has occurred under the sign "bpNichol" – a sign, and also a trademark, that Barrie himself created in perhaps a moment of unconscious 'marketing' and 'unification' near the beginning of his career. There is of course, as Bourdieu notes in *The Field of Cultural Production* (48-51), a difference between marketing for profit and marketing in search of the power of poetic legitimacy – a difference of which the right-leaning editors who led Coach House Press toward its demise in 1996 were unfortunately unaware.
11. That trademark "bpNichol" was throughout his writing life, and continues to be in my opinion, the adequate site of the unification of his "disparate" work. Its use was also an appropriate strategy for attempting to avoid the cheering of editors at his passing and the oblivion of a neglected library. Literature is a part of the material world which the living contend for influence within – as limited as that world may seem, in dark 'hours,' to be.

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“These glyphs, the gesture of these letters”: bpNichol’s gift economy [*Gifts: Book 7&*]

Chris Tysh

I call a poem that very thing that teaches the heart. – Jacques Derrida

What strikes a reader not terribly familiar with bpNichol’s prodigious output is the constantly renewed gesture – tongue, arms, eyes, mouth scraping, talk or babble, then song – dense reaching into the body of language, always already knowing something will be dredged up: whether a “fence of saint” or “son of a bitch dead languages.” “To reach the thing/ with words” is the given, affirmation, ultimate engagement with the lyric as gift, saying “yes” in the falling night. That is “love,” as one of my yoga teachers used to say, yoking breath to movement, that is “yo-ga,” he would elongate the two syllables into a perfect spondee, his naked six-pack glistening in the ardor of his words. Nichol’s faith is *wholly other*: irrecuperable, inseparable from loss and invention; always concerned with “the moment of language” as it breaks away from profit, sedimentation, investment, showy narcissism:

> You braid your syllables into words and your words into sentences, tenses of meaning I become lost in. you are verb and noun and I am lost in the mystery of you. syntax is the ax you destroy me with, the cutting edges of your breath sever my links with the past. leave me the spaces to breathe in.

Without wanting, or even being able for that matter, to relaunch the knotty, discursive circuit involved in delineating a deconstructive application of the gift economy, wherein Jacques Derrida revisits the Maussian concept, only to complicate it and disengage it from the notion of exchange, I instead simply gesture toward the relation between gift and writing as being shaded, and in fact ghosted by this trope which turns giving into a thing without limits or borders “The gift,” Derrida says in *Given Time I:*

Counterfeit Money, "if there is any, must pass beyond the whole" (77). No remainder, no border, no obligation to return or repay. Mark Osteen, in his introduction to *The Question of the Gift: Essays across Disciplines*, aptly sums up the property of this differential structure:

> …Derrida seeks to complicate the relationship between the gift and what he calls, after Georges Bataille, the "restricted" economy of reciprocity. He defines the gift as "that which, in suspending economic calculation, opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry…and so as to turn aside the return in view of the no-return." His premise is paradoxical: the gift is impossible; indeed, it is *the* impossible. (14)

One might agree that the poetic economy at work (at play) in *Martyrology Book 7&* is haunted by this Derridean notion of "a gift without debt," as the philosopher says in his essay on Joyce, "Ulysses Gramophone" (589), but for writers, one might also argue that the reading event inscribes another kind of "debt," which is dizzingly close to desire, the mad desire to return us to writing. That Nichol's words awaken that doubleness that sends the one who writes and the one who receives, the one who dictates and the one who sees into "the co-lapse of speech and script/ript from this life/into that other which is not/or is heaven maybe/hell" is a call I must heed, an invitation I cannot pass on. "Do not read this" already has me in the slats of its command. Nichol's gift is always tendered toward undoing the ground of givens to make us see as we're zipping by on a bullet train, "the half-formed sequence of a day/when everything is a possibility." It is that incessant potentializing which reveals his alliance with the passion and the saints of his writing practice.

In "Assumptions," one comes upon a line which uncannily echoes Derrida: "the doubleness of any gift" – making us realize how contemporary Nichol was with the philosophical scene, in spite of our romantic shibboleths that poets are the vanguard, ahead of the line, at the head of the bus. In keeping with this figure of the gift, I can't help evoking the young Walter Benjamin who loved to contemplate the mundane treasures of his bedroom closets. In *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, he devotes a whole little section to "The Sock":

> Every pair had the appearance of a little pocket. For me, nothing surpassed the pleasure of thrusting my hand as deeply as possible into its interior. I did not do this for the sake of the pocket's warmth. It was "the
>
> little present" rolled up inside that I always held in my hand and that drew
>
> me into the depths…It taught me that form and content, veil and what is
>
> veiled are the same. (97)

The German "Das Mitgebrachte" for "present," evokes the bringing forth, that turning of the sock inside out and back. The author of *Gifts: The Martyrology Book 7&* never ceases to astound me with what *he* turns up: "train station/a rain of t's" To make the train station suddenly awash in rain is the healing and shamanistic "source – re/the mystery of poetry."

In my first encounter with *Martyrology Book 7&*, I sometimes saw the ghost of Jean Cocteau crouched upon the page, especially the one from St Anza IX dealing with a sense of "poets as receivers? as fax machines?/ passing it all on to you/ a page at a time," which carries with it the fabulous vision of Heurtebise the angel[1], both poem and muse. But upon rereading, I am instead reminded of Maria Sabina, Mazatec *curandera* and visionary poet-shaman, brought to our attention by the legendary 1983 anthology of ethnopoetics edited by Diane and Jerome Rothenberg, *Symposium of the Whole*, which includes excerpts of her "Mushrooms of Language" – although we had already made her acquaintance in 1975 via Anne Waldman's performative text, *Fast Speaking Woman,* which in part appropriates and rewrites some of Sabina's trance-inspired lines. It's not so much that I see Nichol up there on a Mexican plateau, like a drunken Kerouac in *Tristessa* guiding his hands towards the wound, the plated ache "like waves of pain," but more as being inhabited through and through by language:

> all these voices scream as one thru you
> shrilling above the babble towers over us
>
> not prophetic then
> simply the sheer weight of what language is
> asserting itself against the misuse and abuse of tongues

Now listen to Sabina relate the sacred mushroom ceremony that she performed on her ailing sister, Maria Ana:

> One of the principal ones spoke to me and said: "Maria Sabina, this is the Book of Wisdom. It is the Book of Language. Everything that is written in it is for you. The Book is yours, take it so that you can work." I exclaimed with emotion: "That is for me. I receive it."
>
> The principal Ones disappeared and left me alone in front of the immense Book. I knew it was the Book of Wisdom.
> The Book was before me, I could see it but not touch it. I tried to caress it but my hands didn't touch anything. I limited myself to contemplating it and, at that moment, I began to speak. Then I realized that I was reading the sacred book of language. My Book. The Book of the Principal Ones. (189)

It should be clear that I am not imputing to the Canadian poet some cheapened hegemonic version of 'Indigenismo,' as Heriberto Yépez calls it– seeing Sabina only from the standpoint of ethnography, rather than as a radical practitioner of poetics – but merely linking the two poets in their gift of being supremely awake to language, "lest the tribe die."

If the move from Sabina's *saint children* to Nichol's saints appears as an opportune hop, skip and a jump, it must, first of all, be said that Nichol's saints do not sacralize. The fragility or solidity of the poem's particulars is not subtracted from the world or time, nor transported from elsewhere, where once there was an X, a name, an event. No arrival or departures in the Hall of Lost Steps. Whether St. Orm, saint ratas, St. Ranglehold, or St. Reat, these do not so much consecrate as remove language from its servile function of pure instrumentality, without *pour autant* landing it back in some Eleusinian mysteries or other Pythian sacred bard trip. This is a different set of exigencies, since there is nothing *per se* or *a priori* to reveal and offer as truth function.

What do the saints inaugurate? They summon us into what Michel Leiris calls "the deep country of hearing" (155),[2] where language is extensible, always divisible, dispatched, St. Anza, disturbing the "pretension to unity," as Derrida writes in "Tympan," his introduction to *Margins of Philosophy* (156). There is no meaning as self-presence, no presence without difference, and that

difference is A SAINT. The steady procession of saints interpellates the reader and forces her to see the gap, to hold open the table of multiplications, to mark its shifting borders, slippage, dissemblance, rebel beauty, tangled in the kiss of its twenty-six letters. The saints ain't st.riving to confirm what we already know; instead, they instantiate a slit, a caesura, which shakes loose the habitual play of the signifier (my paraphrase of Deleuze and Guattari on the rhizome).[3] Or to view it from another angle, the quasi-obsessive declension of words – "moth mouth mother myth math smother smooth" – releases them from their univocal vise, and spread-eagles their arms in all directions at once: "as heaven is that heavin' of the breath"; "make it my own/ saint"; moss mass mess miss muss mouse." Nichol's joy lies in initiating us into the poem's cut, b-side, wit, and slash. "No poem without accident, no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding," Derrida claims in "Che cos'è la poesia?" (233).

Jumping high above the clipped hedge of the sacred/profane binarism, *Martyrology Book 7&*'s saints st.artle us from the congealed versions, the molar doxas, the immortalized forms of classic statuary where meaning is ossified and domesticated. Wild horses, they romp over highways and fields, harbors and woods, "st.airs & st.ares – st.able" spent along the way. Like an insouciant cultivator or a slightly mad experimenter, the poet bends over his st.alks and st.amens, making incisions here and there, suturing, clamping, cracking open, or tying the sheaths in various assemblages, to catch the thing in its difference and "play its own game": "the fundamental mystery of otherness."

> all this lllllanguage, this swerving back and fffffforth of/ what? /
> meaning in the mean world / non sense or sssssensical a canticle / this
> dance is danced above the llllliteral / head lines / eyes / faces wwwwe
> imagine beyond the type's / cast / (of characters) i's speak to / yyyyyy-our
> i's / Ur eyes on horizon / h-i

If I'm deliberately downplaying the spiritual, auratic aspect of Nichol's saints in favor of the libidinal excess of the signifier and

the purely ludic experimentation ("the whole tooth & nothing but"), that doesn't mean that I don't hear the portion which also inscribes prayer, plea, and invocation: "st. anza me / please." Or litany:

> saint agnes a friend called her the same who saw saint reat and called saint agnes to him to her to he who waits to she who is now and forever trapped beyond the poem where saint reat lies dead (how he was born there of the eye and not the tongue) dead as i said against a fence where saint agnes saw him and a friend said he is dead and I knew it to be true.

Indeed, one would have to be deaf not to heed the deep lyricism that animates the "Scraptures" and "Assumptions" sequences making up the greater bulk of *Martyrology Book 7&*, and the mournful line of their canticles:

> saint reat do not. this demand land has no vision. words spoken grow which are god's only. end. where are you saint reat? i have no words. there is nothing. and your syllables damn this land of sentences. i break letters for you like bread. I smash sounds. you are nowhere nowhere now here now there now where now where no where saint reat nowhere.

That intrinsic translation into song is best echoed in Nichol's praise poem to the notion of the maternal, meaning both mothers and tongue, recognizing that formidable double bind that cleaves their being and which the poet never ceases to articulate, taking his turn at "that strange urge to praise" "MA} Eternity":

> old mothers who are gone now
> all mute
> we are your tongues
>
> born from your mouths' mouths
> we have your say
> ….
> this old body flaps in the wind
> looks out over the prairie this cold march day
> into that landscape most of you wandered into as girls
> took up the burden of all that birthing
> all that laying down
> of the law

the line

Although young in years at the time he composed this text, Nichol rejoins here the charmed circle of men writing elegies for their mothers. Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, and recently Ron Padgett have given us some of the more moving *tombeaux*, sounding their notes between words and absence, speaking in the narrow margins of death.

Standing to the side, off base, as per its etymology, is the classic rhetorical figure of parabasis, involving the direct address of the chorus (without masks) to the audience, on a topic usually not related to the plot – although M. S. Silk, in his *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy,*" states that "the Aristophanic parabasis has been called 'a prism through which the play's themes are passed'" (227).[4] Here I need to confess how I detour this trope from Mark Sanders, who is glossing its use in Gayatri Spivak's work, who, in turn, is deploying it via Paul de Man's readings of Rousseau. Such is the leap-frog nature of critical thinking. That the deconstructive, postcolonial theorist is critiquing Kant, and de Man is borrowing and revising Schlegel in order to speak about Rousseau's *Confessions* doesn't prevent me from noticing the pronounced bending of the Greek construct, which now gets tinged with allegory and irony. "The disruption of the figural chain … becomes the permanent parabasis of an allegory (of figure) that is to say, irony" (16), Sanders explains by quoting de Man. What does this reconstellation of a dramatic strategy have to do with Nichol?

Granted, I don't have a Native Informant to put in this stepping aside, in this a*llegorein*[5]space, "to interrupt the main system of meaning," to use Sanders' formulation again, but I believe that *Martyrology Book 7&* installs its very own interference, its own practice of speaking otherwise. Quite often, among these letters that track saints, passion, and the rhythms of the human song – "more songs that I could ever sing /the mouth full of them" – one distinguishes the echoes of a rant, whether it be an anti-war poem, a diatribe against disconnectedness and isolation, "the sickness of the world," or "the bright awl of language" directed at self, puncturing it, shredding its surfaces and organs, now useless.

On one hand, it is possible to correlate Nichol's stepping forth (as the etymology is sometimes glossed) as the announcement of suffering: "I HAVE NO TONGUE NO EYES," which immediately for me summons the terrifying song of Artaud's Momo:

> This tongue between four gums,
>
> this beef between two knees,
> this piece of hole
> for madmen. (22)

or perhaps his more apocalyptic text, "To Be Done with the Judgment of God":

> but there is a thing
> which is something,
> only one thing
> which is something,
> and which I feel
> because it wants
> TO GET OUT:
> the presence
> of my bodily
> suffering,
>
> the menacing,
> never tiring
> presence
> of my
> body; (566)

What I'm suggesting is that the presence of the torn body – the "NO TONGUE NO EYES," the aching leg that the speaker hauls from Toronto to Halifax, the ripped chords – constitutes a kind of limit where the poetic act is played out. Mind you, it is not a thematics, not even an aching consciousness that comes to disrupt the textile of the composition. Taking their cue from Artaud's play broadcast for French Radio in 1948, *Pour en Finir avec le Jugement de Dieu*, Deleuze and Guattari elaborate a trenchant episteme they call the Body without Organs (BwO), which they describe in *A Thouand Plateaus* thusly:

> It is not at all a notion or a concept but a practice, a set of practices. You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit. People ask, So what is this BwO? – But you're already on it, scurrying like a vermin, groping like a blind person, or running like a lunatic desert traveler and nomad of the steppes. On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight…on it we love. (151)

Because the BwO is about intensities, waves and movements of becoming and deterritorializing, I read *Martyrology Book 7&*'s permanent parabasis as a way to make ostensible this elsewhere, this disarticulation and undoing of the body, be it war, state or academy.[6] Having slightly truncated Cuddon's dictionary definition of parabasis, I hurry to add the deleted words, i.e. "addressed the audience directly in a speech that contained the personal views of the author on some topical matter of religion or politics" (676). It goes without saying that this *interpretation sauvage*, as the French like to call all non-canonical formulations, locates "politics" as that ever-shifting threshold from which to invoke an (im)possible desire to speak and write otherwise. "so mulch for thatch." It's not so much that it interferes with the inscription and coding of other elements in the text, as it becomes the very plane from which the real bends "like waves of pain/pass thru this body/and the body & the pain & the words & the days simply are."

If the BwO is one slope of the theatrics we invoked above, the other arc might be filled out by Nichol's self-reflexive and metalinguistic textuality, which by now has become the *de rigueur* sign of postmodern writing. Like the head of the chorus, Nichol doffs his mask and comes forward to address us:

> There is some larger meditation that seems obvious. An inference or moral perhaps. I only know the poem unfolds in front of me, in spite of me, more in control than me. It's not that the poem has a mind of its own but that poetry is its own mind, a particular state you come to, achieve.
>
> Sometimes I talk too much of it, like a magician explaining his best trick and you see after all he is only human. Which is what I wish to be, am, only human.

By thickening the materiality of his medium and asking us to touch its raw matter in the very moment of its fabrication, Nichol unhinges his own mastery and opens it up to the inevitable work we in our turn must do, buoyed up by his gift.

