OPEN LETTER

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bpNichol + 10

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A correction to David Rosenberg's article "Crossing the Border: A Coach House Memoir" (*Open Letter* Series 9, No. 9): David Rosenberg writes, "Abstract Expressionism was the movement I alluded to in 'Crossing the Border: A Coach House Memoir.' That it became 'Im' in print is a Freudian slip: I was perhaps overly impressed with my point."

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

Frank Davey

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

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

Unless a writer succeeds in developing an institutional persona, and in having his or her writings become, at least in some minor or transgressive way, part of the literary institution and its sign system, their circulation and readership will be minimal. Barrie seems to have understood this very early, witness his affiliation of his writing with various genre signs in the 1966 Coach House box *bp* (a veritable box of genres), with early modernist literary history in works like *Dada Lama* and "The 'Pataphysical Hardware Co," and with canonical writers like Stein, Ball, Jarry, and

Wittgenstein. In this issue David Rosenberg, in "Coach House Letters, takes special 'note' of the importance of his various transgressive and critical engagements with genre. Barrie also seems to have understood that the precise parts of the literary institution with which one affiliates one's writing can determine what kind of readers one's work will have, and how numerous they may be. Among these parts he chose the little magazine, the very small press, the visual poem, the sound poem, crossed genres, the ephemeral collectible, the difficult writer—making his own work seem edgy, exotic, difficult, productive of other writing, and desirable because of its scarcity, even as he multiplied these individually scarce items by publishing hundreds of them. As well he understood the requirement for the institutional persona to have hard-edges even if having many and 'borderblurred' edges—as in the predicably recurring 'h', or in the small bp's invariably abutting the upper-case 'N'.

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

Complicating such questions is the fact that Barrie has been best known—unfortunately, I would say, although Miki here would appear to disagree—as the author of a long poem, *The Martyrology*. The long-poem genre calls up the long association of the epic poem with great male authors and the Eurocentric, monolithic, and patriarchal character of high

modernist understandings of canonicity. When we think of Nichol as primarily the author of *The Martyrology,* we are often forgetting that this long poem was for most of Barrie's writing career not a monolith but a work-in-progress, a field of research, and was published piecemeal, in eight-plus 'books,' six or eight volumes, that parts of those volumes were published as pamphlets and broadsides and privately-circulated photocopy before the books or volumes were published, and that accompanying and informing the early volumes were ephemeral pamphlets like those of the *Scrapture* series. We are probably also forgetting that it was published alongside a vast and vastly fragmented assortment of more radical texts, like those of *Dada Lama, ABC, The Adventures of Milt the Morph, Art Facts, Zygal, Truth: A Book of Fictions,* and *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer,* and collaborative works like those of 'TRG' and *Horse d'Oeuvres.* That is, we are forgetting that while *The Martyrology* is his most visible work it is not necessarily a 'central' work.

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

As well as being inventive in creating his institutional persona, Barrie was also tireless—and unselfconscious—in educating readers in how to read or hear or see his various work. Much like Robert Duncan, he tended to present himself in workshops and reading tours as a curious reader of his own writing, and as more informed about that writing than about anyone else's. The audiotape record of such moments shows him discussing other writers' work in terms of his use of it, or discussing literary history in terms of his relationship to it. Essays in this issue are frequently punctuated with such commentary and explanation. Thus one of the questions the ten-year anniversary of his death brings us is what is happening to 'bpNichol', the body of texts, now that Barrie, the person, is no longer able to publish pamphlets and broadsides, to create new collaborations, to place poems in periodicals, or to travel across the country to answer questions about his work—or as Miki phrases the question, how do we read his writing after "the removal of its prime mover"?

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

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

The situation of Nichol's work, and to some extent that of Olson's, is complicated by the fact that the past decade has seen a decline in cultural and scholarly interest in poetry per se, and a rise of interest in fiction, and in minority writing which white male heterosexual writers are usually perceived not to be part of. For example, Barrie's writing hasn't appeared in any historical anthologies of Canadian poetry since David and Lecker's anthology of 1982, but then there have not been any new historical anthologies of Canadian poetry since 1988. In the same period there have been numerous other kinds of anthologies in which his work does not appear. A pre-1988 situation in which it was relatively easy to get his work into an undergraduate or graduate Canadian Literature classroom because one could get Barrie himself into the classroom, or at least a

dozen or so copies of his latest inexpensive chapbook, has been followed by a decade in which has been exceedingly difficult to get his work into a classroom. The bpNichol writing most available for classrooms has been that which is most open to explication and humanistic reading, and therefore least radical, *The Martyrology,* or it has been the institutionally de-radicalized writing of *An H in the Heart.* That is, it has been his writing which is most open to readings which do not disturb the ways literature has normally been read in twentieth-century North American classrooms.[1]

Most of those interested in continuing to author Nichol texts have been other writers. Most of these have been writers of his own generation, and most have been his friends. There has been little sign yet of scholars who hope to focus their careers on Barrie's work; although there have been some doctoral dissertations (Gene Bridwell in his note here on Simon Fraser University's bpNichol Archive lists scholarly projects that have made use of that resource). There have also been a number of younger writers—Peter Jaeger, Jeff Derksen, Christian Bök, Darren Wershler-Henry among them—who have begun authoring his work less by writing about it than by writing from it—by writing texts like Wershler-Henry's *Nicholodeon* that operate to extend Barrie's most non-humanist gestures. Interestingly, this is the way writers like Nichol have kept Stein's work alive. I think the work of these writers is much more important than any that can be done by career scholars, many of whom will attempt to recuperate whatever they study to whatever decorums are current in the academy, and likely much more important than that of my generation of writers, who are at best friendly and interim inheritors.

In fact, I suggest that many of us in my generation need to release the texts known as 'bpNichol' from our friendships with Barrie the bpNichol author, and from the privileged place those friendships have given *The Martyrology* in many of our views of his writings, because of our continuing to read it as autobiography or as metaphors for autobiography. If we don't do this, the elements of friendship and uncritical acceptance already evident in some of our work will proliferate and come to contaminate more and more of those more recently come to reading bpNichol. Lori Emerson writes in this issue about the effect such well-meaning views of Nichol can become obstacles for a student who wishes to read 'bpNichol' (although interestingly her use of words like "holistic", "organic," and "intimacy" suggest that she too has been moved by the textual illusion of the 'human' Nichol). Elsewhere in the issue there seems

to me to be considerable tension between those whose preoccupation is their memory of the person Barrie Nichol and those whose preoccupation is the body of texts known as bpNichol. This isn't a simple tension, for among the former awareness is often evident that the person they remember is now at best a set of textual constructions to which their own writing ironically contributes. Memory and affection are facts, and hardly to be discarded because they may also become critical obstacles. It would be more appropriate to seek ways of textualizing affection—as I think Barbour, Hogg, Little and McCaffery do here—so that far from being an obstacle it might become productive of both writing and reading.

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

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

There is also a need for Nichol readers to do what they can to keep the bpNichol texts from being taken over by careerists. There may be little future for his work within the mainstream literary institution, much as there was little place for his work there in his lifetime. Barrie's scathing dismissal in the 1985 Marlatt and Bowering interview of publication by McClelland &Stewart (recalled in this issue by both Jaeger and Wershler-

Henry), a dismissal which should probably have been remembered when the 'H in the Heart' project was first considered, needs to be especially remembered now when biographies are mooted and when doctoral theses on *The Martyrology* begin to appear. If there is anything that academic work on *The Martyrology* to date can tell us, it is that the poem too often draws the commentator to theories of totality and coherence, the very things Barrie's most innovative work suspended, and to the illusion of an unfractured subject. These are illusions which we do our culture no service by continuing.

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

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

The best hope for continued cultural relevance for the writing known as 'bpNichol' lies with writers like Barrie himself, who I hope will increasingly read beyond *The Martyrology,* and take that work not as embodying Barrie's presence but as a set of textual starting places much like he took Stein's or Sheila Watson's or Wittgenstein's writing, or Frank

O'Hara took Zukofsky's, or Victor Coleman took Spicer's. In this issue of *Open Letter* this hope lies both with his contemporaries, like Douglas Barbour, Steven Smith, Billy Little, David Rosenberg, Roy Miki, and Robert Hogg, whose continued mourning of Barrie the person often shows through their texts; it lies also with new generations of writers, like Bök, Wershler-Henry, Jaeger, Lori Emerson, and Steven Cain, who didn't know him personally, and who are burdened neither by a friendship with him nor by a need to struggle against it.