Notes

1. Jean Cocteau. *L'Ange Heurtebise: Poème*. Paris: Stock, 1925.
2. Quoted in Jacques Derrida. "Tympan."
3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 15.
4. The quoted part in Silk's comment comes from A. M. Bowie "The Parabasis in Aristophanes: Prolegomena, Acharnians" *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, 32.1 (1982): 27-40.
5. *allos* = other; a*gorein* = to speak publicly
6. "A BwO of money (inflation), but also a BwO of the sate, army, factory, city, party, etc." *ATP* 163.

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bp & HD: Father's Day – *The Martyrology* Book 3, December 31 to end

Victor Coleman

you are not permitted to open again
enter thru the lion's mouth the man's root gets planted in
not to be consumed
as tho the use of lips weren't speech
a doorway into the woman's soul intelligence comes out of
SCREAMING
a complete thot
born from the dialogue between you

*

Michael Ondaatje's early film about bpNichol and his contemporaries is called *Sons of Captain Poetry*, Captain Poetry being Nichol's mythologized "father of us all." Nichol's relationship with/to his father (& his mother) is both central and peripheral to the serial books of *The Martyrology:*

the mirrors cannot trick us
our words are spun within the signs our fathers left

Hilda Doolittle's father was an astronomer who died of shock on learning of her older brother's death in France in 1918 when HD was 32. Sometime later she found some solace under the psychoanalytic tutelage of her second father, Sigmund Freud.

> It is not only for the Star, the Dreamer of the Dream, that Helen seeks to read the script – but she searches too for the Child: the Euphorion of the poem.
>
> 'O Child, must it be forever,
> that your father destroys you,
> that you may find your father?'
> – Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book*

Barrie Nichol also sought solace in therapy through a somewhat shadowy, and short-lived (by that name), lay therapy community called Therafields, where he was paid to counsel others in the community. That community, in many instances, was an integrated conglomerate of communes, group homes, all owned by, in this case, the matriarch who founded Therafields and was its main benefactor through her vast real estate holdings. Nichol became central to that concern, a spiritual guide within that Real Estate. To many, Nichol became a kind of down home Sigmund Freud figure to whom they could turn for a very careful analysis (if not completely psycho-) of their various disturbances and (often psycho-somatic) dis-eases.

A.D. on

is dead

let the H
supplant the D
in your sweet poetry

adonis head
HE is the A.D.
HE is not dead

The H is gone from your lips H.D.

soft consonantal breath

the vowels are locked between the dark doors

dead

*

Whether or not Nichol was ever considered to be a "Don" is not our concern here. The saintly personae emanating from his mouth were Patrons of an otherwise simplistic, even banal, kind of language; a language shot through with little rips and tears, often causing tears to be shed, waves of emotional baggage always placed in the appropriate checkroom in the terminal that was *The Martyrology*'s totality:

faint edge of sleep
a literal fuzzing in the mind
as tho the edge of
what was held clearly
became less defined
the penalty paid &
your father recognized
for what he is
forW

HA! the is

*

. . . this triangle, this family romance, this trinity which follows the recognized religious pattern: Father, aloof, distant, the provider, the protector-but a little un-get-at-able, a little too far away and giant-like in proportion, a little chilly withal; Mother, a virgin, the virgin, that is, an untouched child, adoring, with faith, building a dream, and the dream is symbolized by the third member of the trinity, the Child, the doll in her arms.

– H.D., *Tribute to Freud*

*

"Could God Himself create such lovely things as I dreamed?"

"Whence then came thy dream?" answers Hope.

"Out of my dark self, into the light of my consciousness."

"But whence first into thy dark self?" rejoins Hope.

"My brain was its mother, and the fever in my blood its father."

– George MacDonald, *Lilith* (1895)

*

or what comes forth from my mouth
born from the woman in me

handed down thru my grandma ma & lea
is what marks me most a man
that i am finally this we
this one & simple thing
my father Leo
my mother Cancer

*

In *Masque and Unmasking of Captain Poetry* Nichol, through his reductive drawing style mixed liberally with aspects of his visual poetry, denudes and deconstructs his "father" through the agency of palimpsest, an overlay of text upon text and image upon image, much in the manner, although less elegantly, of the Tom Phillips text *A HUMUMENT*, wherein Phillips 'reduces' an old text (*A Human Document*) to reveal something entirely his own. This was also something that occurred often in the works of H.D.

> The image of a parchment from which one writing has been erased to make room for another may also be the image of an identity where one person has been erased to make room for another, a life or lives erased to make room for another life. The doctrine of reincarnation is itself not only in the context of our contemporary scientific orthodoxy but in the earlier context of Christian orthodoxies a belief that, where it comes to the surface, leaks through as an erased writing. Even in the world of fictions, the theme of reincarnation can demote a work as being ultimately beyond the pale of serious concern. But that what once was has an objective existence in what is, is a concept current in the thought of science and philosophy as well as in the possibly vagrant imaginations of certain poets.
>
> – Robert Duncan, The H.D. Book

*

Nichol often performs this unmasking of his own text by 'reducing' it to letters of the alphabet:

she births herself the twin
mouths of women
w's omen

it turns over & reverses itself the mirrors can-
not trick us
our words are spun within the signs our fathers left the sibilance of s
the cross of t
there are finally no words for you father too many letters
multiply the signs you are the one

*

bpNichol's fathers were saints: St. And, St. Ranglehold, St. Reet. H.D.'s fathers were gods, mostly Greek and Egyptian. But both were terribly mortal; bp, it turned out, moreso.

> As we begin to take our identity, beyond the fiction of personality, in the idea of Man the variety of persons Man has been may begin to inhabit what we are as we impersonate Him. Divine or daemonic forces appearing in dreams seem to appear as illustrations of the depths of our own being—a being now that includes all that we have come to know Man to have been—and behind their faces we read the faces of father or mother, sister or brother, actual figures of our own *erased* lives within our present lifetime. Their appearance within us is more significant than their appearance before our imagination.
>
> – Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book*

*

COLLABORATIVE FOOTNOTE

Victor: I waited a moment to reread in Book 3 and see if I could find something to persuade you to end the piece with a further quote from *The M*. Not that that is necessary; just wanted to see. There's no other piece in the issue like yours and so wanted to stretch it into where most everyone else fears to tread, species consciousness – which is where you were headed. So instead I was reading in Book 6 and, in lieu of asking you to do any more, wrote a collaborative footnote for you to edit as you wish.

David: Love to collaborate, as you know. I simply tacked you on to the end, straight from yr email.

….

And still, *The Martyrology* goes further, as we go further. In Book 6's "Continental Trance," unlike any other modern failed attempt at epic, bp broadens the lyric into an evolutionary epic of species consciousness.

is this the poem i wanted to write?

it never is

it's a thing of words
construct of a conscious mind

governed by the inevitable end-rime
time

*

that's the tone

buried in the poem
a consciousness of its own mortality

or mine

a finality Homer

soon there's noone knows
whether your poem's your own

or if the name denoted a community of speakers
history of a race

(Ellie's an obvious we
draws our child's breath & her own)

i's a lie
dispenses illusions of plot

biography when geography's the clue
locale & history of the clear you

It is us, that *you*, the reader – in whom the poem goes on, since the author imagines himself not only dead but lost in name. And lost in all but the species consciousness of writer and reader: a *Homo sapiens* thing. In Book 6's "In the Plunkett Hotel," human history folds into it:

Saskatoon, where ma & pa were married
Burnaby (where they were living when they had me)—
the me runs everywhere
like a theme
moving reservoirs of cells & genes
stretches out over the surface of the earth
more miles than ancestor ever dreamed

we trace our dreamtime in blood,
the colour of an eye, line of a chin,
say ‘you remind me of your grandpa’ or
‘you do that just the way my mother did’,
tribal, restless, constant only in the moving on,
over the continents
thru what we call our history
tho it is more mystery than fact,
more verb than noun,
more image, finally, then story…

a state of mind
the real
the only borders of
my kind

*

The Martyrology Book V

Alice Notley

The proposition by David Rosenberg as editor of a special issue of *Open Letter* was that I read *The Martyrology,* Book V by bpNichol (other poets being assigned other books of *The Martyrology*) and react as a first-time reader. The subtext, or not so sub, to the proposition was that *The Martyrology* is a great unfinished 20th-century epic, largely unknown outside Canada. I would hopefully find my assigned volume to be great.

I have ended up reading the book twice, once as a reader sans sex or profession, once as a woman who is a woman and knows and writes 'epics.' The first time through was mostly a gas, because it's friendly and readable. There was a hook for me in remembering the style and tone of the 70s, when the volume is set, and in the fact that I had known, in the late 60s, some of the people initially referred to in Book V. When I read the book from a more judgemental aspect, things shift, somewhat, not hugely. I should say here that I believe criticism – critical writing on poetry – has become more and more destructive of the art (for the time being), supplanting it, demeaning it, making it either an art complicit to its demands, or one taken as a sort of enfant that has to be babysitted, indulged, and patronized. I am not a critic.

As a reader I am schizophrenic or negatively capable. I can judge or not judge, or both at the same time. As I say, when I'm not-judge, the book is a delight for me: a journal mutating into other forms, quasi-personal, influenced by some of my own influences, particularly my friend Philip Whalen. The mind of the book is nice. The man is rather Blakean, a bit like oneself is said to be. Above all, the book has a great sound, being given up to a net of sound which is even more than aural: "eyes rhyme the landscape," a world of streets and roads taken inside a squeezed-up life that poetry liberates you from. So the book can be a lullaby and I read it in bed.

David Rosenberg suggested I contrast the book with my own practice at the time of its composition. In the 70s I was beginning to carve out a place for myself as a woman, in a literature almost exclusively male for thousands of years throughout all the cultures I knew about. I tried to master the male genres (lyric, epic, narrative, etc.) at the same time as creating my own forms; I sought an athletic excellence of accomplishments at the same time as I had to write poems corresponding to my life's circumstances and influenced by the poems of those around me in New York. I was ultimately to come to the conclusion that the depth and extent of the exclusion of women poets from previous literature was an unfathomable void that no man was ever going to be capable of understanding. The suppression of women from poetry was an incomparable loss, a tragedy for me and everyone else. By the mid-80s I was plainly articulating this black dilemma. Our poetic record is the male face, consciousness, force. If I read to judge, I must think about this awesome and overwhelming circumstance. I don't mean it as a test, but then I do: almost every male poet, until after my generation, fails it. Nichol does.

The poem is lovely. It contains no women: it contains no people except the poet's consciousness, which is all the words and letters chosen, all the rhymes, puns, and silliness (a point of praise). You are asked constantly to be inside him, though he isn't self-centered in the usual meaning of the term. He gives you playfulness and depth and soothingness. Do I identify with him in any way except as a poet? No. But it is a gentle consciousness and the only one he has, especially now that he's dead: it's the one he's given us a present. No, he never addresses my problem or me; he doesn't address the reader, despite the considerable intimacy of the writing. He addresses god, God is his You, and though this God is not your usual one, he is pretty Male. The particulars of the poem are taken largely from givens of map and grid. There's a map of a quarter in Toronto at the beginning of the volume (though the poet also travels), and the map is the site of transcendence; it is a poem – its lines; it is where Sts, streets or saints, are located, and God is talked to.

> Spoke to you Lord ...
> Maker who spawned makeds

raised these temples for you gestures of their awe
I name the places for you ...
I make this [???] glyphs for you

There is a sort of Mrs. God who is referred to once or twice, but she doesn't really take:

Mother
White Lady
Goddess
the less is known of You
the less is sung
You grow old & lonely when Your children leave You
vindictive it's said
rain Your rage upon our worlds

Well, this is kind of ridiculous. Nichol sounds slightly Whalen-esque here, but Phil had an actual relationship with the Goddess, come through Buddhism and his personal loves, which isn't even corny. See his poem "Goddess": "Where I walk is with her ...". The Goddess is shown as half of existence, and thus half of him, inside and out, intermixed: the two of them together are the whole sphere of the earth.

As long as I'm talking about bp and Phil, I should bring in the visual and pictorial angle, which is of some relevance. I suspect Nichol of getting a lot of his permissions for drawing on the page, for layout and visual glyphs – and this is all delightful, and taken to a different place – from Phil. Phil's visual imagination, though, comes first from the outer world through the eye, then down to the page. Or from the visual imagination, and worldly, through the mind's eye to the page. Nichol's eye relates most strongly, for much of the book, almost exclusively, to the page.

picture a man (31) narrating this poem

picture a man (36) typing this final draft

picture the man they speak of
who is almost them

picture the man who writes
(myself)

a pose or the real thing?

& picture me
spoken of by the man telling
telling in my turn.

One will have noticed that are, in fact, no pictures here, there is nothing to visualize whatsoever, no literal detail for the eye. It is an idea, a quite interesting train of thought, that the reader is probably satisfied by, seeing nothing in particular. Here is an excerpt from "Whalen's All About Art and Life," surely Nichol's model:

PICTURE: a wood-engraving by Bewick
GIANT WOOLY COW

PICTURE children, their faces concealed
By their hats which are heads which are
flowers

PICTURE: Leonardo: Madonna & Child, with
5. Giovanbattista ...

PICTURE: 2 Bedouins praying in sand / ocean a camel
with square quizzing-glass on head

PICTURE: All of us when we were young before you
were born

This is a mix of literal 'pictures' – paintings, imaginary pictures like paintings, and then the headbuster koan of the final one I wrote (there are several others). Nichol's poem binds one deliberately to the page, being written in a style I associate with the 60s and 70s that employs the lower case I and little punctuation, and in doing so makes the physical poem its room and/or landscape. Nichol is perhaps apotheosizing his manner here, and I'm willing to go there, into apotheosis, with him. This style in general used to drive me nuts, but now it doesn't.

As the poems or sections (demarcated along the sides of pages by numbers in the way that dictionaries sometimes are by letters) becomes less journal-like, the book achieves its form not through subject – though subject is always simmering underneath – but through change of shape, a release of emotion and tension into new forms on the page. I found this movement gratifying, because

I didn't have to keep track of anything – information, people, events. Section 4 is particularly beautiful, it fells like the ending in the middle and probably is the true climax of the volume. This is where "St Reat," having evolved from "St Reet" in the previous section, becomes the hero of the book, the straight road, the saint who is going to some sort of heaven somewhere! The words come apart, to become more and more contorted:

bridge d is
carded
voices
lie
no after no ons
blow n conscious
dif f
idence

how clou
dwha tso
ci a lwa sHali
fax

As reader I was fascinated but became tenser and tenser working out the 'sense' of the words (I couldn't always do that), and so I was incredibly relieved when the poem finally became staves of music with words following the shapes of actual notated tunes.

It should probably be mentioned that section 7 is a play, with characters, stage directions, dialogue, the characters being saints, so one is presumably being referred to Stein. But actually we are being shown that a play is the appropriate form for the drama of life, which the poet is living offstage and which isn't finally what 'it' is all about, especially if one is part of the company of saints. 'It' is the poem and poetry, it isn't specific events, because no one really knows what they are: one moves through them as one moves through this book. They – events – are defined by definers, and one asks do we need the definers at all? This is a satisfying meaning that I picked up the second time through (and so got to store some more meanings in the meaning place – why not?).

Essentially, I find the construction of the book of great interest. Placing the section numbers to the side is a good invention – the

book doesn't really contain section, it contains twelve poems; but there's more than that. A verticality is emphasized that's part of the work's flow. This is difficult to articulate – the book's shape seems to be exactly the way it's published here by Coach House Press. I know I'm being asked to call the work an epic, but I don't find that word correct. I'm often asked to call books or series of books epics – there is certain pressure on one when great length is involved. This is a book. I don't know what the other books of *The Martyrology* are like, I admit. But the 20th-century long poem is not veering towards the epic, so much as redefining the nature of the relation of the poem to the book. And why shouldn't it be? A book as mass-produced (and now virtual, perhaps) is a radically changing form; the poem's relation to it changes too. A collection of poems is still possible: yes: but if you envision a book when writing a poem because it has become less and less of a big deal, through the ages, to publish one, the occasion of a poem changes. The poem presses towards the book it will be in, and the individual poems start to stick together in different ways. Once you begin to ask 'What book am I working on?' not 'What poem am I writing?' everything changes.

Finally, *The Martyrology,* Book V leaves me thinking, once again, about how boring the standard novel has become. It simply doesn't know what to leave out anymore. This book is an indicator of how much can be left out without one's feeling that anything has been omitted. Sound is an integral part of character, setting, and story: you don't need all that exposition. You need literal poetic overtones, the music of the speaking voice that the poet puts within and between the words: it's almost everything.