Notes

1. We need to be careful, however, not to create a binary between 'conservative' and 'radical' bpNichol texts and to idealize one at the expense of the other, while eliding the political implications of his writing generally. Almost all of Nichol's writing is disruptive in some way of literary convention and reading practices, although its resistance to meaning-recuperative and biographical readings is stronger is some texts than in others. I would argue therefore that introducing students to Nichol through his most disruptive texts would in the long term create more perceptive Nichol readers—thus for me the urgency of keeping such texts in print.

2. While the Therafields approach was radical in its use of long-term "house groups" and of group labour projects to stimulate the person's identification of psychological "blocks," and in the hopes of many of its members of establishing communal living spaces, it was individualist in the frequently professed goal of "freeing" the person from the influence of unrecognized transferences. Writing in the second of her seven projected "Therafields Books," *Secret Places* (1976), which includes Nichol in its acknowledgements, founder Lea Hindley-Smith described the Therafields method of "theradrama" as "the art used by the workers of Therafields to help the lost individual retrace his steps and, in due course, gain a chance to reclaim his birthright." She described its goals as "to deliver man to himself and to liberate his creativity and humanity" ([vi-vii]). At the centre of its therapies were the person's regular private meetings with an assigned theradramist. (The word "centre" here is appropriate—the theradramists spoke frequently of the need for a person to be psychologically "centred," and together with their clients referred colloquially to their main building, on Dupont Street in Toronto, as "The Centre.") A liberationist preoccupation of many of theradramist/administrators of Therafields was preventing it as an institution from taking on the same oppressive role in its clients' transferences as family members often did or as the Roman Catholic church had done for many of the Foundation's founding mem-bers—most of the latter, many of whom became Therafields therapists, had been priests or nuns in the process of leaving their orders. One of the reasons Barrie advanced for advocating the dissolution of Therafields in the late 1980s—speaking as its Vice President—was that such transferences to it, in

which it became experienced by the client as a monolithic 'parental' institution, were becoming increasingly obstructive to therapeutic progress (he showed to me little of the distress over the dissolution that Steve McCaffery speaks of elsewhere in this issue, and seemed to regard community suspicions of undue profits from Therafields real estate sales, which McCaffery also mentions, as merely a vivid instance of this problematic transference). The fact that Barrie had joined these particular people, under the guidance of Lea Hindley-Smith, also suggests a source for the Roman Catholic theology that colours the first books of *The Martyrology,* and why it was specifically "saints," rather than a lay concept like 'doctors' (as in the parodic suggestions of Bök and Wershler-Henry in their essays here), that became the poem's first sign of linguistic instability. A possible outcome of research into Nichol and Therafields is a reading of *The Martyrology* as less significant in itself than as a therapeutic text that enabled the ever-expanding variety of Nichol's later writing.

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

Coach House Letters

David Rosenberg

Dear Reader:

Frank Davey just asked if I will allow the following personal letter to be printed in the next *Open Letter.* I have four hours to decide. I had intended the letter to be private as well as to serve as notes to myself toward an eventual new essay... but when will I get around to it? What about Frank's challenge, while the Coach House issue is fresh—and I have only "first thoughts" (what Allen Ginsberg called best thoughts)? Why not let the future essay gather shape in public: in self-conscious dialogue with readers (offering myself as one) and the subject?

As I re-read the letter and imagine it in print, I hesitate. The whole issue is resonant of early Coach House for me, in which challenges were occasions for exploration. Coach House Press as I knew it, for seven years that ended in 1972, was a laboratory, while the public image had it somewhat wrong: confrontation was not what we sought. It feels like it would be chutzpah for me to say yes to Frank, let's confront the public with our private bias, our gut take. But in fact the offer to publish was pregnant with subject and dialogue issues, and I decided to wait for full term and the attendant risk of stillborn (stale) results. I asked for an extension to the issue after next.

Subject and dialogue are one here because both—the early Coach House and my current thoughts on it—suggest a process of collaboration with a local culture, and even more specifically, a particular canon in formation. It's already self-conscious, this dialogue, because its focus is the past—and yet more than that, what I'd call the living core of the past: the inspiration, the invisible seeds, that give this dialogue life. Were it simply 'Canadian'—whatever happened, or what others talk of as beginnings and endings regarding Coach House Press, for example—it would remain largely of provincial interest. But it is not; there is a particular inspiration that we can locate as having passed through bp Nichol for instance, among others. bp suggested so much more than he actually wrote or presented: cultural critique, social analysis, the writer's place in society, etc.—all the old big questions made charmingly new.

How, specifically? Genres, those pillars of society, were stretched beyond recognition.

These were some private thoughts and intentions as I re-read my letter, but when I imagined it a 'public letter' I shrank back. Poor Manguel, I can't even admit to having read him carefully, and poor *Brick,* maybe it is even heroic in some way. Comparing some marginal Canadian poets to the Bible—won't this look like the theory-mad flipside of analyzing Classic Comics versions of Shakespeare? I'm reminded, however, of "The Basement Tapes" of Bob Dylan and The Band; specifically, the book about them this year by Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic,* and a poem written back then in which I used "basement" as a metaphor for Canada:

> it's not hard slipping thru/ our photograph/ our social hero
> lighting up the line picture/ smoke in the air/ O my Toronto!
> basement of Europe/ America chills the air of/ not my head
> —from "Passing By An Open Field" in *The Necessity of Poetry* (Coach House Press, 1973)

I don't intend basement to demean, do I? Basement is ironic, more on the order of 'underground,' which is how we identified ourselves then. To go "underground," Dylan and some Canadian cohorts had to record themselves in the basement of "Big Pink," an anonymous place that connected in their minds to the underground railroad. The point is: we were happy to be there and—we hoped to be on our way soon. We contained those contradictions, back then. Marcus finds certain of the sources for the Basement tapes to be the true inspiration of American culture, written on the margins by marginal artists. Not folk art, but high art on the margins, distinguished so by the inspiration passing through it. That is how I would look at early Coach House: a way station the train of inspiration passed through one night. Subjects were shattered, genres were bent, words were split. It could not happen in a big studio or a big university or publishing house, anymore than the Bible could have been written in a dominant culture like Egypt, and later, Rome.

So my waiting is about an idea of inspiration, and the problem of making it public. Like making my letter to Frank Davey public (and at that moment, the irony of the magazine title "Open Letter" was lost on me) I suddenly felt vulnerable. Where was I in the world: on stage in New York, in the wings in England's London, or in a basement where nothing's left to lose until we leave? In other words, I didn't write the letter to take a stand, to make my mark in the world. In a similar way, neither did the early writers of the Hebrew Bible, who were merely at home in the

backwater of Jerusalem then, among themselves. They didn't have to be even as self-conscious as I am in my letter, as if I didn't know who my public was anymore.

Dear Frank:

I've had a chance to read much of the chp issue of *ol* by now. Quite impressive, both what's there and what's missing (the latter what your editorial taste may save one from). At first skim, I thought there was too much naming of authors and titles, as if suggesting a canon, which would have been fine, except nobody does much with it (including myself). Then I realized something else was going on, perhaps unconsciously, that was after all canon-making in its suggestion that it has been going on for years, decades. Something that started while I was there but really got going after I'd left in September '71. This issue fills me in, wonderfully, almost as if written for me is how it feels. Let me begin to explain why, and hope to continue in more depth later.

First let me thank you for your own rich piece. I hadn't paid much attention to chp over the years, assuming it was just going on like it had, on the fringe, perhaps too mellowed, with less ferment assimilated from without. I was wrong, and had fallen into the typical American demeanor about itself and the english-speaking satellites. Of those, England was the most irritating, exporting their Tina Browns and James Fentons, who clubbily coopt a leading edge upon which they are clueless. You inform me that Canada has its own clone in the person of Alberto Manguel, and that he even ended up with fingers in the Coach House. Part of it is flattering—that he would even think chp worthy, or that Ondaatje continued to think so for so long, perhaps still does. But the one issue of *Brick* I saw (forgive me if it was an exception) seemed to me London Pubbish, ersatz international—though I am ignorant of the books Brick [Brick Books] does and stand ready to be educated, noting the Greg Curnoe title, which suggests your London may be antidote to pretentions overseas. (There remains an English innovative and fringe group of poets who I originally published in *The Ant's Forefoot* and whose recent anthology is reviewed not-uninterestingly in a summer *London Review of Books,* to which it needn't aspire. Starting with Andrew Crozier, whose Ferry Press distributed the Forefoot in UK).*

The other part of Manguelishness (which I may coin since I don't know the fellow, who may be a sweet person) is unpleasant—shallow ambition, superficial learning, gaseous imagination. Example in my vicinity: his claim that reading was outloud until rise of Europe silenced it, a claim

straight out of a condensed encyclopedia and built into a pretext for half a book, when an ancient scholar worth some salt can ask just how were they reading in the huge libraries throughout Mesopotamia and Egypt, even as late as the burning of the Alexandria library, in cuneiform? There was so much translation and creative misreading going on—out loud? hardly. My point is the grandiosity of sitting upon the saddle of European 'progress'. And it is a point contiguous with my re-education in Coach House.

In the new book I mentioned, *The Book of David,* I flesh out the Solomonic court culture in 10th century BC Jerusalem that was first sketched in The Book of J. A whole culture of writers in a small enclave caught between giants of Egypt and Mesopotamia, concentrating on their own little canon, with two genre-bending writers in particular, J and S, as central inspiration. And now, the Canadian canon on the margins that your chp issue suggests—more than chp, of course—begins to look similar, with bp and at least one more great one not yet currently settled upon (because still lively) as central inspiration. bp had to become history, sadly, for this canon to emerge, of which I'm just learning.

When I was at Coach House I felt what was missing was a sense of the then New York School, specifically Frank O'Hara, who had just died and therefore whose loss could begin to be truly felt. The effect of bp's loss feels similar in Canada (not, of course, to the academy and establishment; likewise, O'Hara is still some ways from frontally entering the American canon) and that is very moving to me, the fact that there are bp followers, that we are all followers, even me in my brief contact with him and his work or vision. It is moving to read the budding intelligence of Wershler-Henry, and even more to see the appreciation for bp across the board. It changes me, makes me realize how important some of the Canadianizing I felt pinched by was a necessary protection. And continues to be. One needs to protect a space in which there is a conscious resistance to the dominant and self-aggrandizing cultures—but even more important, that space has to be free to assimilate as well, open.

I hated the energy wasted in that resistance—ie, the unconscious resistance, the grandiosity of the local—but a conscious resistance, unintimidated by fame yet also assimilating it, is something you seem to have nurtured in *ol.* A critical resistance with some space for inspiration. Good work.

As I've said, I'd like to get back some day and write this up in vivo.

warmly, David Rosenberg

*About the writing of history. It's only natural in your synoptic piece that a mischaracterization might lead as well to continued misunderstanding, so let me respond to one that trips a wire tying me back to early Coach House. At one point, you write "Gone was the parodic, left-of-centre anti-establishment edge of much of the list of the previous Coach House..." While you intend this as a favorable contrast to the weak-minded "fashionably international," I find it misses the mark. It doesn't exhibit just how weak are the editors you refer to, because it casts the leading edge of Coach House in the mode of resistance, as in the unfortunate word "parodic." Most of the work in *The Ant's Forefoot* and my books as well as in Coleman's and Nichol's work and editing, was not parodic in intent. It was, instead, critical—what I called in "Crossing the Border" a critique of the mainstream—it's just that we didn't have the context or frame of mind then to characterize it. These works were mainly not in resistance or reaction, which the term parody connotes, but rather in the mode of pushing aesthetic boundaries and opening the field (a pang at the loss of Duncan) which we can now see, from present vantage, was a form of critique. Critique suggests intellectual distance and the work in question was instead rather passionate, but that's just where the transition began: it was a passionate critique, not seeking to demean the mainstream as much as to open it up, to disarm it. Not strictly rebellion, but a youthful attempt to speak back. Hence the sweetness of bp, or O'Hara (and Duncan too). If it was critique rather than parody, one may ask, what was under critique? Not style, not form, but genre itself. What is a poem, we asked. What right does anybody have to take it for granted? Tradition—that might be the mainstream's answer—and so the critique involves the redefining of traditions, canons, cultures. This is a more weighty context than the one suggested in "parodic, left-of-centre, anti-establishment" etc. Unfortunately, this is what can happen when you are drawn into a polemic with the weak-minded mainstream, and I'm sure you and I and others will go further into this in the time ahead. I'm trusting your "Coach House" issue will turn out to be only the opening salvo in opening this polemic up into a wider field.

Dear National Library of Canada:

The early Coach House was important for pushing the boundaries of what openness can mean, and we still need to describe how that was done, continues, or has been coopted. Back then, 'openness' seemed to mean something in itself, but now we have the burden to give it a context. I

would say it makes inspiration possible: so it can come from anywhere, up, down, sideways—heaven, hell, Mesopotamia. But we can only see it as we read the past. To know how to read the past feels like the right work now. In the early Coach House, the past was right there, in the present; we knew it, but we couldn't say a thing about it, not then. That is the nature of inspiration: it creates a space out of nothing, and the words that come don't have to be anything more or less than words, if they're right.[1] Of course, Proust proved that you can write as if you will die before you get to the end of the piece—and still have lots of time to do it in. Most of us around the early Coach House didn't understand that and wrote as if there was no tomorrow, just like everyone else at the time, whether in San Francisco or Paris. But we had a unique space, one where for moments we could feel like retired men and women, with the press as our golf course.[2] We had to invent the freedom to play. I can see that in bp now. If it was in others of us, there's a lot of work ahead to reconstruct that space in the language available to us now, the language of history, of remembrance.

It's possible. You can see it in the memory of writing poetry more than anything. As soon as I read an old line now I can recall clearly what I was thinking as it was written, the decisions over the next word, etc., the music. It must be that the intensity of concentration was so strong, and so... indelible. But if you show me a photo of myself or something I was teaching then or the voice of an old flame—I hardly know who I was.

The continuation of Coach House in various forms through the years may have been—and may now be—of most potent importance insofar as it teaches us how to read its hereditary past, when genres were first stretched with a unique intensity in the sixties. I think I can describe a sense of how to explore a certain Canadian canon, galvanized around early Coach House, that can be compared to others such as the biblical one I've long studied. This is only half-ironic, of course, once you understand with modern scholarship that the biblical canon was sometimes what we'd call secular before religion got hold of it later, in about the sixth century b.c. Consider what would happen if a religion one day was founded on the works of, say, Billy the Kid, as rendered by both bp Nichol and Michael Ondaatje... My point is not that Coach House is the canon but rather that it is central to a Canadian canon that, because of the way it protects itself from the larger cultures of US and UK while assimilating them, may become the most crucial one in the future.

Dear Scholar,

I can see myself one night in 1970, in my Rochdale apartment, picture window showing the sunset over Lake Ontario in the distance. At my desk, typewriter flanked by stereo speakers, Hannah the cat perched on one: maybe Nashville Skyline, maybe Muddy Waters, or Elvin Jones playing. Somewhere between 2 and 4 tokes of the day's (evening's) joint I would become paralyzed and it was a matter of somehow getting into bed beside my current partner. So I had to keep clear of that upper limit of smoke as long as I could in order to work, which meant finish the day's quota of at least 2 to 4 pages of first draft poetry. This was an every other day routine, with the in-between ones devoted to sober revision.

I can see that for a time the poems were letters. I wrote lots of pre-breakfast stream of consciousness letters to other writers across the border, and I would mine these letters in the evening's poem, reaching for something more limpid, terse, laconic. To wring a psalmic sobriety from the intoxication of words. Once in a while an ascetic phrase from the stereo's song would find its way in. The higher I got, the more I stretched for stone cold sobriety in the poem: it was war.

The stretch between private letter and public poem, I see now, was a stretching of genres, until the time of the letter became irrelevant. Those to whom the poem's letters were addressed might just as well have lived in ancient days. They were like letters to the dead—but as if the dead were a living public that did not react to charm, to imagery, to rhyme or rhetoric. Instead, the dead react only to genre, and only to one genre: they will accept only a letter to the past.

Two of three poems written then, after revision, would still wind up in the trash, and the remaining ones of this period became—more than a year later—*A Star in My Hair,* last volume published while I was still in Canada (Foreprint Editions with Weed/flower Press, 1971), a Coach House collaboration. I see now that my obsession with letters was partly a fact of Canadian distances and partly a wish to receive back from the past a message that would blur boundaries. That message came, in a way, as an imperative to translate the anonymously dead, leaving me at the door of the Psalms a couple years later in New York (*Blues of the Sky,* Angel Hair Books, 1974).