On First Opening Nichol's Chaucer

George Bowering

Canterbury Tales, it's a long poem that has to incorporate – that's a good word, with the gross corp, the body in there, the fart wheel, the big peckers and pants full of shit – or am I supplying those latter, a lusty woman with a gap between her front teeth, like Anselm Hollo, the church on one horse, the bawd on another, and I remember that Anselmin 1966, a year before he started on his lifetime's epic, wrote naughty words in the gleaming pigeon poop on a bridge in Hyde Park, poetry gone contrary in the whited sepulchre.

So Charles Olson's own pilgrimage, celebrating or detailinh a Massachusetts fishing town older than U.S. history and lately filled with Italians instead of Adames, makes the most recent great Amerk poem, out of narrative and a giant smoking man's breath, necessarily oppositional, a form of love that "is form, and cannot be without/ important substance," one substance being the "gurry of it" that the speaker, so we have been taught to call him, is covered with, so that this big human mammal boasts the holes in his shoes, "my fly/ gaping, me out/ at the elbows" – the funniest misdirection in midcentury poetry, but is it really misdirecting? Someone he purports to be quoting says that in the face of sweetness a poet should

> piss
> and go
> sing,
> thus going "contrary."

This is a hundred years, isn't it, after Emily Dickinson of Massachusetts said to tell it slant, the truth.

T.S. Eliot, who knew something about a long poem, did not omit the smellier parts of the human anatomy – it was just that he assigned them to the lesser among us mortals. Modernism, his kind, called for education and taste, those things that the cloacal

James Joyce was often accused of lacking but which he was rather forgoing. In his poetry, however, he was all dews and dawns, and his verses were tiny pale-skinned creatures, hardly longer than a sigh.

When I read the first volume of *The Martyrology,* whenever that was, half a lifetime ago, I had been told that this was a poem written as a book, this was a book – yet I looked in vain for what you'd grown used to finding up front in a book, a page, after you'd turned some stuffing but before you'd got to the meat, on the verso side, filled with information about the coming into print of what is immediately to follow. Not there: all we got was a kind of colophon at the end, letting us know that Jerry Ofo had illustrated and printed this volume, and that Coach House Press had claimed to have run a thousand copies in "early spring 1972."

OK, no – what is that page called? – but one's troubles had only begun. As someone else has pointed out, we had to give up hope of seeing bp knuckle under and start the poem. There are, I don't know, twelve pages of *prefatory* stuff before we get to the title page, all of them suggesting that the book may have begun. We know that it is the title page, I think, because at the bottom, inside Jerry Ofo's border, it says:

The Coach House Press Toronto

.....

But that's not my topic. It's fart wheels and pissing poets, and this stuff in Nichol's long poem far before we get to *Organ Music* – which I could have sworn was incorporated, the way *Scraptures* were.

In Gertrude Stein's plays the saints never move, because they aren't really supposed to have bodies. Well, Stein is the first person Nichol quotes, but that's, maybe, before the books starts; "so many bad beginnings," *The Martyrology* begins.

In our legal-psychological system we make allowances for bad beginnings. What about our literary system? How many beginnings can a poet get away with? Eliot said our beginning is our end, or was it the other way around? He was nostalgic for the ideal. He was careful when it came time to piss. There was a lotus in that pond.

Just after the dedication page, which is inside the poem, we're instructed:

> the breath lies
>
> on mornings like this
> you gotta be careful
> which way you piss

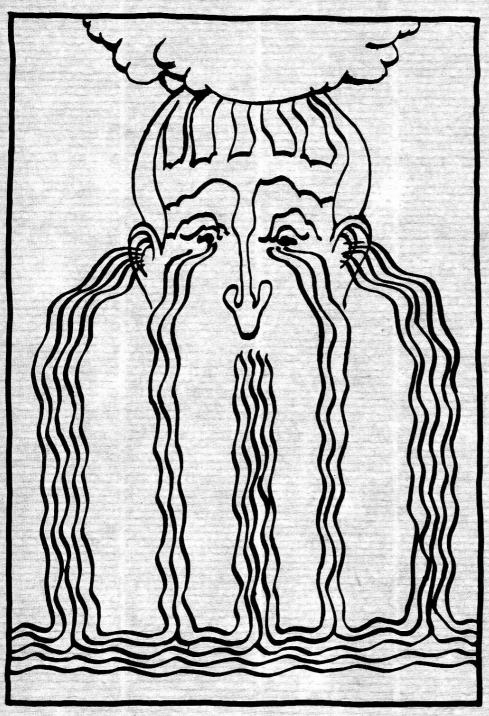
In the face of sweetness, I assume; here is a poem begun in 1967, a centennial project, as they used to say, a hundred years after they started a serial county called ca-na-da, but a handful of years since *The Maximus Poems* was first published and became the presiding long poem in the New World.

Not that bp Nichol was engaging in a pissing contest. Olson played the role of a large unkempt legend; bp was more likely to break into a Fred Astaire song, and sing it worse than Astaire did.

And for this low postmodernist no blow was too low:

> December 67
>
> the undated poem is
> found and
> forgotten
> passes
> like gas

Another bad beginning – or a saintly poem that starts with pissing and farting? A warning that no matter how touched you may be by the prayers to come, form comes into being when the thing is born, and you should never give up having some damned fun with the fundament – it's like abc, where nothing is sacred, and so is everything else.



BOOK 3

The Music of Pure Thought: Notes on *The Martyrology* Books 3 &4

Lewis Warsh

Though *The Martyrology* makes endless references to the specific details of one particular life, 'bpNichol' remains an elusive shape-changing character, shifting from the center to the periphery, from a present 'self' to a person with a past. He leaves traces of himself behind but most of the time he's moving too quickly, much like Whitman, as if he's about to catch a train, so that the sum of all the different parts never add up to a whole. While Whitman moved across the page, Nichol's poem tends to flow downward, in blocks of stanzas where all the lines run together. It's faster, more breathless than Whitman who makes us pause at the end of each line and look around.

The words on the page are on the page but the poem's essence is hovering above the ground. There are no trapdoors or invisible pulleys, but something is hidden and unspoken. The poem is an ongoing attempt to say what can't be said. Simplicity as subterfuge. And in the attempt to say one thing, something else happens, an unfolding. Something that wasn't here – the beginning of everything – totally naked.

Sometimes self-consciousness feels like an intrusion, in the same way that 'thought' (or 'consciousness') can be metaphor for prison. As Thoreau describes his own prison experience, the bars of the jail are meaningless – since it's only the body that's locked away. Can't ever lock up the spirit. Possibly the ultimate form of self-consciousnesss is the awareness that one is alive in the moment. This leads to the question: can one ever not be aware that one is alive? It's hard to imagine 'forgetting' one's aliveness, but it's easy to do. You have better things to do with your time.

Nichol presents the outline of who he is in the moment – and until the early parts of Book 4, the approach to self never changes. It's

relentless, defining borders between self, body, other people, nature, only to reinvent these borders a few pages later. He gives the illusion of being in control of something – reimagining what the artfulness of a poem might be, something 'real' yet uncaged – but he ends up going over the falls in a barrel. He's so much in the poem that he ends up disappearing.

Nichol is a poet-child of the 1960s, a period of time where the only place that made sense was the present. Memory felt redundant then, associated more with maudlin alcoholic regret, a needless playing out of the past. There was always something happening in the present. One had to excise the demons. One had to get over it all. If you weren't in the present, where were you? Nichol filters the past as it occurs to him, in glimpses, as anecdote, echoes of childhood voices. He tries to stay true to notions of genuineness and authenticity, tries to make the poem define what these terms mean. He wants to isolate the most organic way of thinking and let that way guide the poem. As if it was really possible to 'go with the flow,' and let everything else take care of itself. Sometimes, in its darker places, the poem seems to be a cover-up for what isn't there, the unmentionable, the searchlight flicker amid the detritus of an old attic. The real wandering, in the 1960s, was happening in real time. Even yesterday is a distant memory, as far back as any past you might conjure up.

I first read bpNichol's poems in 1967 when I reviewed a small book of his for *Poetry Magazine*. He actually refers to this book in Book 4 of *The Martyrology* – a small book published by Coach House Press, *Journeying & The Returns*. He goes back to the house where he wrote that book, ten years before. The poems in *Journeying* were in the Creeley/Williams tradition – lyric, short-lived, intimate, intense. The pages of the book were gray – the words disappeared onto the page. I liked it a great deal, and the book as physical object as well. I was 23 years old, same age as the author. It was interesting to be drawn to something without knowing why, except that his poems reminded me of everything else that I was reading, especially the Black Mountain poets. Of the Objectivists, I knew Zukofsky best, but not much was available. In those days, there was still a lot of excitement in the air

generated by the poets in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* (1945-60) anthology, but the Objectivist revival had not yet happened. It was inspiring to think that this Canadian poet, whom I'd never read before, was also exploring this tradition.

I've never liked the word 'martyr.' It has a slightly masochistic edge – like you're feeling pain and secretly enjoying it. Maybe I'm just frightened of my own impulses in that direction. I'm never sure how bpNichol is using the word 'martyr' – like he's dying for poetry? I don't think one has to be a martyr for anything. It also sounds like the word 'victim' to me. But there isn't a trace of bitterness in this work.

No matter how much Nichol insists on the present as the measure of preceiving, this is a poem which also includes memory, the *memoire involuntaire* that Walter Benjamin refers to when writing about Proust in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." "Emergent consciousness," says WB quoting Freud, "takes the place of a memory trace." "Becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are incompatible processes within one and the same system." For Nichol, memory is almost a physical act, like chopping wood, and the shifting from line to line recreates the process by which memory happens. There's the conscious act of remembering which could happen at any moment, and there's the memory triggered by something that happens in the present. The song on the radio brings back the memory. It happens, so to speak, out of the blue. Nichol's strength is to recreate the act of mind wandering through bliss consciousness in and out of the present.

The Martyrology is Nichol's epic, his *Paterson,* his *Maximus,* his *A*. There are more differences between these book-length poems than similarities. I never get the feeling that he's "trying" to write a long poem. The smaller poems in *Journeying* were tight and fragile but *The Martyrology* is muscular and vulnerable. I don't think of it as a journal but time passes like in a journal and things happen. Many things happen.

As always, it's the approach (or sensibility) that guides the poem. The soulfulness of it all, as if there's no place else to be but right there. Nichol is both passive and aggressive without being pas-

sive-aggressive, meaning that he seems to be letting the language flow through him, while also going beyond himself. The impatience with the possibilities of what words can say is part of the big theme, more so in Book 4. He's grappling after the unknown but finding it when least expected. The reference points, like the earlier epics by Williams, Zukofsky and Olson, are self and place and then everything else. But in a way *The Martyrology* is more restrained than the other long poems. It's all of a piece, the shape of the writing doesn't vary. Everything meets the demands of the process of writing. Nor are there any defining moments. Everything is presented on the same plane, at the same scale. He goes over the edge, and then pulls back. He always pulls back.

"Faint words in the evening air," he writes, "send you looking for paper to write them down someone to read them to." As you write you read the words aloud. There's a plaintiveness in the tone that sometimes imperils the whole project. This is also Nichol's high card and somehow he has it both ways. He's daring you to tell him that you can't write this way. He never crosses himself out by denying what he said before i.e. there's no irony in tone that makes us think he doesn't really mean it. There's no going backwards except in time. He just goes on.

Book 4 is like a wake up call, the future is now. The words cease to be words, the unit is the letter. The sound of the word conveys the meaning. Nichol comes back to the original tone but the way the letters fall apart and then recombine to create something different ("no t, no e, no w, for w's sake") is the highpoint of the poem. Suddenly everything is bathed in starlight. The hollowness which permeates the entire Book 3 (as if something is missing, as if language is necessary to fill up space) miraculously disappears. An escape from prison!

the skin

sink
in

ink's
sin
is

no sin

Zukofsky replaces Whitman as guiding influence. Nichol is comfortable in the role of singer but he's also invested in the mystical energy of individual letters. You can sound out a poem instead of just reading it. Nichol is connecting and invigorating traditions of oral and concrete and lyric poetry and making it work as one thing. Instead of closing down, the whole world opens up. You get the feeling of a person in dire need using everything at his disposal. It's like being in the middle of a blizzard, with a light at the end.

“Making in a Universe of Making” after Book 5 of *The Martyrology*

Tony Tost

The morphology of *The Martyrology* – felt as an areal knowledge, or Ariel’s knowledge, an aerial knowing. Carl O. Sauer’s morphological postulates: 1) “there is a unit of organic or quasi-organic quality ... a structure to which certain components are necessary, these component elements being called ‘forms’; 2) “similarity of form in different structures is recognized because of functional equivalence, the forms then being ‘homologous’”; 3) “the structural elements may be placed in series.”

The morphological method, for Sauer: a “working device, the truth of which may perhaps be subject to question, but which leads nevertheless to increasingly valid conclusions.”

Nichol: “the way I think of ’pataphysics is that very often you climb a fictional staircase that you know is fictional; you walk up every imaginary stair, you get to your imaginary window and you open your imaginary window, and there is the real world.”

The real world, in its wholeness, cannot (to its glory) be merely understood.

Goethe’s morphology:

> When I see before me something which has already taken shape, inquire about its origin and trace back the process as far as I can follow, I become aware of a series of stages. Naturally, these cannot be observed side by side with the physical eye but must be pictured mentally as a certain ideal whole.
>
> Inclined at first to postulate certain stages, I am finally compelled, since Nature never proceeds by skips and jumps, to regard the sequence of uninterrupted activity as a whole, annulling individual details so as not to destroy the total impression.

That is, a "certain ideal whole" is that which bubbles up as vision: it includes as itself a certain sequencing of time, the uninterrupted activity of wholeness into which particulars weep. Nichol's revision: this uninterrupted activity is not just pictured mentally (the rational mind relies upon the spatial repose of picturing) but it is *felt*, viscerally, as *making*. And often as particular words.

The Martyrology registers the distance words have traveled, to be used. Emotion is Nichol's registration. A name is the dreamlife of ghosts. Donna, his sister, passed away at six weeks of age, at their mother's breast: in his poem (as in his life) she breathes through the difference in her younger siblings' names: Deanna, Don.

We all, a name says, fall: but only to be dispersed. So a window opens.

The imagination is a court with the real seated at its throne.

> Niagara raga in
> the night
>
> silver moon
> a sliver
> l(u)siver
> falls & phalls
> scar of cars moving
> head slight glare
> tail slight pulling away
> pen t' up
> down stroke the hand
> o.k. eh

Pound:

> What you depart from is not the way
> and olive tree blown white in the wind
> washed in the Kiang and Han
> what whiteness will you add to this whiteness
> what candor?
> You who have passed the pillars and outward from Herakles
> when Lucifer fell in N. Carolina.

Must one weep to be a bearer of light? Lucifer fell in N. Carolina (where I be) as a star shower now dispersed into the "head slight glare" of a multitude: the moving (s)cars. Light annuls in each.

The movement: away from causal geography (O Sauer) and causal mythology (Charles O) and away from a police-like knowledge of cause and effect: into expression.

Dispersal is the expression of a fall: a name is the expression of ghosts: a saint expresses a unity it cannot claim as its cause.

An expression may repeat itself into an insistence.

TRG: "we see the poem as a visual whole before we read it. Perceived optically as a complete unit the page is qualified to such an extent that it ceases to function as an arbitrary receptacle, or surface ... becoming instead the frame, landscape, atmosphere within which the poem's own unity is enacted and reacted upon."

Book 5: an icon of *The Martyrology* as a whole: the non-unity is apprehended with a certain suddenness. That is, there are also all these other Books. Each has situated itself *as* anticipation even as I insist upon returning to this particular Book.

Karl Heinz Bohrer, on the moment of aesthetic appearance: "Only in the tension of anticipatory time can literature be experienced in an immediate sense."

For Nichol, the immediate is the expression of the absolute. Anticipation must perform a role in this.

Similarity is the anticipation of a certain ideal whole: an expression of wholeness: there be a resemblance of usage as there be a resemblance of origin as there be a resemblance of structure.

Noise is the kiss of origination: a beginning song, the sound of making.

Understanding is the sound that takes.

In resemblances, usage is masked *as* understanding.

The morphological method: an origin is to structure itself *in* usage, *within* the becoming of an ideal whole.

Origins have many uses.

A pun is the anticipation of origins, of the difference that continues to make.

Life: the sign that remains unspoken, like Peirce’s mind: a sign that sings among signs.

Nichol: “the pain inside the language speaks”

Tonight I am reading St Nichol and/or St Hopkins, to feel the dapple-dawn-drawn and/or blue-bluer-blur.

So to speak is to buckle: to fasten and/or collapse.

> the moment at hand
> the thrust of the poem
> the cumulative weight of your own history of a writing
> pushing you into this shock of perception
> it all crumbles
> all falls away

To be dispersed.

The theatre of the instant: the stage upon which the saints do their speech.

Disappearance: the staging of understanding (this can be performed by words).

Olson: “(The distinction here is between language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant.)”

The silences between words are also an act of the instant (they also are to be stripped of their beauty).

The spaces between the words

> *are* what “the ear takes in”
> *are* what “the mind cannot encompass.”

Those silences are the pivots upon which a thought relies: the looks that thoughts are due.

“Somewhere you are happy,” a silence says, “in the language of another day.”

Pun: thought expelling its own difference.

A pun is mostly the space between two words (the pain inside the language speaks):

pan
  pun
vowelgrrgyrations pon
pinning
    down
pen
     that ponders only when
the writer's home
de
 script
    tion

A world also speaks its own insistence:

forward into my present past
eyes ryme the landscape . . .

i'll make my way
into whatever future the poem holds for me
this issue of time
          of ryme

The issue of time is the tissue of I'm.

A punning time rhymes itself as a crying between words: a word giving birth to the sound of an origin that its usage may be.

When time is organized into repetition it is felt as insistence, a hymn of belief:

did not believe
the comics i read in sunday school
only in You
only in You
only in You
only in You
only in You
only in You
only in You
only in You

only in You
only in You

that insistence

that phrase’s
praise of You

only of You

only of You

only of You

There is a functional equivalence in repetition, a mark of insistence and/or belief:

cruising endlessly among the letters
seeking the connecting streets
the St Reets that inhabit this plane
cruising at an altitude measured in megathots
an attitude
a particular point of view
bird’s eye

Each pun a step towards an aerial knowledge, not to be reduced to a physical eye.

The pun is plot.

A silent space (between the words) inside a pun: the immediate knowing of an anticipating, absolute whole.

A pun is head: is also punished. It can open up an actual I.

Is the pain that words pin down, the erring of difference; the expulsion of one identity to reveal an other. Or: where one first hears of the truth, the *the* that dreams itself as another wor(l)d:

explaining to someone the other day
how the saints come to me in the writing
how i speak to you Lord
then as now
moments when the channel opens
my eyes fill with tears
tho i hang back from the full feeling
wonder ‘is this real?’

its real when i talk to you
speak the saints by name
call my friends forth
into the instant of the poem
make connections from form
back into content

to say as i see
tho too often it still disturbs me
write around the truth sometimes
i give my trust over to the lines
i hang from
a climber in the cloud range
i don't know the one in front of or the one behind me
sense them in the line's play
a tension or an easing of the same
i let that climb continue as it may

Donna today it seemed to me
you could've been a writer

The Martyrology, Book 9: Ad Sanctos

Fred Wah

"Music at the Heart of Thinking" is an ongoing cycle of poems that respond to texts and other cultural productions. These six are in response to *Ad Sanctos*, a choral performance work, bpNichol/words, Howard Gerhard/music, *The Martyrology Book 9*, 1986-87 (Coach House Press, 1993). "Book 9" is the last published segment of bpNichol's life-long poem. In the summer of 1988, just before his untimely death, I discussed with him loose plans he had for further books of *The Mart*, at that point projected into Book 13. Somewhere in his notebooks there should be fragments or sketches of the ongoing work both before and after he had completed the libretto for *Ad Sanctos* in 1987. The Coach House publication provides both Nichol's "Words" and Gerhard's "Music."

As we know, Nichol was intimately interested in theatre and 'the sacred.' The numerous saints of *The Mart* provide Nichol with what he calls a "no-gimmees relationship" to belief as well as a compositional measure applied within his processual poetics. The narrative of *Ad Sanctos* uses the device of *mise en abyme*, plays within plays. A troupe of "poor pilgrims" (that includes i, she, he, we, they, david, a writer, a reader) are "on their way to be buried by the tomb of" St. Valentine. The pilgrimage involves performing to raise money for the venture and arguments and divisions about the location of the tomb. As Nichol comments, "There is no peace in escaping into death."

Music at the Heart of Thinking 140

Having tried trumpet
stutter up front
as a slip
of the tongue

as the length of meaning fades
adjust the lips
on every second note

you learn the fingering
in the stomach
much like the taste
of metal

these are the keys
to this grave
C, G, A flat
B, F, F sharp
– major

each valve is designed
to extend
the moment of language

if she plants
in the spring
they eat
in the fall.

Music at the Heart of Thinking 141

david a man
carries a triangle

david mistakenly prints
two poems as one

david submits
to bpnichol dot ca

david is very familiar
with his name®

david's in the stagnate

city called home

david is the you
in the alphabet

who sighs
at the wrong love song

who writes
on the long road

if david is less you
more me

Music at the Heart of Thinking 142

Oh God please give us
a second chance
we'll hit the nail
square on the head
we'll dance for love
instead of shadows
if you'll forget
our other prayers
we'll build a house
out of bananas
something concrete
we can hang onto
turn the plans
into the body
tap the feet
into their soles.

We'll tear it down
and start again
do it right
make no mistakes
swing the hammer
kick the door
if we could have
another go
we'd never take no
and never say die
we'd teach our kids
to take a stance
live all the lines
build with stone
O Lord won't you give us
that second chance.

Music at the Heart of Thinking 143

i's pitch pipe the necessary deictic to the speaking event's absolute moment or epidemic index *of* the idea is to be perfect genitive also known as the infamous "Patient Zero" a designation whose tense has become a rolling St One just to remind us that "They're still here!!" this icon is as old as a racehorse just another temporal succession called "A Singer's Hell" but we hums same

old same old in F minor just witness the Stars and Stripes identical to the founding colonies arrows, errors, eros of St. Valentine flying this severed portion of contagious magic alive alive O every so often repeating the absolute pitch of the self meditating on its own second chanceness if only she would play the 2x4 and hammer as the fragment surfaces into the mouth trap to decide and tumble counter-clockwise between tumbling and directed swimming no geometric chance because the cell evokes memories how the hell could they get home to the tomb he says the one I found but she does too shocked to learn of the flag as an emotionally surcharged problem ok cuz here and now only lasts three seconds that's why this text has proper pauses to emphasize that the 3-second time window appears to be fully used up though he intuitively keeps trying the holy road not the now mistaken inchoate road so they needs the *Indicator indicator* to cymbalize the way to the honey crotch of dying while the chorus marches to the drum of we's snare.

Music at the Heart of Thinking 144

this is the love poem:
this is the symptom:
this is the footprint:
this is the clue:
this is the sand:
this is the island:
this is the trail:
this is the song:
this is the syllable:
this is the diagnosis:
this is the scat:
this is the index:
this is the referral:
this is the snapped twig:

this is the drop of oil in the water that metaphorically becomes the manual of *Reconnaissance and Scouting* or Osprey fishing for the letters that could be attached to the diagram of *the* sought and dreamed of City:

this is the single black hair root on a small piece of film displayed in the head lines still in love wanting that good song to be sung inging it ahead into the dark just beyond the high beam hoping for the poem home.

Music at the Heart of Thinking 145

that in this life alone becomes complete it all looks done and zeroed in on one a stony stone a perfect single rock we be sunk down becoming moan

that in this life the stranger seems to be the only one in town who knows the song the one that starts with “Oh” and ends “Just passing through”

that in this life the pronoun’s heart breaks i to you and triple tongues a “me me me” whose echoes overlap inflected waves of them, us, they, and we

that in this life when the meaning’s over and the dog heads down to the creek when the ol man’s gone and the lights go out the last leg falls asleep when one turns to zero thinking’s complete it’s reached the end of its sentence.

Learning from *Gifts – The Martyrology Book(s) 7&*

Susan Wheeler

> Is not dread of thirst when your well is full, thirst that is unquenchable?
>
> – Kahlil Gibran

Not collage, not even bric olage, but braiding. Not collage, not bricolage, not braiding. Collage, yes, bricolage, yes, braiding, yes. Not lyric, but graphemic. Not graph e mic, not lyre ic. Of course, yes, both. Check:

- ☐ modernist
- ☐ postmodernist
- ☐ auto bio graph
- ☐ bi l dung sro man
- ☐ Stein
- ☐ Stand
- ☐ eat Christ
- ☐ fuck God
- ☐ unraveling
- ☐ acc ruing
- ☐ self-immolate
- ☐ self-aggrandize
- ☐ hum a nest
- ☐ situ at i onist
- ☐ strung
- ☐ hammered
- ☐ piled
- ☐ farted
- ☐ the dark
- ☐ the light
- ☐ naïve
- ☐ né
- ☐ red

☐ reckon
☐ the dead the dead

Yes, of course, St. And. Now get out of my fucking face and don't tell me to pray.

bpNic as inkblot. Hagiography, or *nicholphilia*, as Masters Wilcke and Samuels have put it. Another says: led out of the dark wood by Virgil, the Character.

> The trick is, rather: how to keep all the balls up. Hi.

Could anyone hearing him speaking Book Two's "friends as footnotes" (how more tersely put could be our bent to reflect only ourselves in our elegies for others?) shirk the Lyric bpN and its burden, a Calling to turn out his Gifts with His Gifts?

Could anyone stumbling down the irregular steps of *love: a book of remembrance*'s "Against Explanation" or dipping into the pool of the diachronic in its "Allegory #27" not acknowledge his material linguistics?

And by Book 5, when Nichol writes,

> who took the im from mortality . . .
>
> > you do what you can
> > ask *of the walls you live in*
> > *fingers & a way of loving*

don't we sense the burning of the shifting ~~eye~~ I, the letter, the pronoun, the voyager whose job it is to remove that syllable, the "im", through the course of a life's work, to prepare for death (by better cleaving to the Good disOrderly Direction of *The Martyrology*, paean, thanksgiving, in the use of said gifts vouchsafed in him) – don't we sense the chafing of the bp figure, character, at the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis the author bp has kept so close – the constitution of the national soul through the word clusters, that of the individual soul through morphemes – and isn't it tempting to see this ethnographic linguistics as cement, both the science in the syntax and the gloppier Modernity, or late Romanticism, or benign and anodyne *humanism*, as Master Derksen has called it –

> And, splat, the balls multiply as they fall,

dub the world or
double it with each gesture

or, from the same "Assumptions:"

semi
idi } otic

Book(s) 7 &'s epigraph is his own journal entry, a drive "to go beyond the point where it is even necessary to think in terms of [THE WORD]." To the speech unit, the construct, the mouth-orifice-making-shape? To the *grok*, the ESP? To the Christus, supplanted by us? If St. And and St. Ein serve as patrons, he must answer YES and YES, make a mess or not (dropping, rising balls), and then noodle a bit at the edge of the wood, not so much to throw us off the scent but to keep himself off-balance.

Ravelling of the double helix.

Forget gift economies, Hyde's *The Gift*. Apportioned the gifts one would think of first, *1's* gifts; then those of the hand-me-downs, or what any poet inherits from the generation come before; then St. Rata's, the "poly ticking of the world clock;" the "em blem" then, AND the "em brace" – dashes both, opening on more of the bodies' wholes. Why throw the yearning for God out with the bathwater? The accrual of lines and curves out with the baby? Vice versa?

The scraps meant to be lost – the *blow-ins*, as they are known in the glossies trade, what point of purchase is to print – the most ephemeral of *The Martyrology*'s pages, fall hard: no air, to my ear, those balls. Consider this, from a "bp: if:"

•

free

dumb

. . .

"free will"
as I was taught it

free to live

free to die

But the messiness, the unhemmed edges, make the palimpsest of the bp *i* a moving thing, and the braided poem what both a poet and a pilgrim need: movement. What registers as accurate to my own – well, writing practice – is the restlessness. In Book(s) 7&, especially, we follow the swing, the tacking of the double negation, then the assertion, the neutral con junction, the linking in the affirmative what seemed at first apposite. In the accrual of "bp: if"s, the "if not bp, then bp." The claiming of faith, the renouncing of faith – the in scription of the word and its mutation:

w a r d
en

[page break]
ters

Also, cheese, citing "the used heart" and its immolation by the (vorticist) blast of "Scraptures: 3rd Sequence." What Pound, Dante, Zukofsky found, hd and Berryman, Williams and Milton less so; what DuPlessis and Silliman are within sight of, aiming or not: an arena with a few kitchen sinks. Accommodating any practice (or, okay *and,* for you: gesture).

For me: how can I keep it an elastic site, a changeling, for in only that will it be true to Your Gifts, God. Discernment through the midrash – or sitting practice's thoughts-as-clouds – or my own, wherein I sense that in the doubt there is movement and the movement toward or away is what cons tit toots belief. If the gifts are math and machi nations, and bathos, and the dismantling of the syntax bully, lament, whine, visual
deep loyment, and false modesty, and false arrogance, make thee of these the single sink and number all in triplicate.

It's mess see when the balls fall, especially from a history of gestalt and R.D. Laing. In *Book(s) 7&* the claptrap of the stage-craft swings from the prop-poles of prayer – these stakes being higher there's further to fall. As it should be; "everything reconsidered then / / take it all in / the bad & the good" (*Book 5)*: to whit.

> the abuse, calumnious,
> that madness of simplicity
>
> . . .
>
> (more
>
> all I tease meaning out of
> tricking the words
>
> this life
>
> and why a wife took me, baby,
> took me a wife

The weft of the *Monotones* and St. Anzas, the warp of Assumptions, the *Scraptures* falling, disappearing as they fall. The cloth on which he lay the gifts for Thee.

The Authentic Poet in the Late 20th Century: Ted, bp, and Araki Yasusada

David Rosenberg

A Postmortem Surveillance of:

Collected Poems, by Ted Berrigan. (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005).

The Martyrology, Books 1 to 9, by bpNichol. (Toronto: Coach House Books, six volumes, 1972-2003).

Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada, edited and translated by Tosa Motokiyu, Ojiu Norinaga, and Okura Kyogin, copyright by Kent Johnson. (New York: Roof Books, 1997).

Also, With My Throat, I Shall Swallow Ten Thousand Swords: Araki Yasusada's Letters in English, by Tosa Motokiyu, edited by Kent Johnson and Javier Alvarez, copyright by Kent Johnson. (Providence: Combo Books, 2005).

(for Rhonda, who asks)

My early teachers and models were consumed with the idea of an authentic voice, from Lowell and Plath to Ginsberg and O'Hara. Yet none of them, anymore than their predecessors in Williams and Pound, thought to carry on an authentic conversation with himself – with life, love and death on the line. Their poetic voices are 'charged' language, performances, however manically the buttons of verisimilitude are pushed. At best, the reader is an intimate audience of a hermetic theatre. My last teacher in the writing program at Syracuse proved the best example. Delmore Schwartz was often out of his mind, coddled or ignored by dilettantish colleagues rather than the psychoanalyst he desperately needed, and at the same time he was struggling to write in a classical voice at odds with his predicament. Within a few months he drove himself to death – strangled by language, we could say.

Sometimes, in a tradition of experimental poets including Stein, Zukofsky, and Ashbery, the reader does become an intimate par-

ticipant; yet it's as a silent actor in the unfolding drama of the poem, rather than as a vulnerable human being in a spontaneous scene from life. At other times, the reader is called up on stage as witness, as in the heartbreaking objectivity of Charles Reznikoff's work. But again, the call is for a silent witness.

There is, however, another tradition of this reader or silent witness becoming active, on the arm of the author in a parental role. If we go back to Shakespeare, to whom Stein was often comparing herself, and if we refer to the author as W.S. while we call the characters in the plays his 'poets,' then the parental W.S. can be seen stepping into character, among his characters, most famously in the 'Who am I?' passages of Hamlet, King Lear, Prospero, Rosalind, et.al. Gertrude Stein began to play with this role in her "operas and plays," most famously in "Four Saints in Three Acts (1932-1934)," where she inhabited the author-as-stage-manager, a downstage figure who parents the childlike saints, profoundly lost "in the moment," the timelessness that renders them innocent of death and transformation.