But the "current partner" might have seen it differently, as the infamous writer-partner was losing his grip on the au courant, growing into the past, losing his way in the relationship. And Hannah answers soon enough, in a poem titled "Love's Letters":

"I am glad Hannah is o.k./ Hannah is dead/ dearest

died of cold and starvation/ I am bearing that/ rare little cat's life
and now you must too/ harden your heart/ before the coming plaintive lights
that we may shine back/ like animal metal/ like tinsel in a pipe"
—from *A Star in My Hair*

Dear Reader:

That a writer must trust solely in the reader is still the most radical notion in literature of our time. Most writers, myself included, imagine a 'public.' Sometimes this public is given to us through reviews and prizes, and sometimes through sales and marketing figures. And sometimes it is simply a circle of colleagues. Once in a while a writer will say "I write only to please myself," but that is quite a superficial insight about masturbation. To write directly for the reader, however, is to reject a preconceived public and risk creating a new audience. A preconceived public demands genre, demands to know if this is a letter or a prose poem or an essay or a "postmodernist text." But let me reassure you: this is intended less to be a text than simply a space. Instead of intuiting what moves you, we need to set up a laboratory and watch what happens.

Inspiration is in the quality of the experiment, but why must it be public? Why not just circulate a ms. among colleagues? Because. Because the reader is public the way a god is—outside, but instead of observing, he or she is also participating. If you write for him or her you demand judgment outside the boundaries of genre. Gods don't know from genres. They want a space to exist in, period.

So to address you properly, I must inspire a space. I can't do that now, we're still too public; I can only reiterate that it happened then—around Coach House, in Canada, for a time. 'Read' bp, for instance, and you see that it is scripture, the voices there transcending genre. This doesn't mean it's all great literature, of course. What it means is that a decade, or three decades, or three centuries after, we can begin to become aware that such a canon has been opened, and that when we are in touch with it we know who you, reader, are. Forget the word "god." You—you are another species.

I am talking about Canadian inspiration—outside of a particular text, outside, public. Inspiration as it leaked from the as yet unrepaired roof of the Coach House, back in the sixties, an authentic Canadian inspiration (Canadian, as in beavers).

Please excuse me for getting dramatic, performance-conscious. I'm trying to wait until the way to make my final, and unifying, point comes clear. But waiting is precious, too; it suggests that something already

happened, before, and that when it becomes conscious we will recognize it. That is to say: it was a renaissance around early Coach House, around bp and others, a small canadian renaissance. And the original? Those were truly Canadian origins, Canada embodying the contradictions of Europe and the frontier, of immigrants and aboriginals, of men and beavers. America didn't so much as embody it as run with it. But Canada just hung back, and there were no words for it that I know until early Coach House re-embodied the original in "words." That is key: that "words" must be put in quotation marks (unlike 19th century Canadian literature). Because in the Canadian renaissance I am describing, the contradictions that original Canada embodied become blurred genres, bending the words within them. European genres, frontier genres, native genres, immigrant genres (I was an immigrant). Those genres get all curved out of shape in the embodying—in the works of bp and other early chp authors, including some Americans. But you wouldn't know it until you read the works, because Coach House hung back, waited. At the time, the books may have seemed cute or subversive or just plain spaced out—all those things were fashionable back then, all over the world. But now we can see the renaissance was none of that. It was waiting to be seen as a canon in formation—or an underground country.

Notes

1. I use the term Coach House somewhat imprecisely because even "Coach House Press" was not a clear entity, sponsoring all sorts of offshoots of books, or what we'd call ephemera. At least 30 issues of *Is*. and *The Ant's Forefoot* were published during my time there, for instance, and I contributed to most of them, so that by "there" I feel more comfortable recalling a "house." And perhaps that is really the point: it is a spirit and a space I refer back to, and not by any means solely a publisher. This is a point I explained in more detail in my previous essay, "Crossing the Border: A Coach House Memoir," in the Coach House Press issue of *Open Letter*.
2. In "Crossing the Border" I emphasize the ways in which Coach House was not cavalier about a community it was striving to create. Its ideas of community and creation stand opposed to today's usual "arts groups," which seek relevance by catering to conventional communities.

st. Ink

billy little

maria spelterini walked
blindfolded
fruit baskets on feet
wire strung across niagara falls
and would again
to meet bp in canada and yodel
for kd lang

maria spelterini walked blindfolded
barefoot in snow training
to meet bp at greasy spoons
in tacky tourist knickknack joints
on frozen arboretum trails
in aviaries and apiaries

bp and kd yodeling on cbc
st Ereo reading eeeerie poems
frostbit fort erie audio modulation
maria spelterini ermine trimmed
mini and doeskin toque
fruit baskets like wooden landing craft
her unslippers

unwavering above

dropping current
maid of mist below

o vendor saints go martian in

o vendor saints go martian in

maria spelterini steady in wind
gliding taut cable carrying bp
dead send kisses in swarms like mumblebees
wind in face
bp big as muddy poetry

mazel tov muscle tongue ululates
every noun a kiss

bps carry bp and maria kisses now
ova fibre optic niagara
st. Art knows stick drip slick of mud
brings kiss nanoseconds deeper
st. And and st. Ammers innocently
listen on tombbox

st. All and st. Ripped
deacon st. Ruction and
maria spelterini clambered peace
bridge cables wit bp piggyback
in starless dark
poem after poem learnt and burnt 43

rered dread rereed deed
demon read smelled spilled
spelled smaller big bp spread
generous spirit fundamentally

even welcomt mis-taken attempts
mr kindness knew results
nova ice & no nicer
b4 bp st. Olen in operay
tion o woe o woe
om on lips now

& zen zipn U2me
tree size of c

zonko

unsleeping beauty(for MCP)

unable to rest, worried stiff,
up all night worried about the unworking
standing on her head, doing her yoga
to strengthen her reserves, she's
got a lot of worrying to do yet
worrying about the refugees
what can she do stiff as a board
worrying which war she's forgetting
who's doing what in her name
unrepresenting her in government
war Is humaNity'S humANITY
you don't see a thousand sheep charging
another thousand sheep charging them do you
or for that matter a thousand rats
you have to worry about men
they're so rational, they're cruel
one might murder you tonight
they're so professional, so sane
they believe and they do
no thinking interrupts their thought
you have to worry especially
if they like your looks those princes
those expert kissers
puckerers par excellence
lined up to kiss you into remland
you worry you won't have enough
garlick on your breathe
to fend off the vampires
worried she'll snore and bore her
snoring childhood sweetheart
worried she's not meditating correctly
worried she's not doing enough
to save her sinking friends
worried she won't have anything left
to keep worrying

in the style she's accustomed to
and will her cooking please them
worried sick she'll be unappreciated
by the unfunny hungry
unsleeping beauty doesn't get a wink
she's worried friends
        all over the world
will worry about her
she's worried they won't
she worry you bruise her lips
with you fervent kiss

Nicholongings / because they is

Lori Emerson

When writing of one whom is greatly admired but no longer living, it is often too easy to rely on an elegiac mode that is nothing more than a "ready-made sadness apparatus."[1] Rather than be found guilty of being a stylistic homeopath, writing only to see bpNichol in terms of my own tautological sorrow, I intend instead to take on a strategy that is homeopathic in its acknowledgment of my own subjectivity. And while I have chosen Nichol as my Stevensian "external construct—the myth— which will suffice,"[2] what I expect will emerge from this examination of 'Nichol-as-myth' is an externalization of myself intended to better reflect the spirit of Nichol's style of living/writing/thought as I have come to know it.

1

My relationship with bpNichol's work has been from the start one characterized (and perhaps nourished) by longing. There is first the longing which is the salient structural characteristic of the elegy genre: the longing to be in living nearness to the elegized; and as one who is to begin graduate work on Nichol this fall and having neither met Nichol, nor had the opportunity to see him read or perform, there is the sense in which Nichol will always be the elegized in my writing of him.

Over the past week I have spent my mornings at the University of Alberta's Special Collections; what began as the librarian's and my marveling over Nichol's extraordinary creative range, ended with both of us self-consciously fingering the poem objects in the *bp* box, she trying to negotiate her instincts to protect what she felt were the more "ephemeral" pieces against my desire to take away with me photocopies of the spirit of Nichol that felt so throbbingly present—even there in the basement, amid dust and behind glass. My desire was only made worse when the librarian said, "Didn't he just die recently? I remember hearing him read on the radio quite a bit," to which I could only reply, "Oh, really?" *If only I could have known bpNichol; if only I was born twenty years earlier; if only I had heard of bpNichol just ten years earlier*.

I was also confronted with a similar feeling of alienation while listening to the *Borders* record in the Music Listening Room at the university. I found myself doing two things: first, I sat, with my head on my arms to block out the fluorescent lights, the volume turned up, and tried to give myself over to the voice that was warmer, more self-conscious and less intimidating than I expected; second, after listening to the record three times and still longing for more than I was able to get, I began looking around the room, trying to find a tape-machine that might unintentionally have been hooked-up to a record player. Unlike my desire to take away with me photocopies of Nichol's poems, this sudden desire to take away with me Nichol's voice illustrates how longing becomes a structural feature not only inherent to, but produced by, the disembodied voice of the sound poet insofar as the recording denies total/bodily expression of the poem to the speaker, and total experiencing of the poem to the listener.

2

And then there is the longing to bridge the unreal and often necessary distance between reader / writer and elegized, a distance that is intrinsic to the myth-making process and that engenders a mythologization / heroization of the elegized. Ironically, in taking on issues of re-presentational distance and control through his exploration / explosion of form (for example through sound), and as one of the most visible Canadian poets to have successfully carried forward the work of removing restrictions to the openness afforded by language, there is a reverential distance imposed between myself and Nichol that is in itself representational, and that renders him inaccessible.

I cannot say that I have come to know Nichol's work outside of the criticism of him that I have read, most of which has been written by friends / colleagues of Nichol, and I have been influenced by their inevitable making mention of the courage, sense of honesty, and spirit that typify both the man and his work.[4] However, as a result of succumbing to the influence of these other writers, not only am I made more acutely aware of the loss of a poet whom I did not know yet

> This is what I'm talking about, around the individual sort of superstardom and what that means ... You're fighting a mythification process really; you're fighting the attempt to make you something you aren't.[3]

whose living trace I feel strongly around me, but the combination of his near-celebrity status and the Nichol-persona as it is projected through others' writing of him transforms this awareness into a devout idolization of the poet as hero— ironically, the very process of mythification against which Nichol struggled. However, if the perpetuation of a myth depends upon sustaining the hero's status as both human and superhuman, then Nichol and his work simultaneously cultivate an impotent longing that results from the kind of inaccessibility outlined above, and generate a hope-filled move towards change that results from the kind of accessibility outlined below.

3

Not unlike what Nichol aimed to do as a theradramist, his poetry points towards how we have outgrown the Cartesian/positivist mind, and teaches through the embodiment of what is being taught how we might begin building a new language for a new art. Nichol's accessibility, then, not only lies in his democratic humanism which exhorts "everybody [to do] poetry because everybody should be using language raised to its highest power,"[7] but, in my case, what has ultimately rendered him accessible is the intimacy between speaker/text and listener/reader[8] that is created in his poetry of familiar and strange sounds, an intimacy that allows language to exceed its by now outgrown representational function. That is, rather than viewing sound as the carrier of meaning reflected in the reality

> ... what you're doing in the situation is not imposing yourself on the person but basically being a catalyst: to ask questions they can't formulate, to out them in the situation where they're going to have to deal with the material themselves and where you help them as much as you can.[5]

> The other is emerging as the necessary prerequisite for dialogues with the self that clarify the soul & heart and deepen the ability to love. I place myself there, with them, whoever they are, ... who seek to reach themselves and the other thru the poem by as many exits and entrances as possible.[6]

that language is supposed to transcribe, poems such as "Ballad of the Restless Are" and "Dada Lama" view sound both as a form of expression meaningful in itself, and as the voice of material bodies.[9] As Richard Poirier writes in *Poetry and Pragmatism,* barriers to conventional meaning and sense (such as those offered by Nichol's sound poems) point towards not so much a refusal to communicate merely through a mimesis of reality, but an openness to speaking the "something, perhaps" that is a universal bond existing between humans. Poirier writes:

> One virtue of [this] kind of sound ... is ... that it can create spaces or gaps in ascertained structures of meaning and that it can do so in such a way as simultaneously to create trust and reassurance instead of human separation. The sounds invite us to live with others in a space of expectation rather than deferral.[10]

4.

Given Nichol's insistent attempt to overcome the bias of representational thought through sound, it comes as no surprise that Martin Heidegger's name appears several times through the books of *The Martyrology,* for Nichol can readily be located as a descendant of a Heideggerian 'them' with whom he shares the desire "to reach themselves and the other thru the poem by as many exits and entrances as possible."[12] Superficially, both Nichol and Heidegger regard poetry as a privileged kind of expression,[13] but the essence of their thinking/writing lies in that only in the poetry of sound and song can language best body forth its basic nature. In works such as "The Nature of Language" and "Dialogue on Language," Heidegger writes that in order to allow ourselves to be given up to the essential nature of language we must release language from conventional "meaning and sense-content" through *Dichten,* or the harmonization of thought with song. And similarly, just as Heidegger claims that when language is released from representation and words are allowed to resound in their own right that the words begin to sing, Nichol declares that "I sing with the sounds the sound is all the meaning that there is."[14]

> To sing, truly to say worldly existence, to say out of the haleness of the whole pure draft, and to say only this, is to belong in the precinct of beings themselves.[11]

> We must return to the human voice and listen / rip off the mask of words to free the sounds.[15]

However, what both Nichol and Heidegger ultimately strive toward is the articulation of a writing / philosophy for the body that can best emerge through a surrender and submission to the non-dualistic experiencing of sound.[16] In this last sense, language becomes what John Vernon calls "a bodily act,"[17] endowed with the ontological capacity to heal and promote wellness through wholeness—and by "wholeness" I not only mean the wholeness of individuals but also the wholeness found in (language) communities which, according particularly to Heidegger and Wittgenstein,[18] this kind of dialogic closeness with language issues forth.

> We are marrying the flesh to the flesh, the word to the daily flux of our lives we know & don't know ... so many things you still lack words for, struggle to wed the inner & outer worlds, the self to some other self or selves, confess your love & struggle with one another, together, conscious there is this word in you, your name, & that you are yet another thing or things you will never encompass, never exhaust the possibilities of, because you are wedded to the flux of life, because we are words and our meanings change.[19]

The endeavors of Heidegger and Nichol to develop a philosophy of the body is therefore part of their endeavor to lead us out of the trappings of mind/body, subject/object dualities, and into a meaningful holism. As a result, what is promoted in both is an experiential openness that creates intimacy, and confers listener/reader access to the speaker/text.

5

In this final and personal note it is tempting for me to make melodramatic claims like 'without a figure like Nichol to look towards for (en)courage(ment) I wouldn't have made it through this past year's slogging through required coursework,' or 'if it weren't for Nichol I wouldn't be writing poetry today,' when both are only partially true; however, in bringing the sensuous to thinking/writing, and mindfulness to the sensuous, Nichol has helped bring me closer to a writing that is a holistic enrichment, rather than casual annihilation, of myself.

Before discovering my love of poetry, I found university to be a

deadening and suffocating place that, in what I felt was a single-minded approach to learning, either contradicted or denied my sense of how things were in the world. But in my third year I began reading and writing poetry under the influence of the New York Poets, particularly Frank O'Hara. In a statement of poetics I wrote for my first creative writing class, I claimed (maybe with a little too much self-important certainty) that "... primarily Frank O'Hara allowed me to start writing, to write in a way that reflected who I was ... I think it's all about finding your way in, and using that doorway as a starting point for understanding poetry— although I must admit that I have yet to gain access to the language of a lot of Canadian poetry this way, which is really too bad." However, whether it was that O'Hara's poems eventually seemed to me to be too rooted in American (rather than Canadian) everyday life, or whether it was my increasing resistance to the intellectual precision that is so subtle and yet pervasive in O'Hara's poems, I found not only that I shared a geographical and cultural kinship with Nichol, but also that Nichol helped legitimize my as-yet unexplored desires to write a poetry that could hold all I wanted to put in—including myself. And although I do not know for certain whether, right now, I have arrived at that ideal place of organic, whole writing, I can say that, having experienced some extraordinary moments where I did not know where poetry began and where it ended, I must be getting closer.

Notes

1. Kinereth Meyer, in his article "The Mythology of Modern Death," *Genre* 19 (Spring 1986), p. 23, theorizes how the elegy has been used by modern poets.
2. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 239.
3. Daphne Marlatt et al, "Interview with bpNichol, Sept. 19, 1974." *The Capilano Review*, 8/9 (Fall, 1975/Spring, 1976), 328.
4. Here I am thinking of Steven Scobie's description of *The Martyrology,* in *bpNichol: What History Teaches* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984), which characterizes it as being "... a rare and remarkable honesty and openness ... [that] never degenerates into cynicism or satire" (19); Frank Davey, in "bpNichol," *From There to Here: A Guide to English-Canadian Literature since 1960* (Erin, Ont.: Porcepic, 1974), describes *The Martyrology* as being "the most courageous body of work in Canadian literature today" (213); and, in *bpNichol and His Works* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1992) Douglas Barbour writes that "Nichol brought to each of his endeavors a non-sentimental sense of joy and love ..." (5).
5. *The Capilano Review*, 326.
6. Quoted in Scobie, 16.
7. Raoul Duguay, "Raoul Duguay Interviews bpNichol (En Anglais)." *Brick: a journal of reviews* (Winter 1985), 28.