But allow me to step back a moment and illustrate these initial remarks with a passage from one of our poets under discussion, bpNichol (1944-1988). We will return to him later in the context of his relationship to his contemporaries, Ted Berrigan (1934-1983) and Kent Johnson (1962 –). For the moment, it's useful to be reminded that Nichol was sometimes a critic who wrote about Gertrude Stein. Yet the saints in bpNichol's lifetime opus, *The Martyrology* (1966-1988), are far more substantial than Stein's.

They are first encountered in Nichol's own childhood, in a heaven literally perceived as "cloud town." Through puberty and adolescence the author, inhabiting an "i" in the poem, discerns that language can open up like clouds to reveal our intricate world beneath. As he becomes a poet, he gives new voice to the saints with whom he play-talked in childhood – except that these saints have now fallen to earth and become lost in language. They are confused about sudden transformations of identity (in contrast to the constant of change that moves the clouds). And they are further distressed by the cultural workings of time, the social gains and losses, the memory of births and deaths. As he ages and his poem matures, the parental author steps in and out of the theatre he has

created, to observe not only the character "i" within it but also the author "bp" outside.

from "Assumptions" (Book 7)

…(space to breathe in)
"everything has to change" i said to myself
(i was looking out the window) "changes"
#9 Tram rushing by
Plantage Midden Laan 4:45 on a Tuesday morning in June
another landscape pulling the poem out of you
around you
the description any one of us needs to live in
as in "who am i?", "who are you?", "where am i? &
is that true?"

The poet's questions here have developed from an earlier parallel to Freud's depiction of the "human mental apparatus" and its projection of the psyche onto the landscape. Here that projection is dated June, 1985; the landscape, Amsterdam; and the author is represented by the "i" in the poem. It is the "i" of one's identity that looks out the window and, in the penultimate line, asks "where am i?" This "i" is lost in time, like a saint, for at the actual scene of writing, the "i (who) was looking out the window" is in a dead past the living author bp here recalls. The present writer, bp, is not the one asking "who am I?" – for bp is not "I" – in the present time of writing the poem. If he did ask it, the question would be ironic, even sarcastic. But it is not ironic (or, as bp might write it, "i ronic"); it is instead deeply poignant, as true a question as can be – because of the next line, where "is that true?" *is* a question asked by bp himself at the scene of writing. In other words, even if there were an answer to "who am i?" (and there is: myself, a character recalled) and "where am I?" (in Amsterdam), it is all contingent upon a present author who asks "is that true?" (about not only the specific answer but the poignancy of the time lost and only artfully recalled). It is an unholy and unsaintly cosmic question, and it is also parental, because it is fully conscious of the death (in time) of the "i" as well as the eventual death of the author, bp – but also, further, the death of the reader (an as-yet unborn reader in the future).

A vast majority of professional poets today are not going to alert you to this parental scene of writing and the consciousness of their own death, either because they don't unequivocally believe in it or because it fills them with exactly the kind of dread from which they are escaping into the poem and its poetic 'I'. This is also the declamatory 'I' of academic tradition, which can state the consciousness of its own solitude but cannot parent it – that is, it can't place itself in real history but instead conjures an aesthetic history of poetry, humanity, and various traditions.

Nevertheless, echoing the necessity of Shakespeare and the theatricality of Stein, the authentic poets of my time write, in effect, theatrical plays. Beyond a protean playfulness, they sit in the wings, outside of their poems but not absent – and not merely sit but live, invoking the strangeness of the world and its theatre, the haunting natural beauty of *creatureliness*. Each addresses fragments of himself within the poem: Berrigan in the guise of friends and appropriated lines, bpNichol's childhood saints fallen into language, and Yasusada's friends and family obliterated in Hiroshima. Each is parent to an earlier heroic self before it shattered, the one that imagined itself living vicariously in the poem, instead of outside it. Thus, the poem's theatre now exists primarily to awaken us to the creaturely world in which the author is disguised as himself but essentially just beyond the margin's edge – and made more palpable for being so.

Ted Berrigan strove to make of his reader more than a silent witness, to include her in a real conversation about the poignant brevity of life that went beyond the named conversants in the poem. But Berrigan's personal theatre entailed such an intensity of purpose that his life was constantly in danger of – literally – going up in smoke. He fought through this by translating the artistic minimalist drive of his cultural moment into expansive white space in many of his poems, upon his always literal 8½ by 11 inch piece of typing paper. With enough white space, there was room enough for a dance between friends, reader, and author in the wing of the margin, as if the page was stage enough for Berrigan. Yet he began to work toward coming down from it.

And he succeeded by becoming more alive as the author we imagine re-typing his poem – editing it, preserving it, parenting –

than the high-stepping poet composing it. For his poems can be immensely delicate, the stage on the verge of collapsing, except when we are made disarmingly aware of the author holding *our* arm, a Berrigan determined also to be a kind of post-poem historian of the dance we're experiencing. He may, for instance, appear to find or re-use lost lines of his own, in the guise of historical-minded editor. But in the passage that follows, we encounter first the stage-Berrigan and his typical deadpan of literary failure. At the same time, however, the context makes us aware of the paternal Berrigan on our arm, reminding us of the dangers of poetic pretension:

> "…contemplating my new books of poems
> to be printed in simple type on old brown paper"
> [*from* XXXVI, "After Frank O'Hara," *The Sonnets*]

I shall return momentarily to this personal theatre of Berrigan both in and somewhat outside his poem. Actually, I have a vivid image of him literally on the stage of the Fillmore East on Second Avenue, reading his poems as a kind of warm-up act for the John Coltrane Quartet. In those early hippie days he was in full costume, in a kind of blue-checked circus pants, a yellow t-shirt with a "Peace Eye Bookstore" logo on it, and some sort of scant vest. Plus: blue granny spectacles, dark mane of head-banded hair, beard in full bloom (mustache erased). You could say he resembled something halfway between a street theatre poet and the twitching Coltrane, except that Ted was as lucid and composed as a professor. His work professed to take care of you, clothe you in it, making you comfortable even in an outlandish costume. Once you allowed yourself to be so dressed, at least figuratively, you realized that his words, like his clothes, disarmed the first pretentious parental lesson, the one about making "a good first impression" on the world. Instead, this father figure counsels the riches of thought rather than the world's riches, especially when set down on "old brown paper" – an image from that Fillmore event ingrained in me as one of inevitable aging, although I was barely in my twenties.

And beyond aging, Ted found lines from the past, his own as well as others, to create a stage presence that shimmered between poem and margin, life and death – in which death was always the

"last poem" and life the poet with one leg outside it, "in bed, words chosen randomly."

from Last Poem

…Some words remembered from an earlier time,
"The intention of the organism is to survive."
My earliest, & happiest, memories pre-date WWII,
They involve a glass slipper & a helpless blue rose
In a slender blue single-rose vase. Mine
Was a story without a plot…
…inspired strangers sadly died: everyone
I ever knew aged tremendously, except me. I remained
Somewhere between 2 and 9 years old. But frequent
Reification of my own experiences delivered to me
Several new vocabularies…
…that other people die the source
Of my great, terrible, & inarticulate one grief. In my time
I grew tall & huge of frame, obviously possessed
Of a disconnected head, I had a perfect heart. The end
Came quickly & completely without pain, one quiet night as I
Was sitting, writing, next to you in bed, words chosen randomly
From a tired brain, it, like them, suitable, & fitting…

With the feel of being made up of borrowings, the stage-voice in the poem seems lost, out of touch, the words coming "randomly" – and rescued only by the parental poet Ted Berrigan, as if a found poem. It is Ted listening to his ghost like Hamlet to his ghost-father, only here the verisimilitude of ghost-life is more acute because the poem is, in fact, largely ghost-written from random sources. The poet in bed who is 'composing' his last poem is actually creating a 'decomposition.' As prelude to the natural decomposition of his body in the death following his "last poem," the poem itself disarms or decomposes our ideas of composition.

The redundancy of a 'random choosing' of words, an oxymoron, is itself a choice echo of the scientific concept of natural selection, a parallel to the natural process of the poem. The result is that we are disposed to the paradox at the heart of poetic composition: the grandiosity of the author's voice (it's his *last* poem, for pity's sake) versus the decomposition of that voice, and its artful pretension, by the natural hand of the poet outside the poem. It's precisely his

creaturely presence in the humorous underpinning of the poem that upholds the origin of poetry in natural history, for it's entirely human to wish ourselves more important, more grandiose, than other creatures.

In the poem that follows, we encounter the same lost poet within the poem (but now lost *outside of time*) who wishes to 're-compose' himself and the poetic tradition (represented by the Muse). But as the poem acknowledges scientific reality (eg. "Relativity") the writer on our arm – more precisely, our parental editor – pulls us back to view the larger perspective: our creaturely wonder (no longer an anachronistic "compleynt") at the scene of writing itself.

From Compleynt to the Muse
After Philip Whalen

Lady, why will you insist on
Coming back into my life only when
It's too late, I've just this moment
Ago stepped out the backdoor
Of my body, gone ahead into Relativity…
I don't mind at all, now that I'm simply
Air, a large hunk of see-through molecules…
I am grinning & don't care. I mean, not heavily.
But now you return, and so, I have too,
Into my ashy beard & dusty head, my pink baby's torso
And you are laughing, and I am once again
Lying in the world…

The stage-voice here, the "I" who is not 'heavy', is looking back at a life long dead in time, but it is restored into history by the writing poet, so that this "I" is alive because he is "lying," and not merely in the sense of repose. An art that 'lies' about the finality of death, just as it lies about the voice of the Muse it addresses (as if the gods still exist) is an art to be hauled offstage. But this is also a friendly critique of the poet Whalen, who had become a Zen Buddhist priest living in Japan, for whom the difference between dying and lying was deadpan by doctrine.

In his Vancouver teens, bpNichol was also reading Philip Whalen. He took Whalen's tendency to incorporate his drawing hand into poems and applied it to typography, in some instances pulling

words apart into their constituent letters and then accumulating a drawing from the extra spaces as they descended through the lines of the poem. But for Nichol, deadpan or experiment was never the point. Instead, as we shall see, it was the childlike foil for a critical and lifelong encounter with the necessity of accepting death in the family drama – an inside-out deadpan, so to speak. And more than that, a necessity to confront the inevitable, natural extinction of our species. Since that means that all the art and all the artifice of humanity is finite – as are our languages – the poems we now write must include that awareness (and not merely the finite body in an *ars longa, vita brevis*, usually assumed to mean that art outlives life). Like Nichol, the Berrigan who pointed to the creaturely and inarticulate life outside the poem was species-conscious, though it didn't develop beyond a stock parental gesture for Berrigan.

Meanwhile, his stage persona was free to be in the moment (and thus parody such romantic pretension). Berrigan could be out in the wild, animal-like, while his father figure anchors the home (in the passage that follows, the wife stands in) and is responsible, dedicated to the poem:

> *from* Wishes
>
> …Wish I were walking around in Chelsea (NY) & it was 5:15 a.m., the sun coming up, alone, you asleep at home…

Yet in fact Berrigan *is* at home during the scene of writing the poem and is not "walking around," except in his mind. *That* Berrigan, the one walking the streets, the onstage Berrigan 'of the poem,' remains marginal, compared to the parental one at his desk, (who *really is* at the page's margin, creature-wise, and is the truer subject of the poem). And that is why the stage-Berrigan in the poems can also be depicted as impoverished, or drug-dependent, or cavalierly self-destructive, when his poetic career at the typewriter belies it with a contrasting creative richness. (Incidentally, I say "stage-Berrigan" because it's more authentic than the academic tradition's 'persona'; even within the poem, Berrigan tests the limits of the autobiographical.) So what enriches this art is that it never settles for the poetic. It demands of each poem that it find a new way to pull the rug out from under the conventional dramas

of poetry, insisting upon a theatre where the scene of writing must always be conscious and alive.

Ted's stage, however, was no soapbox. He managed to mostly keep clear of trendy political opinions and fashionable academe, as did bp and Yasusada (and his Johnson). Paradoxically, as the literary avant-garde moved into universities, their poems and prose came to resemble *lectures* (though shorn of the classic roots and contagious friendliness of Stein's). They may often be uproarious but have little to say *about themselves*. And thus they are buttressed with all the old soapbox tricks, however experimental, from carny come-on to speaking in tongues – egoistic sleight-of-hand rarely to be found in Berrigan.

On the other hand, a current *prima donna* poet of Princeton and Oxford, Paul Muldoon, is noted for his virtuosic punning, while seemingly unaware of the cynicism in his work. He takes over a shabby old theatre of academic tradition and dresses up the old soft-shoe. Ted, bp and Kent Johnson are also known as great punners, but their plays on words signify a new theatre that is dependent on such puns for life, for real survival. Whereas Muldoon writes a poem to flatter poetry, the authentic poet strives to *disarm* poetry, so that we are left with a moving, existential question about how to live: "Now what?" For that's our question of today, its author conscious of being lost in the cosmos and speaking to the dead of past and future. It is, in other words, a tragicomic poetry, watching over the old theatrical pride in craft like a parent over his child's prodigious pride in her own feces – prior to toilet-training, of course.

When Ted, bp, or Yasusada trade in political opinions, it is largely for cultural context. Muldoon, however, trades in superior faux-intelligence: "Might it have to do with the gross/ Imports of crude oil Bush will come clean on/ Only when the Tigris comes clean?" (*Horse Latitudes*, 2006). In several of Berrigan's poems, however, he gently chides an older colleague, Allen Ginsberg, for occasionally smuggling a political soapbox into his verse. Ted's work insists on respect for character, especially the author's character boiled down to species consciousness. Before it can step up to self-righteousness, we are made conscious of Berrigan on our arm, solid as an Amazonian parrot.

Nevertheless, Ginsberg is famously capable of satirizing his own political grandiosity, so his opinions are rarely accused of being incongruous. In contrast, Muldoon is hailed for his "fondness for the incongruous" (by those who haven't looked up the definition of 'metaphor'), as if his drive to entertain is the height of virtue. Of course, there is nothing incongruous in Berrigan's work: it was a war for survival, personal and cultural. The cultural context was a time of disillusionment with the 'counter-culture,' a 'youth culture' which turned out to last for about ten minutes but continued on in a state of defiance for years (embodied finally in the punk stance). Ted was one of the first to know it was over, for which the appropriate mask was deadpan and then the various inventive processes of removing the mask. Nothing incongruent about that, possibly because we are speaking of life off the page, in all its desperate laundry. But for acclaimed poets like Muldoon, 'off the page' means the academic hall, literally, and academic tradition figuratively. It means having a big echo, down through the decades if not the centuries. An authentic poet of our time, however, has no echo because even the most incongruous cultural drama imaginable – the mushroom cloud of Hiroshima or "arbeit macht frei" – has happened upon a universal stage on which even the incommensurate is congruous, so long as the boundary between them, between domestic life and Holocaust, for instance, or between written poem and heroin overdose, is respected. That boundary is the author's own life on the line, in the wing of his theatre. His species consciousness and its knowledge of extinction puts him on stage parallel to Shakespeare the actor mouthing a line in his own play ("all the world's a stage…"). Faeries and ghosts from an incommensurate "world" may speak there but they never seem incongruous.

We can see this most especially in the work of Araki Yasusada, where the massive headline of A-bombed Hiroshima would otherwise be too incommensurate to hold in the same consciousness as domestic life – were it not for the 'editor,' Kent Johnson, setting a universal stage. On a more personal level, for bpNichol the daily news of the natural world and the psyche are commensurate with his presence, just outside the poem, as we are made conscious that the margin of the page (and the systems of language it contains) is the boundary. In this natural theatre that includes its creator, Nich-

ol has a special advantage, thanks to Canada, whose massive physical presence outweighs its cultural grandiosity. The huge invisible weight of its northern provinces is always in bp's consciousness, even as forgetting that fact is the main business of its cultural media, huddled down along the 49th Parallel. In the U.S., it was Whitman who had sunk the anchor of America's physicality in the depths of personality, and we will soon see how Nichol and Johnson plumbed it further. Berrigan's sensibility was also capacious enough to turn Whitman's project of speaking to the cosmos into one of reading. It was not even foremost a reading of texts but of the authors of those texts caught ambiently, with pen in hand. The human ape lost in poetry.

I recall an afternoon-long conversation with Ted Berrigan thirty years ago, sitting on the stoop of my St. Marks Place tenement. "You're just like your 'uncle' Harold," Ted was saying, conjuring Harold Rosenberg, the art critic. "Everything you encounter is a question that has to be answered, instead of a thing wanting to be greeted affectionately. That's the same argument Ginsberg had with Kerouac's Republican politics. Jack by then was encountering his own past with suspicion and projecting it out into the world, while Allen could barely tell the difference between an enemy interlocutor and a groupie: it was all Buddhist conviviality now, a kind of all-night party Socialism (as opposed to Socialist party). Allen wanted Jack to join the party again, but Jack wanted to sit home and watch the Republican convention on tv. I love them both, but you, Rosenberg, you just want to interrogate everyone, both Jack and Allen, you don't want to get involved."

Possibly Ted was right; I was boxed in. I actually read 'literary criticism,' even the Higher Biblical criticism. But in those days before Deleuze and Blanchot or Derrida and Kristeva were widely available in English, criticism was often practiced within our poems themselves, in their implications about the authenticity of other works and traditions. Berrigan encountered another's poems and responded in his own: he was a critical historian, his poems a record of reading like no other. Whether Thucydides, a poet friend, or Reverdy, his responses were always a one-two jolt: first, deadpan; then, deadly sobering – reading Reverdy was reading a living dead poet. It was as if Berrigan could become the ghost of himself, reading over the shoulder of other writers – and he would steal their

pens if he could. In doing so, his audience becomes numinous readers, as if we too were dead, like the dead poets of the past – and yet, we're addressed as if we were *re-composed*, alive, as if time didn't exist, as if "5:15 a.m." was the most gorgeous of metaphors.

II.

The one authentic poet who conceived of and completed the project of holding an ongoing conversation with a numinous reader was a Canadian – the "Canadian Whitman," as the transplanted American-born critic Warren Tallman wrote of him. Whereas Whitman seemed to speak to anyone who crossed his path on the open road, bpNichol brought us into his room, to sit beside him at his desk and to be turned to familiarly, face to face, at any line or stanza, as if to be asked: Just what should come next that will not dispel the intimacy of the moment? And yet Barrie was far ahead of any 'poet in the moment,' whether experimental or academic.

The purpose of this conversation was none other than to establish the history of civilization as a universal stage, upon which the living and the dead are equal to the unborn, the future. Thus, our origin in the past remains ahead of us, an inspiring question, as it was for Darwin and Freud. Even the juxtaposition of ancient history with current ("con/ Sumer"), or even the simplest exchange of thoughts with the dead affirms a universal history that survives us – and that marks us as species-bound, and bound for extinction. When Nichol places the scene of writing on this stage, his earlier selves – or even the previous line – clearly denote the past, while the future is buried there too, waiting to be excavated like immortal saints; or, like signs of their language, to be unmasked by letters, words, phrases and stanzas (St. Anzas).

from Assumptions (Book 7)

…the letters let him glimpse a truth
none of which they meant
me ant
(tiny flick amidst the constant din
the distant consonants…
the trick is to keep writing
tho the trick is you're bound to stop
writing…

faint flicker as the light years pass
as the sound waves & disappears
in the gaps between the stars
and all that we are we are
was
and even the is is argued
dismissed…

This universe-wide universal, rendered in light years overtaking sound waves, is parallel to the space between letters overtaken and held together by gravity. And the gravitas of this poem's situation is the writer bp's estrangement from the dead 'we's' of the poem, as they are made gorgeously equivalent to the lost sounds (the gaps) in the language of the stars, made legible by light.

All through the nine singular books of bpNichol's *The Martyrology* (1967-1988) we find this new testament to the union of heaven and earth. It is Nichol's creation of a universal theatre, constructed for poets and readers of the future to encounter as a gateway toward reanimating the past. But the nationalist-bound literary critics of the U.S., who proffer little interest in the future (though much angst) haven't encountered Nichol. Harold Bloom, with his pretension to represent the age, has never read him. Neither have younger poetry critics Ron Silliman or David Lehman, Ann Lauterbach or Ed Hirsch, all of whom I've asked over the years.

Perhaps if he had lived longer…. For here, too, a tragic death at an age earlier than Berrigan, shortened the conversation with his reader. Yet once and for all (in our time, at least), a poet reached back into the original family romance of man, to represent it without fear of literary castration for such presumption. Castrated, for instance, by getting lost in the past, unsure of one's time and place – but saved in the firm anchoring to a room. Windows for eyes and ears, door for "bringing one's genitals in contact with those of another's…" as Freud caricatured it. Or, as Nichol does, we must substitute 'thinking' for "genitals," as when he projects the body into the surrounding prosthesis of a room, a place in which one's inner life can sit, write and walk about. Literate in Freud's theories of origins, Nichol sublimated castration anxiety into the threat of species extinction. If we can no longer be weakened (i.e. castrated) by presuming to control our destiny with knowledge, then consider the threat when

even our signs of knowledge, from language to physical artifact, will be lost in the extinction of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

from Assumptions (Book 7), "Toronto to Vancouver, 1986"

…blue all around you, not sad, 31,000 feet,
a certain relation you assumes…
this world of cloud & possible saints
heaven as you has always imagined it
that pain there, that love, world
you must return to, pass thru another
gate another time, always here
between worlds, points of view
changing because you changes too, me or i, assumptions of
what i knows of i's self
this or that me
cumulative accumulation of
i's dentity, the world's and how i knows of it
knows to have this sky, that colour,
you…

"You" is conventionally the reader, but here it has become the author, observing himself at the scene of writing – imself and the "assumptions" of himself 'above,' into clouds and other assumptions of heaven that ignore gravity. But bp the author *is* gravity: even the saints of his childhood come down to Earth, though they are lost here.

To be perfectly clear, bp the author is not a literary creation, not a double or an alter ego, not a performance as in conventional postmodern fictions. Consider: We have just sent a satellite into orbit dedicated to finding exoplanets around other stars by means of blips and mirrors, because the visuals are still beyond us – and that is how bp sites himself, as a creature lost in time and space but located by traces. In the poem, bp's "i" plays the *fort-da* of finding the boundary between interior and outer world, deepening a literary personality that compares with Whitman. But unlike most experimental writing, the gravity of Nichol's poem is located in the creature outside the margin, a selfhood whose never grandiose lostness among the stars and the organisms is always poignant.

In fall of 2006, I returned to Toronto for an eighteen-hour reading performance (over a three-day weekend) of *The Martyrology*

by the prodigious Nichol bibliographer, J. W. Curry of Ottawa. On the stage where he read, Curry sometimes used a violent voice for the "i's" in the poem, a passionate anger propelling them. "What made you think bp was angry?" I asked him during an intermission. "He was angry with language that appeared to exist by itself, detached from the living breath, what is studied as art or literature in the universities. When he occasionally taught there, he considered every text as artifact first, with its existential context crucial to it. So when his poetry sounds the most arty or experimental it's meant to be insubordinate, to be angry about having to be 'creative.' And that's why I insist on reading in a theatre and not at a university, where the preciousness of art trumps life. In a theatre, anything can actually happen (even when it rarely does). You can wind up on an operating table, odds against your life, and that is where bp is in the 'If' sequence – he's writing it in the hospital bed, before the operation that killed him."

"You say bp took the scene of writing with him, the pen and paper. So why," I asked, "did you ban microphones and recording devices from the theatre? They're just extensions of the theatrical, no?"

"I don't like any distance from the physical act. There's a price to breathing, to projecting your voice, and you should be aware of it. I'm totally exhausted by this reading. You in the audience should feel that too. I think that's what bp was angry about, the way arty language – and its echoes in an academic canon – works against physical presence."

"There's something dramatic in physical presence alone, it tells a story of strain and aging, and the inevitability of dying. I don't dress up. I don't use any makeup, I don't even wash before I go on stage."

The physical feat that Curry embodied, performing the entire nine books of *The Martyrology* in "real time" (equating the scene of writing with the scene of reading) further suggests the Whitmanian. Nichol extends Walt Whitman's physicality as no American poet has. The Walt of Whitman's poems is a creature of the mind, larger than life, though beyond the stance it's hard to see Whitman agonizing at his desk, crossing out and revising lines, or simply sighing. Moreover, Nichol fills in and animates Whitman's lost childhood and lost fatherhood with a Stevensian meditation on

myth (the childhood of humanity) transformed into history (the obligation to "master reality," as Delmore Schwartz has written of Wallace Stevens). That, too, is what the Bible was concerned with, and the biblical echoes in *The Martyrology* are more acute than in Whitman, addressing multiple levels of fatherhood.

"Stevens' *Collected Poems* make a book as important as *Leaves of Grass*," wrote Schwartz upon its publication in 1955; "but," he continued, "the primary philosophical motive leads to a major limitation – the meditative mode is a solitude which excludes the dramatic and narrative poet's human character and personality." After reading *The Martyrology*, we have to disagree with this assessment, as Nichol presents us with a *thinking* personality more vivid than any other. As each line of Nichol's thinks its way forward, unpresupposing, unprepossessed, it sees "the nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is," as Stevens wanted it, but it also dramatizes itself in a universal theatre that renders the reader, at moments, numinous or saintly. It's as if not only do we outlive the author but also, by being made a necessary adjunct to the poem's staging, we live as long as the poem itself, as do readers of the Bible today.

Far from supposing a divine author, we can see the author's personality on stage, thinking with his pen, and we glimpse the author offstage, preparing for death in a lifetime of confronting "nothing more nor less than the blank page." Minimalist experiment aside, Nichol fits this confrontation into our emerging tradition of natural history: a creature evolves within a text, yet remains *without a text* like all other creatures – save for its genome. Stevens did not yet have this Darwinian text to fully consider; Nichol found the way to embody it by showing in countless ways throughout *The Martyrology* how myths of childhood, religion, and intellectual grandiosity can be transformed into a contemporary record of the scene of writing.

from Assumptions, *for Charles Bernstein* (Book 7)

wandered the streets of downtown Berkeley
all morning
the pain in my leg
so intense at certain moments i could not stand
the pain…
notion of the processual
or this talk of doing

to be included with the doing
hauling my leg up the hill
even as this line drags every other line with it
the whole of the Martyrology trailing behind…

The pain recalled – the leg – is of the grandiose "i" in the poem walking, as the writer bp now proceeds in "this talk of doing/to be included with the doing". In other words, the parental "talk" is also painful, an uphill haul, an entire life (in the recalling of the nine books of *The Martyrology*) that engenders bp at the scene of writing. There he sits, the sitting wanderer, legless – but attached to it in memory, and thereby parent (with tender pathos and pity for the pain) to the "i" as it wanders dying through the processional of time. But it's the parental writer who is rendered creaturely; his text is merely memory, as it is for all animals, all of whom experience pain.

We may note here again that Nichol remained influenced by Gertrude Stein's writing process and its suggestion of mammalian consciousness; she had been more prescient than most modern writers in her themes of repetition and variation, replication and mutation. Yet where Stein dramatized theory (in this case, natural selection) Nichol could also dramatize himself. Within the poem, that is. Stein was a master at dramatizing her life in other genres (the *Autobiographies*, for example) but not in poetry. Not like this, where the authorial bp gets his face in the picture:

from bp: if (Book 8)

*
sacrum

say
the whole thing ends

say
you're frightened
of the whole thing
ending

say
cheese

say n't

n't ready

n't ready to die

– September 1, 1988

What the sacrum represents here, as we know historically, is the physical back that will be operated on. Bp did not survive the operation as he survives this poem – though he is not the "you" in the poem, identifying himself with everyone, for that you is another 'i', like all others, and has to die in time. But the bp at the scene of writing survives to the extent he interferes in the poem, refusing the "not ready" and catching himself here gasping for air in the "n't". His formal smile in a photo may recall him, but that gasp is his life in our hands for a moment.

I remember a long day of conversation with Barrie that started at Coach House, where we both had books on press, and continued at his apartment; there, he opened his large artist journals (drawing-size, in order to include all manner of paste-ins) to refer to his essays on Stein's *The Making of Americans*. From Stein's own theory of personality, bp had extrapolated a psychology of language in which syntax and words could break apart into the deeper bonding of families. It was this last notion that transfixed me, since he wasn't talking about a metaphoric family of syntax but rather the genetics of a human family. In other words, what held letters together in words was the parental eye and voice of the lost poet we all once were in childhood, safe (we thought) in the physics of families.

This was 1971. I was well along in my own doctoral thesis on Stein, and the first book of bp's *The Martyrology*, still unpublished though months later to be set in type, was unknown to me. But I was privy to bp's underpinning theories for his theatre of saints. Like Stein, he represented the saints as if speaking in a play or opera, characters unaware that they would not live forever, minds detached from time. But what I had already learned, and what would only unfold in *The Martyrology* over many years, was that bp's parenting of the saints would merge into friends and the

members of his own family over time, and eventually into all of human history, back through Sumerian Gilgamesh to prehistory. It is within this universal theatre that the Creator is sometimes addressed, the father figure Nichol occludes with his own father occasionally, or any father and mother within his Homo sapiens genealogy, and every so often with an 'i'. But here all 'i's' are eclipsed except the one lost like the saints were, among 'countries.' Where earlier we might have assumed one of the saints was speaking, now it is the son-poet, lost in his universal poem:

> *from* Considerations, Puerto Rico, 1971 (Book 7)
>
> …sun going down
> behind the ruined walls of cloud town
> late we drive along the sea wall
> darkness over the city
> dark girls in summer dresses
> searching for the ones they love or will love
> over everything His shadow falls
> larger than history (if that is possible—
> that conceit) & i am singing brokenly His praises
> as tho i had lost what sense of form i did gain
> hoping to find it again
> among the voices of another country…

Stein's parental 'authors' rarely contemplate their deaths, so the distance from a Stein opera is found here in the emphasis on time's limitations rather than its freedoms. Yet bp is still a parental author as he faces the loss of his 'sense of form,' his life as well as his poem. Back in '71, Barrie was leaving the afternoon after our Stein conversation for a lay analyst stint at Therafields, an analytic community based on an abandoned farm. We agreed to meet one last time to conclude our deliberations: lunch at "The Sport," a Hungarian café near Bloor and Spadina, both of us semi-vegetarian yet fond of "the lunch plate special," goulash and dumplings, at the price of a mere Canadian dollar. For the first time, we each confessed to reading Freud, who was then nowhere as fashionable as Lacan. I remember we moved directly from a hypothesis that Stein's language experiment was, like sexual intercourse, a combination of violent aggression and narcissism – a kind of erotic goulash – into the Freudian hypothesis of the death instinct. To what extent, we

asked, is the use of language against itself – as in puns and wordplay – analogous to the destructive desire to return to an inorganic state, where language is unnecessary? In other words, must visual and sound poetry, for instance, be inherently violent? We even mimicked this heaviness by pretending to violently attack our food and devour our dumplings like so many dead prisoners. (In the late *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud wrote: "The act of eating is a destruction of the object with the final aim of incorporating it.")

As we parted, it would have been impossible for me to imagine it was the last time I'd see him alive. *"Book 7 &"* didn't come out until 1990, two years after Nichol's death. Although I had always meant to get back to Toronto in the intervening years, there seemed no rush, for it had become clear that *The Martyrology* was always going to be about 'continuing.' And yet here was this supreme irony I hadn't swallowed until reading Book 7, that the more of the poet's life the work took in, the closer to death *we* (not just 'he') came. Since the continuity was life-affirming in its *increase*, the irony was that the approaching loss – the *continual* loss – was easy to ignore.

from Assumptions (Book 7)

…in the dark night
not even the moon to follow me across the lawn
not even the single light from some stray &/or forlorn streetlamp
not even those comfortless descriptions to comfort me
only myself, as i am, for company
evoking your presence
name
        but never naming you
never fixing you in all the descriptions that do not fit
the vanity of nouns, of even these pronouns i and you…
still that longing for love
for all that is meant by the word "peace"
& that we must value that longing
that tortured feeling
be moved by it
till these tortures cease…

Although "these tortures" are the ones – the feelings – that belong to bp at the scene of writing, the "longing/ that tortured feel-

ing" is also what the collective "we" of the poem (that collection of i's and you's) feel for each other. It's human social longing. But the "tortures" of bp, outside the poem, represent another kind of longing: to continue writing poetry as any creature continues breathing. Poetry, not prose. As I myself write this specific prose I feel something like survivor's guilt, for prose is well suited to humanity but a bit out of its depth in the deeper time of species consciousness, which we can no more avoid today than our own deaths. Prose is fine for considering the latter and framing the former, but extinction of the species demands authentic poetry.