8. Since some of Nichol's sound poems have not yet been transcribed, from here on in, when referring to Nichol's work, I will make parallel contrasts between reader and text, and speaker and listener.
9. While Stephen Scobie may be right in calling "Salad" merely an "expressionist gimmick" (*bpNichol* 63), the voices tossing salad ingredients, do not represent 'salad' so much as they appeal to the being and corporeality of the salad itself; Douglas Barbour investigates this point more thoroughly in *bpNichol and his Works*, pages 11-12.
10. Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1992), 41-43.
11. Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 138.
12. Quoted in Scobie, 16.
13. In the *Brick* interview, Nichol declares that "... poetry is language raised to its highest power & its joy" (28), and similarly, in the introduction to a collection of essays by Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter nicely summarizes Heidegger's definition of poetry as being that which has "... an indispensable function for human life: it is the creative source of the humanness of the dwelling of life of man (xv)."
14. bpNichol, *Journal* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1978), 17.
15. Quoted by Dwight Gardiner in *The Capilano Review* interview, 325.
16. A passage from Jonathan Albert's essay, in "A Language of Spoken Movement," *Open Letter* 5.3(Summer 1982) 11-16, illuminates better what I mean by this; Albert writes, "Sound has the ability to speak feelings. We hear music in an entirely different way than we normally hear language. We feel sounds. We feel the movements of the textures and frequencies. And when we feel them, something inside moves with the sounds." (11)
17. John Vernon, *Poetry and the Body* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979), 4.
18. In "Dialogue on Language," Heidegger writes how meaning is created between speaker and listener by way of a previously shared familiarity with the world, and similarly according to Wittgenstein, meaning is created by way of mutually agreed-upon "intentions" that develop in "language games" (quoted in Anca Rosu's *The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens,* Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1995, p. 21); it is this relationship between speaker and listener that demonstrates both the presence of intimacy and the dialogic nature of language.
19. Quoted in Scobie, 29.

False Portrait of bpNichol as Charles Lamb

Steve McCaffery

He succeeded not by conforming
to the spirit of the age

but in opposition to it. He stole off
the pavement to pick his way

in the contrary direction. Shy
sensitive, the reverse

of everything coarse, borne along with
no pompous paradoxes, having none

of the froth of newfangled opinions.
Neither fop nor sophist he would stand

on one side to look over an old book-stall
or stroll down some deserted pathway

in search of a pensive description.
His style ran pure though it would often take

an underground coarse into the retirement
of his own mind disdaining

all the vulgar artifice of authorship all the
cant of criticism and helps

to notoriety. He had no grand swelling
theories to attract the visionary

and the enthusiast, no passing topics
to allure the thoughtless

and the vain. He pitched his tent
in the suburbs of existing manners

and brought down the account
of character to the few.

With what a firm yet subtle pencil
he embodied! How notably embalmed

a battered beau. His friends were
his portraits his portraits were fixtures

and silence his cheese. He haunted
Toronto like a gentle spirit

but the streets of Plunkett
were his fairy-land.

His taste in French and German
literature was somewhat defective

nor had he made much progress in
the Science of Political Economy

or other abstruse studies, though he
had read vast folios of controversial

divinity, merely for the sake of
the intricacy of style.

There was a primitive
simplicity and self denial

about his manners
and a Quakerism in his personal
appearance, which was relieved however

by a fine Titian head shown
on the cover of Book Six.

He did not go deep into the Scotch novels
but was at home in Bissett

Duncan, Bowering and Stein
and gained ground in

the opinion of others by making
no advances of his own.

One sunday he left us

and death has this sense

yet even here we recall him
to our fancy

the stranger on the grate, still
fluttering

in his dusky tenuity.

Steve McCaffery (and William Hazlitt)

Argument for a Secular *Martyrology*

Darren Wershler-Henry

We read the writings of our acquaintances (friends and foes) in a twofold sense, inasmuch as our knowledge continually whispers to us: 'this is by him, a sign of his inner nature, his experiences, his talent,' while another kind of knowledge at the same time seeks to determine what his work is worth in itself, what evaluation it deserves apart from its author, what enrichment of knowledge it brings with it. As goes without saying, these two kinds of reading and evaluating disturb one another. Even a conversation with a friend will bring the fruits of knowledge to maturity only if both finally think only of the matter at hand and forget they are friends.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human,* 94

I don't remember exactly when it occurred to me that there might be doctors as well as saints in *The Martyrology,* but Doctor Ink was involved. And possibly Doctor Ugs. Tracking them down became a kind of mania: from Doctor Ag, the first, to Doctor Essingroom, the mysterious Doctor Y, and the omnipresent Doctors Iving, Eam, Eamt, and Eaming, to the struggling antihero of the text, Doctor Agon. I even made graphs. I mentioned the idea to Doktor Bök, who replied, "What the hell: you might as well give PhDs to words. They haven't done us any good."And then, as if to seal the inevitability of this essay, *The Martyrology* itself became the engineer of its own salvage. In *The Martyrology* Book 5, I found a "Pal in / Dr Omic's St Andard Dictionary".

I do recall why the idea of the doctors seemed important. It was a relativization strategy that stemmed from my conviction that reading *The Martyrology* as the triumphant centrepiece of Nichol's oeuvre is to do both it and his other texts a major disservice. The doctors, like the saints, are the product of a charade, the breaking of words at different locations in order to produce variant meanings. The difference between the two is one of orthodoxy—the saints are literally authorized transgressions, and thus, they take on the air of the sacred. The doctors were born of a perverse whim, a moment of readerly bliss. As such, they are examples of the paragrammatic function of language, an infinitely variable system of antisemantic features that unavoidably commit writing to an excessive,

potlatch economy. Further, paragrams demonstrate that unpresentability is a necessary condition for language to present anything at all (McCaffery 63, 64).

While the doctors are something of a conceptual one-liner, they do serve an indexical function, pointing to the possibility of reading *The Martyrology* as something other than a serial epic or personal poetic journal, forms whose ongoing validity, in the contemporary poetic climate at least, are in serious doubt (for one version of this argument, see Marjorie Perloff's *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*). Paragrammatic play cracks a text wide open, pointing outward as often as in, staging the text as a node in a productive network rather than as a monolithic whole. Casting *The Martyrology* in such a light not only relativizes this highly conflicted and problematic text, it provides new criteria for the reassessment of Nichol's other, 'minor' texts, which may, if we invoke Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's use of the word, prove to be more important than the 'major' one.

The usefulness of the doctors more or less ended at this point, because of my resistance to using *The Martyrology* as a gloss or *sortes Virgiliani,* presenting a quasi-mystical, hermeneutic justification for the critique of a text whose reception has been steeped in quasi-mysticism and hermeneutical readings. It's better that the doctors should remain as a sign of potential than to serve as an excuse for gratuitous postmodern textual wankery. Instead, I decided, it would be more effective to pull out a soapbox and address some of the major flaws in the critical and editorial handling of Nichol's work in general, and of *The Martyrology* in particular.

*

The Martyrology continues to occupy a central place in the Nichol canon despite the serious issues Frank Davey raises in "Exegesis / Eggs á Jesus:*The Martyrology* as a Text in Crisis." Davey's argument may be summarized as follows:

> —Nichol's personal generosity, largesse and courage have obfuscated most attempts to discuss *The Martyrology* in a critical fashion, reducing the level of critique to a kind of honorifics based on personal anecdotes (38-39).
>
> —The text of *The Martyrology* itself is often uncritically didactic (39).
>
> —Despite its play with the first-person pronoun, *The Martyrology* allows for a reconstitution of a sovereign authorial subject fully in

control of its production (41).

—The religiosity and exegetical tendencies of the text go largely unchecked (42).

To Davey's list of critiques, I would add the problems inherent in the project of a 'life poem' or 'life writing,' the increasingly evident tendency of *The Martyrology* to acquire disciples rather than readers, and that the relative scarcity of Nichol's more challenging texts leaves Nichol's potential audience little in the way of an alternative. Though Davey's essay appeared ten years ago, in the *Tracing the Paths: Reading ≠ Writing "The Martyrology",* the questions that it raises have gone largely unanswered, and the official reception of Nichol's work in general and *The Martyrology* in particular has remained relatively indiscriminate.