What, for example, might it mean if Philip Roth, the prose queen of our day, were to become a poet? It would be as if from the back of the writer at his desk emerged an earlier (and thus older) self who begins to observe, over bp's (or Roth's) shoulder – to observe not his own world, but the author in his. It's just because this would seem to describe Roth's fiction of an alter ego, the author Zuckerman, that we never encounter the actual author Roth: he is folded into the work as *auteur*. So our sense of the real world in which Roth resides as a natural creature (and not simply a literary creation) is lost to us; instead of the scene of writing, we have the stagy scenes of half-baked political, social and psychological insight into 'our times' on the one hand, and into literary characters on the other. He or his defenders might say that we shouldn't be interested in the 'real Roth,' who in fact might be a pretty boring fellow in a pretty dull life. But that is just the point. How is it possible for a life to be 'dull'? Can we imagine another creature, a whale, or a pelican, or even a butterfly, inhabiting a 'dull' life? In other words, must we continue to leave the problem of 'being' out of the work? Berrigan, Nichol and Johnson's work tells us, no; and that an authentic poet today can construct a new kind of theatre – even as the ultimate impact reveals what great writers have shown in the past, that we are creatures wondrously lost on a cosmic island and that most human excitement is a diminishment of that knowledge.

from St. Anzas VII (Book 8)

…the thickening night words. the tongue
unfolding flesh, rasps along the body's length
is words. moves across the room. sits. writes.

> has just written. fact this fiction. the thickening night;
> the unfolding flesh; the you he addresses
> across this room that is, as any room, crowded
> with old standards, stock scenes, clichés,
> we have seen before, heard. who
> directed this shit?…

Here it is again in another of its permutations, the scene of writing, the writer who "sits. writes." It is already the past, the dead writer, even by only the minute it has taken for the writer outside the poem to write this down. But suddenly the outside creature slips in: "who directed this shit?" – and this anti-aside peels the roof off the whole theatre, reminding us of the higher creation driving the species, the *creatureliness* of the mind itself. It is a play, after all, and the lines continue, folding back director, creature, and writer into the 'i''s tongue. Although there is some hilarious poetry from the New York School that seems to do this, especially Ted Berrigan, the author nonetheless remains safe within the poem while there; whereas Nichol, within the larger poem, approaches a Beckettian theatrical despair, and it is ultimately saved, not by humor but by a steadily deepening species consciousness.

The poetry of John Ashbery also performs innumerable acts of humorously displacing the author (and his hyperactive mind) yet Ashbery remains a narrowly 'human' author. The acrobatics of pronouns, riffs on tradition, sleight-of-hand appropriation and high-low juggling reveal an almost professorial Ashbery in the end, witty and wise but confined to a Museum of Modern Art version of the 20th Century. This may be preferable to the academic version or the experimental version, but still not good enough. Extinction is no longer an existential condition to be evoked in abstract constructions or deconstructions of thinking. Extinction is becoming a species fact we'll have to internalize. Although Ashbery is still today our parental avant-garde, we no longer have the sense that we are more exposed than we want to be. Yet we are, and Nichol won't let us forget it. With bpNichol, we are walking in the wilderness along with the ghosts of Darwin and Freud. And as if the shit has hit the fan, and we can no longer avoid how Freud found the origin of our creativity in the infant's erotic attachment to its feces, its instinct to play with it.

III.
from Doubled Flowering:
High Altitude Photo of Hiroshima (Circa 1944)
March 7, 1957

There must be a schoolgirl deep inside there, stuttering,
almost weeping, to remember the main cities
of our ally, Germany.

There must be a monk, self-absorbed, slowly dragging
his rake through sand, around a moss-covered stone.

A man inside his home has thrown a little boy into the air:
The child is there, falling, his mouth open with joy.

And I… where am I? For being here is confusing,
makes my position less clear. Somewhere in the upper left,
I suppose, hurrying ambitiously to get somewhere…

I shut my eyes, try to recall those days…

Outside of me the photograph is beautiful and clear:
A long, single pulse of geometry under dreams.
Pure hieroglyph into which I also will vanish.

All the facts here are decomposing. Yasusada's note to the poem says, "I dedicate this poem to the great artist, Piet Mondrian." So, here are facts resolved into art – or into geometry? No. Once again, through the scrim of 1945, even "I shut my eyes" has turned impossible, the eyelids singed off. All photos have become unreal, their verisimilitude turned into pure art: "where am I?" But even Mondrian's art and its verisimilitude of pure form and color, turns into hieroglyph for which no reader can exist.

Unless *we* are that reader, as we are Kent Johnson's reader. And after we have given it up – our privilege as readers or viewers – to re-imagine ourselves, like history itself, as already past. Homo sapiens, ourselves, have become extinct. That is how we have arrived, in our day, at the formerly unimaginable condition for species consciousness.

Proof that such loss can be dispelled -- that it is not just a spiritual wish – now comes in the recent posthumous volumes of Araki Yasusada. (Both books involve more than one editor and translator who themselves are unstable, so that our truest anchor for authorship is the person cited as copyright holder for both books, Kent Johnson.) For in these two volumes we hear a voice speaking to us in the broken language of the species. It is the potential conversation of any Homo sapiens tribe translated into our tongue, a story of life and love and everything lost, yet surviving. How so? This is the question that dogs us and elbows us and opens our eyes. Indeed, how could it be? It could only seem a miraculous breakthrough: a breaking into time by a dead poet who we still sense breathing beside us.

In this case, as with the early deaths of Berrigan and Nichol, we intuit the poet has matured at an unusually young age. He speaks to us as an enduring historian, a heart and mind devoted to history and to the rescuing from it of our darkest secret. At any moment the secret may be revealed to us, even in the misspelling of a word or the mispronouncing of an affection. For all of history is addressed as time, as the same time in which we are breathing speech, so that the reader, even were he to be dead like the original poet Yasusada, becomes newly crucial to the conversation: at one time or other, each word enters his ear and exits his mouth like drawn breath, and that is the secret of how we stop time by speaking to it, embodying it so we can face extinction together: ourselves and our language. In other words, poet and reader exist both in and outside of time, and each thought is spoken and echoes historically, yet without recourse to anything more than the page before us.

So the whole history of civilization is present and accompanies every page, from first speaker to last historian, and the living poet never lets us forget this. We are forced to ask who is speaking – and even more poignantly, who is listening and translating? How has the history of writing and book-making sublimated our darkest thoughts – especially the thought that we are authors of our own creation and our own death? Because if the pages of history are an ephemeral artifact, not only is the human mind as well, but also the human genome.

from Also, with my Throat, I shall Swallow Ten Thousand Swords:

from May 7, 1926

…*Who or what* is it, *at this moment*, that is reading?
How can *we* have the apricot blossoms perfuming *the whole world*?
[italics mine]

Footnote 1: In our opinion, as editors and translators, this is the most mysterious and beautiful of all the letters.
Footnote A: As the editors of the "editors," we don't necessarily concur…

From the footnote of the original editor, Tosa Motokiyu, we understand that the letter is an artifact of history. For the later editors ("Footnote A") this letter has become, however, an artifact of poetry. Thanks to them (Kent Johnson and Javier Alvarez), "at this moment" and "the whole world," which denote time and space, are now rendered as figures of timelessness. Further, the questions of these two lines, very real for Yasusada and Motokiyu, are transfigured by post-1945 history into a rhetoric of loss. Whatever was historical for the author has been obliterated – that is *our* history, and our history is one of editorial restoration. The historical has become our truest poetry, and the authentic poets have also become editors of what is lost. And more than that: restorers-in-advance of what has yet to be lost, pertinent to our species.

from Also, with my Throat, I shall Swallow Ten
Thousand Swords:
from August 9, 1926

…Presently I will name such a country Platonica. It is a country with no Time, scarcely in belief as you must be. In its landscape are some long and oily Rods such as mathematical Rods (sic). Most strikingly, this landscape is lopsided, with a most definite backside and one Black frontier all oily around a hole. For example, if you will please consider Triangulars in creasings as Nows, the land of them comes to a stopping in the degenerate Triangular into which every three points come once in a clicking (sic). Consequently, there is a jetting-forthness [illegible passage due to blotching] whilst (sic) who knows what will happen? Therefore, through the telescope, there is some stubble, all wetly, under the Black boy's arms. In other words (sic), pal-pen, have you ever stumbled through a burnt forest, dying for some water?

Today, try as we might to read this as historical in 1926, it can only be read through the scrim of 1945, as poetry. We can re-imagine the intent of the mistranslations but it all turns into post-Hiroshima. In the same way, modern and postmodern literature carries its own history – "all wetly" might be Joyce, "illegible passage due to blotching" might be Solzhenitsyn hunched over Gulag records – so that the historical can seem 're-composed' at any moment, suggesting more of an opera or play than a 'foreign' text. We might say it's the dramatic context that *effects* the translation.

Indeed, it was most natural for Johnson to present his poems as plays, set upon a stage along with the characters of poem's rediscoverer and author's relatives, poem's translator and assorted editors, poem's redactor and original publisher, and Kent himself, like Shakespeare occasionally, in an androgynous role of messenger. In one instance to which I was directed by Kent in an email, he uses the stage of a visual podcast: onscreen the poet at a desk, with the timing bar of the forty minute reading below him. Avuncular but dour, ur-translator Johnson read as if – like Curry reading Nichol – he was *forced* onto the stage, against his will, in order to make a living. Thus it became easier to imagine the 'living' that Araki Yasusada had to make for himself as a poet after the war. It was a living breathed into him by the editors Tosa Motokiyu and others, all of them actors on Kent's stage. Coming together is a life provoked, under threat of extinction, and a poetic practice challenged by the literal extinction of the epic mode in our time. In addition, the deterioration of the lyric into aesthetic artifact no doubt kindled Johnson's resolve to mount a neo-Shakespearean play within the play.

Offstage however, Kent was the prototypical 'family man,' as if living the life Araki Yasusada lost in the catastrophe of Hiroshima. He took his sons on fishing trips to the Upper Peninsula and he manned the backyard barbecue while his wife regaled Midwest guests with tales of Kent's numerous *faux pas* among the corporate executives of his local college board, on which he served as a sort of *Monsieur Hulot* in the role of faculty dean and board chairman, I think. But the true *pas mal* manifest in all Johnson's work was the backdrop of twentieth-century civilization's meltdown and its encapsulation in a reductive theatre of history, with

its monuments, sacred dates, and ritual silences. Instead, Kent's epic work dissolves our cultural history into a universal theatre where living and dead, author and audience, all partake in the afterlife that is his spirit-inhabited poem.

In the passage that follows, Johnson brings yet another actor onstage to turn Yasusada himself into a translator:

> *from* Doubled Flowering:
> *from* "a transformation of poem #6 in Jack Spicer's *Language* (1965)…"
>
> …If I pass my tongue through your speaking mouth, I know that there is nothing there. But if I hold my tongue inside a written sentence,
> It blisters.
> This is an act of forgetting that the dead are dead and that is that…

Take away the blistering of Hiroshima, and the words still record a literary history. But now the tongue "blisters inside a written sentence" – burnt from history into poetry, into "forgetting that the dead are dead." The "speaking mouth" still speaks within history and thus may speak from memory, but the written sentence is timeless: although it may exist after our deaths, even after our species' death, it is amnesiac. The sentence may record history, and itself be an artifact of history, but after Hiroshima, as at the moment of speaking, it is obliterated; now, since *literary* history is lost (or can even be imagined as lost), we are lost. And yet this poetry of loss links to others, to Spicer as well as Nichol and Johnson (both Spicer *aficionados*), to form a first draft of species consciousness.

Once, I received an emailed request from Kent to write a protest letter to the editor of Dave Eggers' *The Believer* magazine, which had just published an uncomprehending essay about Yasusada as if it all was an intentional "hoax" – and *nothing more* – by the poet Kent Johnson. Apparently, according to this clueless magazine critic, Johnson had even hoodwinked such critical wits as Marjorie Perloff and Mikhail Epstein. "Kent," I wrote back, "I can't find the current issue in Miami. Barnes & Noble's issue is two months out of date. Just write it yourself in my name and I'll sign and send." Not only was time of the essence but it was famil-

iar practice for Johnson to appear to reconstruct his Japanese editors' notes about Yasusada from often cryptic, illegible or mistranslated text – so why not have him construe my comment for me as well? Knowing my work, he'd be perfectly able to imagine my response, according to his poetic practice.

Yet I couldn't keep from thinking: How far could Kent actually go; how deep into inhabiting my entire *oeuvre* could he imaginatively delve, not only annotating but extending my own poems and essays with his own hand? And even my decades of translations from the Bible! Just to have this thought speaks volumes about Kent's incorporation of criticism and translation into poetry. In the end, my wife found a current copy of *The Believer* the next day, on a Miami Beach muscle-magazine rack, and so I wrote the letter myself.

I was enraged as I read the piece. Its author was arrogantly intolerant of classical aesthetic perspective, in which *any* work of art can be claimed to be a hoax, since it promises ultimate truth and delivers ambiguity instead. Worse yet, distinctions could be made only in favor of authoritarian academic poets and against freedom-loving poems. Indeed, a freedom-loving poem was an oxymoron to *The Believer*'s one-party critic, who thought in terms of a work of art as rigidly enclosed artifact. Thus, the fascist Pound could be acclaimed as a true original while his poem, *The Cantos*, could be mocked for its liberties or its 'hoax' of epic grandeur. Kent Johnson was no ultra-conservative like Pound or Kerouac, however, and so he was not in need of being apologized for as a humanitarian; and since he didn't need an apology, his epic excavation of the lost grandeur of Yasusada required more than simple mocking, according to *The Believer*: it needed excoriation as an *epic* 'hoax' in itself. Our critic was a cartoon within a cartoon of Lenin-pure true believership.

This was not going to be a simple letter of protest to write! And so it was and is with all things Kent Johnsonian. They require a thorough restatement of history, whether of the origins of poetry, of civilization, or of Freudian resistance to self-knowledge. And thus, for the reader encountering a Kent Johnsonian text, a willingness is wanted to think through who one is and what one wants from art. Either that, or to allow the poem – whether in translation, in editorial conjecture, or even in a state of decomposition – to

work of itself on one's open heart and mind. That 'de-composition' could even entail the whole modern tradition, as represented by surrealism in the following passage:

> *from* Doubled Flowering:
> *from* Silk Tree Renga
>
> …Thus during sitting, he had felt the Milky Way as a pair of thongs between the toes
> …Why don't you go fuck yourself, she said, throwing the thong at his head and missing
> …In fact, in the very gesture of the geisha, was the retreat of a whole genre

Here, a parental editor, Johnson, is creating a documentary record of the final act of geisha tradition – and of surrealist tradition. The surrealism of "the Milky Way" reduced to *footwear* is no longer within a tenable tradition because history-telling itself no longer is. We are left with nothing more than the poet outside the poem, again as in Nichol and Berrigan. Nothing more than parenting figures, reproducers of the species for now. As was Stein herself, the silent figure of a psychoanalyst listening to language, and recording attentively as the subject – language itself – acted out every unconscious tic within it. When she became a parent to her own work late in life, especially in the lectures on narrative and America, she found a way to view her own oeuvre as a historical record of a lost civilization. As such, history-telling is the active force, just as it will be in our human future of space exploration: the question is not what exists on Mars now, but what it can tell us of what *once* was there and then suffered annihilation.

Few poets are able to embody their own character in this way, moving from active to parental. Stein rediscovered the genre of "lecture" in order to maintain this theatre of parenting – of passing down knowledge – even if the lecture-audience became extinct. The play, as Shakespeare interiorized it, was the thing. And as Stein inhabited the lecturer, Johnson inhabits the editor, who, after annihilation, represents the most historically poignant and parental role of the poet.

> The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to earth,

from earth to heaven;
And as the imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing…
from A Midsummer Night's Dream

So we may now read Johnson back into Shakespeare and understand that "airy nothing" was a Hiroshima or Auschwitz catastrophe; and the "poet's pen" that "turns them to shapes" is the editorial restoration of a history-of-relationships lost. Relationships of time and place, family and canon, language and genre. In fact, Johnson has become our Horatio: as the active poet Hamlet dies, it falls to Horatio to record the true (hence, inner) history of an entire court obliterated.

We can see this process at work in even the smallest poem, where species consciousness intervenes to rescue a devastated memory.

from Doubled Flowering:
[undated]

Faint memory
of her lithe body—
wet smacking
of the mud snails.