Speaking for those members of the current generation of writers who would approach the Nichol canon with a more critical eye, Kevin Connolly reiterates the first of Davey's points: "I'll say it for the thousandth time, bp was a great guy, but it's high time someone admitted that his work could be divided pretty evenly into the categories of 'genius' and 'twaddle,' and that after 10 years the 'saint beep' routine is wearing a little thin" (26). It might be argued that such sentiments are nothing more than the stereotypical Bloomian "anxiety of influence" playing itself out. However, my contention is that despite the dominant climate of unquestioning celebration of Nichol's work, the passing of the decade since Nichol's death has finally allowed for the emergence of critical perspectives on Nichol's work that are admittedly subjective, but more dispassionate—and therefore more useful—than the responses of the majority of Nichol's contemporaries.

As a rule, the editorial decisions concerning Nichol's posthumous publications are marred by a degree of sentimentality that ultimately compromises the text. George Bowering and Michael Ondaatje's hamfisted handling of the McClelland & Stewart selected Nichol, *An H in the Heart: bpNichol—A Reader,* is unfortunately exemplary. While the book's overtly personal Introduction and Afterword may be the appropriate places for honorifics such as Bowering's remark that "It is really hard, when you are writing about bpNichol, to stay away from hagiography" (xi), no amount of emotion serves as an excuse for the degree of carelessness evident in the presentation of the poems themselves. The treatment of the epigraph for the Reader, "A / LAKE / A / LANE / A / LINE / A / LONE," is an ill omen of things to come. In the poem's initial context, the concrete novel *Extreme Positions* (Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1981),

it is set in lower case, indicating a much quieter, more meditative mood than the Wagnerian overtones that its later, upper-case versions suggest. Worse still, as it appears in the Reader, all of the words in the poem are centred on the page. As the poem's initial and other subsequent appearances demonstrate (BACK LANE LETTERS, Toronto: Letters Press, 1994; and Stan Bevington and David Smith's 1994 version, cut into the concrete of bpNichol Lane itself, and published by Coach House as an accompanying broadside), this is a 'drop poem,' whose subtle shifts in signification depend on the text being set in a monotype font, with each letter occupying equal space (as on a typewriter), and the "a"s, the "i" and the "o" occupying the second cell of the implicit grid. Toronto historian, publisher and bookseller Nicky Drumbolis observes that to overlook this sort of typographic refinement is to miss a level of detail that is crucial to the understanding and representation of Nichol's work. The rest of the anthology, rife with typos and misprints, populated by a haphazard selection of Nichol's ephemera, piecemeal excerpts from longer texts, and alternate versions of major poems, serves as a sad confirmation of this contention.

The crowning irony in the (mis)treatment of "a / lake" stems from the following excerpt from a Nichol interview conducted by Daphne Marlatt and George Bowering himself:

> [Q:] What would McClelland and Stewart do?
> [Nichol:] I wouldn't publish with them! They think they're really going the distance if they give you a choice of two typefaces! They've really busted their hump for you as an author—"Hey, this stuff's not going to sell anyway!"
>
> ("Formal" 121)

Peter Jaeger argues that while Bowering and Ondaatje's stated desire to share Nichol's work with a wider audience may be well-intentioned, its net effect is to depoliticize the work by ignoring the importance Nichol placed on the material qualities of his publications, and on a small-press publishing context. "Neglecting to stress the incomplete process of the social revolution welcomed by the TRG Reports," writes Jaeger, "the 'bpNichol reader' offers a type of retro nostalgia for the glory days of the counter-culture.... Like any good ideology, this textual escapism hails subjects into an imaginary relationship with the real conditions of their existence: buy the book, and you too can participate in the social project of the avant-garde" (86-87).

Small wonder that with *An H in the Heart* as the only other Nichol text

still in wide circulation (some others are technically still in print, but are extraordinarily difficult to locate), there is scant evidence for the argument that *The Martyrology* is rather less than the significant Nichol text. Coach House Books has made a commitment to keep the entire series in print, and has—with one glaring exception—presented facsimile versions of the original texts, down to the choice of internal paper stock. The only major failing of this line of reprints (and this was a decision made by the Coach House Press of the early Nineties rather than its current or previous incarnations) has to do with the use of new covers, which alter textual significance substantially. This is particularly noticeable in the case of *Book 6 Books,* where, on the first edition's cover, Nichol mimes his own defacement by the autobiographical text (Stephen Scobie discusses this extensively in "On Dangerous Ground: Two Essays on Six Books"). However, the replacement of the first edition's highly specific cover with Gord Robertson's generic design exacerbates the tendency of the monolithic status of *The Martyrology* as a whole to recuperate its own gestures toward fragmentation.

While Douglas Barbour's arguments in "The Heavenly Rhetoric of Thine I: Some Versions of the Subject in Book 1" for the polyvalence and indeterminacy of the "i" and the writerly ego in *The Martyrology* are quite cogent on the level of close reading, a change of scale to take into "a counting" the entire series reveals a different picture altogether. In the opening of *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deleuze and Guattari present a convincing case for the notion that modernity pays "willing allegiance" to a figure of the book which they refer to as a "radicle-system" (5). In such a book, while the central organizing principle—the sovereign authorial subject, in this case—has been largely destroyed through dint of authorial effort, and "an immediate, indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots grafts on to it and undergoes a flourishing development," the desire for spiritual unity reconstitutes "an even more comprehensive secret unity, or more extensive totality" (D&G 5-6). From this perspective, it becomes evident that fragmentation is properly a modern rather than postmodern trope, and even the most deliberately fragmented of poetic texts—*The Cantos, The Maximus Poems,* even Stein's *The Making of Americans* (particularly with the Something Else Press's Statue of Liberty cover), Ron Silliman's *The Alphabet,* and now, *The Martyrology*—"can also be presented as the Total Work or Magnum Opus" (D&G 6). "The abortionists of unity," write Deleuze and Guattari, "are indeed angel makers ... because they affirm a properly angelic and superior unity" (6). It's no

stretch at all to substitute Nichol's broken, linguistic saints for these aborted angels. Even though *The Martyrology* reflects a chaotic world made of a jumble of signifiers, this mimesis is itself complicit with a binary logic that allows for the synthesis of a higher unity, "a book all the more total for being fragmented" (6).

Rather than attempting to read *The Martyrology* rhizomatically, seeking out points of connection and departure, asignifying ruptures, organizations of power, or scenes of struggle and resistance, much of the extant Nichol criticism is more akin to a structuralist Easter egg hunt. In such critical practice, self-reflexivity and other tropes of mimetic violation become themes whose various appearances may be isolated, tagged and taxonomized under the rubric of postmodern literature. Here I would cite various mentions of Nichol in the critical writings of Robert Kroetsch; his search for the thematic trope of "the obscured" in *The Martyrology, The Double Hook* and other CanLit faves in his essay "The Veil of Knowing" (190) typefies this approach.

As Garrett Stewart's argument in "Modernism's Sonic Waiver: Literary Writing and the Filmic Difference" suggests, though, such tropes are more indicative of literariness itself than they are of an ontological transgression that has no truck with binarisms and logocentricity.

> If aesthetic modernism, on one prevailing account, is understood as a mode of art determined by the concerted revelation of its own medium, abstracted from the dutiful protocols of mimesis, then what literary modernism programmatically discloses about the materiality of language is a fact about such language that it is only reasonable to conceive being glimpsed, if not fully excavated, in the most intensive literary activity of any period. (247)

The excavation of various and sundry linguistic tricks, then, is no guarantor of postmodern rhizomatic multiplicity. We must also ask whether or not a given text nostalgically seeks to present the unpresentable, or whether it rejects this nostalgia to embrace the undoing of its very being.