In the last two lines we encounter the putative author through his perception of sound and sense. The immediacy of it, the litheness of the snail bodies (who would have thought it) puts us in the picture with him, there by the shore, a long way from both "her" body and the memory of it, "faint." In fact what the snails tell us is that the memory is lost and only the present sense remains. So from the "faint memory" of the presumed author to the lost memory of the actual author is to step outside the poem and encounter the magnitude of the loss. Snails is all that's left to him, an alien species; however, at least they are alive, and even the mud is alive, echoing the same mud out of which Adam was created. And so, another species is possible, and that is the essence of species consciousness. (In the sensibility of a lesser poet, one who had not been totally inhabited by loss, this poem might have been accounted as deadpan surrealism or even a Poundian

parody of haiku, cleverly brought off within a 'successful' academic career, a la Muldoon or Charles Simic.)

As if anticipating my parenthetical thought, Johnson has appended to his first volume of Yasusada material, *Doubled Flowering*, a twenty-page essay, earlier published by the venerable poetry critic, Marjorie Perloff.

> *from* Doubled Flowering:
> *from* In Search of the Authentic Other: The Poetry of Araki Yasusada
>
> The Yasusada case, I shall argue here, can be understood as a reaction formation experienced by a literary community that no longer trusts the individual talent to rise above mass culture and hence must find a poetry worthy of its attention in increasingly remote and improbable locations.

There is something improbable about this description of a 'higher' literary community, one that considers itself above concern with hoaxes – that is, too smart to be conned – and instead absorbed by the highly exotic, putative Hiroshima-surviving poet, Yasusada, while more radically confused (another con) about the difference between uniqueness and genius. For Johnson has himself re-created this "community" within his book, as a presumed community of translators and editors, dead and alive, and this literary community is above all blind and deaf to the representation of itself. For it's really of secondary import that the critics and editors of slick poetry publications had been 'taken in' and had prominently published Yasusada (the "case" referred to by Perloff), because they were themselves mere ciphers of an ersatz cultural moment called 'postmodern' and reflected in Araki Yasusada's tribe of post-Yasusada translators and editors. In fact, Kent Johnson had created a capacious if convex mirror for several generations of postwar poets and critics.

And most liked what they saw in it – that is, until they realized it was them! On the other hand, for those who, like Perloff, appreciated the layers of authorship involved, it was in danger of being categorized as a Kent Johnsonian style, and even reduced to one side or other of the repressed politics of form, be it academic or experimental. On the latter side, Johnson might be sat beside any other

postmodern striver and blurrer of genres, where he could be gorged upon in terms of identity poetics (a k a identity *politics*). On to the next essay and the next innovative poets, Perloff might have said to herself, upon completing this splendid piece on Johnson. But that would be a mistaken move, because what the Yasusada "case" requires is that everything just stop and start all over, including the academic canon and its passion to add an original living poet to its library display and thereby continue to authenticate it.

But the authentic really demands we stop everything and go back. Back to the Sumerians, if we can, or to Paleolithic artists, in order to forget all about 'post' anything. Instead, we must concentrate on the 'pre' – prehistoric, pre-Biblical, pre-Romantic, and especially, pre-Postmodern. This last is the niche that Yasusada has blazed for our dimming civilization today, opening new possibilities of *pre-Nuclear* and *pre-Holocaust* and the radical poignancy of such deep restoration of the annihilated. If we can get back there, we can imagine a different history and a poetics based upon it, one with the ability to recognize the monster in Hitler before he has consumed us, and before he can reconstitute himself in contemporary Iran. It can be a historical poetics, one in which we take parental responsibility for all human degradation and murderous experiment. And then, we give it dramatic outlet in a *Homo sapiens* theatre of species consciousness, in which we might imagine ourselves as other species to come – or simply, other species, less inclined to species grandiosity.

CODA

I've referred in this essay to the academic or experimental canon, by which I meant in either case the Western canon; it is a covering still desperately reached for in our time, as if to 'shore up our ruins.' But even T. S. Eliot's biting irony has faded these days, so that the Western canon has devolved into a shadow of itself, merely an academic canon. What has arisen in its stead is still not allowed in the classroom, for it requires the authentic poet's reframing of the literary art. Such a reconstitution at first seems interdisciplinary, in that the authors bring to bear on literature an aesthetic derived elsewhere, as from the visual arts, psychology, metaphysics, archaeology, linguistics or the social sciences. Today, as is prefig-

ured by the authentic poets discussed here, it is an interdisciplinary education in natural sciences that is almost prophetically advised. It is in the awareness that something more than a canon is needed, something we can now distinguish as species knowledge – now, that is, that we're confronted with our inevitable extinction. Knowing that, the authentic poet shows the way toward a hopeful framing of our knowledge for its voyage into the future, as in the space rocket sent free of our solar system and carrying some tokens of us.

I don't think the Bible or Shakespeare was among those tokens; rather, some brief lines, befitting the short attention spans we might expect to encounter among those who were not expecting us. But Earth itself is a spacecraft, and even here species continue to evolve, and thus we can ask more local questions. How will a further iteration of Homo sapiens, were it to evolve, look at our human artifacts? That is the awareness a poet can bring to his work now. The way has already been prepared by the authentic poet of the late Twentieth Century.

Although we can valuably read Berrigan, Nichol and Johnson back into Chaucer and Shakespeare, Holderlin and Mallarmé, this doesn't mean simply a broadening of the Western canon. Instead, we might reckon that canon's limitations by light of a competing canon of less self-consciously bookish but nevertheless ingeniously authored works, from the Bible and the Talmud set against the Greco-Roman, to Moses de Leon's Zohar set against Dante's Divine Comedy, to Thoreau's multi-volumed *Journal* set against James Schuyler's *The Morning of the Poem*. Who would we set against Berrigan, Nichol and Johnson? There's always the novelty of newly translated works, ancient or modern, from India or China or wherever. When an ancient Sanskrit work is finally understood in terms of its authorship by a poet-scholar yet to come, we might recognize in it a parallel creation to bpNichol's universal theatre. I would submit that what is most thrilling about reading the authentic poets today is that we don't yet know into what proper canon they might fall – or whether, in fact, they are not heralds to the newly forming canon of species consciousness.

Meanwhile, a creative writing professor and colleague of mine reports that his students long to try out "hybrid" forms and to break free of rigid genres. This makes sense in an academic set-

ting, where genres are taught as if they originated at creation; still, the creative drive to blur the boundaries between genres is also a handicap to critical reading. I wonder why my friend doesn't counsel his students to not need exclusively to 'write' but instead to *read*, as in the natural sciences, where 'reading' the world and its evolutionary history is already half way toward re-dramatizing – and re-composing – a thoroughly cosmic theatre. The beginning of cosmic theatres are still to be found in the creation or transformation myths of all religions, as they are later deconstructed and dramatized by the Hebraic culture's poets, to take the Bible for one example. So let's recall, for our moment, that it is the authentic poet who sets the stage and gives life to the audience – and who survives his own death by secreting himself in the wings, as if a dispassionate observer of his own life, some forgotten kind of poetic scientist.

Contributors

After deciding there was more to art than being a Canadian air force photographer, **George Bowering** enrolled at the University of British Columbia where he studied with Earle Birney and Robert Creeley, became one of the founding editors of *Tish* in 1961, and attended the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963. While teaching in Calgary and Montreal in the 1960s he founded the long poem magazine *Imago* (1964-74) which published work by McClure, Oppenheimer, Raworth, Rothenberg, Hollo, Blackburn, Eshelman, LeRoi Jones, Robert Kelly, and Carol Bergé, as well as that of Rosenberg and numerous Canadian poets, and the Beaver-Kosmos literary criticism chapbook series (1969-74) in which appeared Bowering's essay on Ginsberg, *How I Hear* Howl, Frank Davey's study of Olson, an interview with Duncan, and studies of Creeley by Warren Tallman and Ann Mandel. Since the early 60s, Bowering has published more than a book a year, including six novels, eleven works of literary criticism, autobiography and history, eight collections of short stories, at least 23 collections of poetry, and eleven edited or co-edited anthologies. In 2004 he was named Canada's first Parliamentary Poet Laureate. He now lives in Vancouver, where he had long taught at Simon Fraser U. and helped establish there the bpNichol Archive. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Bowering

Victor Coleman participated in the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference at age seventeen, interviewing Spicer and Olson. From then on, he became a university of one in Toronto, editing *Island* magazine and books (including Paul Blackburn, Robert Creeley, Ray Souster and Margaret Avison), followed by *Is*. He was principal editor and publisher of Coach House Press during its formative years and many thereafter, responsible for books ranging from George Bowering and Allen Ginsberg to bpNichol and Ron Padgett. Not least of those books were several of his own. By 1974, with *Stranger* (CHP) he had begun to parent his writings in the performance persona of "Vic d'Or", leading to published tapes and also transforming into books of such extreme parental revision as *Corrections: Rewriting Six of my First Nine Books* (CHP, 1985) and *Lapsed W.A.S.P.* (ECW, 1994). Soon enough he joined in the Oulipo school of Paris, leading to his recent books *Letter Drop* (online archive at chbooks.com) and *Icon Tact* (BookThug). Almost alone in his resemblance to New York School poets, Coleman is a prolific critic, curator, collaborator and editor of Canadian artists. He currently lives in Toronto's multicultural ghetto of Kensington with his wife, the poet Kate Van Dusen, and local representative of *Felidae*, Gino.

Frank Davey, along with George Bowering and Fred Wah, was one of the contributors who brought Robert Duncan by bus to Vancouver in 1961 to give four nights of lectures on 20th-century poetry. The following month he became managing editor of the newly-founded poetry newsletter *Tish*. He completed his second book of poems, *Bridge Force,* in 1963 as part of an MA thesis supervised by Robert Creeley, a book published in early 1965 by Contact Press under the editorship of Louis Dudek. He attended much of the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, and between 1965 and 68 wrote the first doctoral dissertation (USC 1968) on Black Mountain poetics. He founded the journal *Open Letter* in 1965. After a year in Montreal as Writer-in-Residence at Sir George Williams University, he moved to Toronto in 1970 where *Open Letter* became a Coach House Press publication and bpNichol an *Open Letter* editor. Following Victor Coleman's first resignation from Coach House in 1975, Davey and Nichol became the principal Coach House editors, editing more than half of the press's titles in the 1976-85 period. As well as numerous books on Canadian literature and culture, Davey has published more than 20 collections of poetry, developing a discourse-based poetics in books such as *Capitalistic Affection!* (1982), *The Abbotsford Guide to India* (1986), *Cultural Mischief* (1994), *Popular Narratives* (1996), and *Bardy Google* (in press for 2010). Through Massassauga Editions he has recently published two new poetry chapbooks, *Lack-On!* and *How We Won the War in Iraq*.
http://publish.uwo.ca/~fdavey/c/daveymain.htm

Paris-based **Alice Notley's** books include *The Descent of Alette*, *Mysteries of Small Houses*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and *Disobedience*, which won the Griffin International Prize in 2002. She received an Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Poetry Society of America's Shelly Memorial Award. She edited and wrote a new introduction to her late husband Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets* (Penguin, 2000) and then edited his *Collected Poems* (UP of California, 2005) with their sons Anselm and Edmund. Later remarried to British poet Douglas Oliver, with whom she edited *Scarlet* in New York and then moved to Paris, where she stayed on after his passing. Alice was born in Bisbee, Arizona, grew up in Needles, California, and took an MFA in poetry at U. of Iowa. Her most recent book is *In the Pines*. Forthcoming from Penguin, *Culture of One*, and from Wesleyan, S*ongs and Stories of the Ghouls*. http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/767

David Rosenberg published four early books (all edited by Victor Coleman) with CHP, where he edited *The Ant's Forefoot* (1967-74; archived at U. Pittsburgh) and related books including, in the latter year, *Coach*

House South in New York: two of those were by Ted Berrigan and Lewis Warsh. His *The Necessity of Poetry* is restored in the online archive at chbooks.com. He was born in Detroit, summered in Port Stanley, Ont., taught at York U., Resource Fellow at Rochdale College. In Israel and New York, he translated the lost biblical writers. One of the latter, the foundational female author of the Bible, constitutes *The Book of J*, coauthored with Harold Bloom. Most of his 28 books are on his Amazon.com Author Page. His latest, *A Literary Bible*, collects 30 years work. Basically he would summarize: his 1971 book, *Paris & London* (Talonbooks), on press simultaneously with bpNichol's *Monotones*, metamorphosed into *The Lost Book of Paradise* (New York: Hyperion, 1993). He lives near the multispecies ghetto of the Everglades with his wife, science writer Rhonda Rosenberg, and local representative of *Felidae*, Zorro (Prof. Z. Buber).

David Shapiro edited the first *Anthology of New York Poets* and wrote the first studies of John Ashbery's poems, Mondrian's Flowers, Jasper Johns' drawings, and Jim Dine's work. His first book of poems, *January*, was sensationally published when he was seventeen. Of many notable poetry collections since are *Burning Interior*, *Lateness*, *To An Idea*, *House (Blown Apart)*, and *New and Selected Poems, 1965-2006*. Among several institutions, he has taught at Cooper Union in New York, which also published his collaboration with Jacques Derrida and Michal Govrin, *Body of Prayer* (2001). In addition to many monographs for artists, he's written about Chinese and Israeli art, as well as many essays on Jewish history. One of his movies with Rudy Burckhardt was presented at the Lincoln Center Film Festival. Shapiro's collages have appeared in New York in group shows and can be found online a http://www.RobertRobertson.com.

Tony Tost's books of poems are *Invisible Bride*, which won the 2003 Walt Whitman Award, and *Complex Sleep* (Iowa UP, 2007). He edited the online poetry and critical journals *Octopus* and *Fascicle*. He's studied and taught at Duke U. and now at U. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where he lives with his wife and son. He's also writing a short book about Johnny Cash's first American Recordings album with Rick Rubin.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tony_Tost

Franco-American poet, **Chris Tysh** was born and raised in Paris by survivors of the Holocaust. She studied American literature at the Sorbonne and married poet George Tysh, who edited *Blue Pig* in Paris at the time. Chris wrote the first biography of Allen Ginsberg, published by Gallimard. Her latest collections of poems are *Continuity Girl* (United Artists) and *Cleavage* (Roof). She received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 2003. Presently she is on the faculty of the English Depart-

ment at Wayne State University in Detroit where she teaches creative writing and women's studies. http://www.louisiana.edu/Academic/Liberal Arts/ENGL/Creative/Ctysh.htm

Fred Wah helped found the poetry newsletter *Tish* in 1961 and attended the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference. He studied with Robert Creeley in New Mexico in 1963-4, and with Charles Olson and Henry Lee Smith at Buffalo 1965-67, while editing the newsletter *SUM* and assisting in the editing of *The Niagara Frontier Review* and *The Magazine of Further Studies* (known affectionately in Toronto as 'The Magazine of Far-Out Studies'). Most of Wah's books of poetry have been investigations of translation poetics, initially based on Olson's theories of the projective, and later on the visual (*Pictograms from the Interior of British Columbia,* 1977) and performance (*Music at the Heart of Thinking,* 1987.) Influenced both by Rothenberg's ethnopoetics and by the slowly increasing prominence of race-writing in Canada, Wah began exploring his partially Chinese heritage in the early 1980s with books such as *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* (1981), *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* (1982), and *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985). With Frank Davey in 1984 he founded the world's first on-line poetry magazine, *SwiftCurrent,* which they operated until 1990. http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/wah/index.htm

Lewis Warsh edited the mags and presses *Angel Hair* and *United Artists* in New York, as well as *The Angel Hair Anthology* (Granary, 2001). His *Part of My History* was published by CHP in 1971 and he was a primary contributor to *The Ant's Forefoot* at CHP. Of his novels, autobiography, and poetry collections, recent ones include *Origin of the World*, *Touch of the Whip*, *Inseparable: Poems 1995-2005* (Granary, 2008) and *A Place in the Sun* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2009). Over the years he was married to Anne Waldman and to Bernadette Mayer, mother of their children. He is director of the MFA program in creative writing at Long Island University in Brooklyn. http://www.lewiswarsh.org/

Of **Susan Wheeler**'s poetry, John Ashbery has written, "What at first seems cacophonous comes in the end to seem invested with a mournful dignity," and Marjorie Perloff: "Wheeler is that rare thing among poets, a genuine cultural critic." She is the author of a novel, *Record Palace*, and five books of poems, most recently *Assorted Poems* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009). She teaches at Princeton University. Among her critical pieces, her "conversation" with Robert Polito in *Bomb* a few years ago caused a sensation. http://www.susanwheeler.net/

bpNichol + 10

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bpNichol + 20

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