It should be noted at this point that the prevalence of Linda Hutcheon's particular critical paradigm must also bear some of the responsibility for the ongoing laxity of Nichol criticism. Unlike the structuralist theme sleuths, Hutcheon eschews methodology for an act of literary bad faith, ironically excluding at the outset of her discussions of postmodern Canadian literature the purported subject of her work: postmodern Canadian literature. Christian Bök points out in his essay on Hutcheon's formulation of "historiographic metafiction" in general and "the Canadian

Postmodern" in particular, that such critical practice relies on the misrecognition of modernist texts (that embrace epistemological uncertainty without questioning ontology) as postmodern texts (that embrace both epistemological and ontological uncertainty) (5). This misrecognition permits the assembly of an anticanon of mildly deviant texts (such as *The Martyrology*) that obscures the presence of a more challenging set of texts, which critics frequently exclude from discussion by resorting to a variety of strategies (generational, as in the case of Jeff Derksen or Lisa Robertson; linguistic, as in the case of Louky Bersianik or Cozette de Charmoy; nationalistic, as in the case of Steve McCaffery or Martin Vaughn-James; degree of difficulty, as in the case of Karen Mac Cormack; availability, as in the case of jwcurry or Beth Learn—or much of Nichol's own work, for that matter). The net result of Hutcheon's franchise is a critical climate based on what Lorraine Weir refers to as "domesticated deviance" (184)—a vision of a national literature that is fashionably hip, allowing critics and readers to flirt with the frisson of uncertainty, yet still remain comfortable, like a graduate student with a nipple ring.

Unfortunately, misguided poststructuralism represents the current high watermark in Nichol criticism rather than the low one. When text becomes dogma, it produces disciples and exegetes, mystics and sycophants; the Great Work becomes Holy Writ, interpreted by apostles through either a reductive hermeneutics or an ecstatic glossolalia, rather than by active readers and writers through theory, poetics or criticism. This phenomenon recurs throughout the modernist canon—the texts of Pound, Olson, Zukofsky, Joyce, and Stein have all been subject to interminable skeleton keys, concordances, and annotated bibliographies on the one hand, and bizarre mystifications on the other—and, in the case of Nichol at least, it shows no signs of abating.

Consider the manner in which the referential and reverential orthodoxy of Irene Niechoda's *A Sourcery* for Books 1 and 2 of bpNichol's *The Martyrology* sucks the infamous opening lines of "Friends as Footnotes" dry of all allusive richness. In response to "we buried terry beyond the orchard / mark & I digging in the half-frozen earth / laid her to rest as best we could" (*Martyrology* 1&2), Niechoda states flatly that "Terry was a dog. Mark was a Therafields friend" (172), claiming that "the clarification of who Terry was should lower any eyebrows raised over reading about Mark and bp digging her grave" (53). Who wants their eyebrows lowered? Despite the citation of Nichol's warning in "Things I Don't Really

Understand About Myself" that "autobiographical information seems to raise the desire for more such information, as if knowing it would somehow increase one's appreciation of the text when, in fact, the exact opposite happens" (73), Niechoda misreads Book 2's "i" for the person Barrie Nichol, the suggestively graphic "mark" for a proper name, and the entire ghoulish exegetical enterprise proceeds apace. A more productive approach might have been to expand on Steve McCaffery's "*The Martyrology* as Paragram," constructing a "perverse genealogy" that suggests "coherent and viable orders of intertextuality capable of producing variant and inventive readings of this problematic poem and contextualizing it in a richer field than Projective Verse and North American traditions of seriality" (59): not sourcery, but resourcery.

The other extreme is the undigested stew produced by Adeena Karasick's context-free, poststructuralist name-dropping machine:

> This is especially foregrounded in Nichol's view that language must be deconstructed in order to enliven it. Seeing the necessity to "break it up, smash it into pieces and begin again with the scattered liberated letters" (O/P 43) reeks not only of the Saussurian notion of language as a relation of differences, but of Brechtian *verfremsdungeffekt* "defamiliarization," Shklovskyian "deautomization" (CT 173), *ostrananie* "making strange," de Manian *meconnaissance,* and of course, Derridean dissemination. All of which [sic] practiced in *The Martyrology*. (Or, according to Ahad Ha'am (14th C) "the site of a foreign letter makes the [I]'s unclean.") (82)

Under the banner of Écriture, Karasick's "Genrecide" kills Nichol's poetry dead, eliding all critical specificity under an onslaught of proper names and ill-considered juxtapositions of incompatible theoretical vocabularies.

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The Martyrology has become the central text in the Nichol canon because it is amenable to the aforementioned types of readings, despite warnings to the contrary, both in *The Martyrology* and elsewhere in Nichol's oeuvre. Charles Bernstein's caveat that "aesthetic processes can be used for a variety of purposes; that to understand a work requires interrogating its motivations and social context" (125) is particularly appropriate in this situation. I have no difficulty in voicing the desire that "historiographic metafiction," the "life poem" and "life writing" will not continue to serve as convenient but bogus props for various forms of academic and artistic careerism. Jed Rasula points out the irony of the situation in "Poetry's Voice-Over":

Poets [and, I would add, many of poetry's critics], laboring under a cultural misconception, imagine that authenticity can be conflated with subjectivity, not realizing that subjectivity is simply the most accurately engineered of all our technologies—voice activated, setting in motion a replay of cultural 'memories' that are generic, belonging to everyone and to no one. (307)

Christian Bök's take on the subject shares the same philosophical roots, but is more inspirational:

Why this obsession with our own pathetic humanity when hardly anything in the universe is a human being? Why this need to police the range of our own experience in order to insist that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, we are somehow set apart from beast or robot? We can certainly imagine becoming something else, anything at all, no matter what, be it strange or unknown; however, poets in this country ignore such a fact in order to recite a litany of truisms about the eternal quality of our own nature, even though we have been as human as we are for only a few, truly brief, ages. No more humans, please: we already have enough. Do not compose lyrics; do not retell stories. Do not confess to being something so boring as a person in love: write like an amoeba, a meteor, or an abacus. (9)

Such strange pleasures are there for the taking in the sound poetry of the Four Horsemen, in the vertiginous logic of Milt the Morph and the world of Nichol's cartoons (I'll never be able to thank Nichol enough for proving wrong Eugen Gomringer's pompous contention that "Concrete poetry has nothing to do with comic strips" [qtd. In Solt 10]), the paradigm-shifting *Love*/*Zygal*/*Art Facts* series, the experiments in poetic research with Steve McCaffery in Rational Geomancy: Kids of the Book-Machine, and the concrete pieces in *Journeying and the Returns* and *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer* that earned Nichol an international reputation, but were overlooked domestically in favour of the less risky *Martyrology*.

Reading *The Martyrology* as the 'central' work in the Canadian canon in general and Nichol's canon in particular aids and abets in the construction of a double chimera—an unproblematically coherent subject that is the author of what Steve McCaffery would refer to as a "teachable text" (postmodernism sanitized for mass consumption). Arguments for the coherence of that chimerical subject and for the revolutionary nature of *The Martyrology* hold only as long as Nichol's more difficult and ultimately more rewarding texts remain safely out of sight. When approaching the Nichol oeuvre, we must resort to an 'author-function' for taxonomic reasons, but looking for Barrie Nichol in the poems of

bpNichol will ultimately produce something as flat and monochrome as the icon of the author in Brian Nash's *bp: Pushing the Boundaries: A Process Documentary*. As Nash's film demonstrates, that icon is but one element in a gloriously chaotic swirl of voices and images. Focusing on it at the expense of the network of which it is but a part is to lose the game before you've even opened the box.

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The bpNichol Archive at Simon Fraser University

Gene Bridwell

Simon Fraser's Special Collections and Rare Books is the major depository of bpNichol fonds. They were acquired on five separate occasions. Nichol sold us the first lot, 1961-1973, in 1975, and the second, 1974-1982, in 1983. The third lot, *Ganglia/grOnk,* 1964-1987, was acquired by purchase and gift from Ellie Nichol in 1990. That year also saw us purchase from Arnold Shives a batch of correspondence, 1963-1975, from Nichol to Shives. The final lot, 1982-1988, which also includes a number of notebooks from earlier years, was purchased from Ellie Nichol in 1995. Since then Ellie has given us bp's Apple IIe computer with manuals and disks, as well as his collections of robots, games, and game magazines. The total of the Nichol fonds, then, is in excess of 10,000 items, more than 23 metres in length.

The first four lots, 1961-1982, have been catalogued in the on-line manuscript catalogue, accessible through the Web at http://www.lib.sfu.ca. The manuscript catalogue is included under the logo for Collections. Direct contact can be had through: http://www.sfu.lib.ca/kiosk/other/manucri.htm. Nichol as author will turn up 1188 entries, *Martyrology* as a title will turn up 84, *Moosequakes* 5, etc. The final lot, 1982-1988, has been described in a finding list available in Special Collections.

Simon Fraser University holds copyright on the unpublished material that was in its possession at the time of Nichol's death. Ellie Nichol maintains copyright on the remainder.

Two MA thesis have been completed on Nichol using material in this collection:

> Hoch, Jorg. *The prince of difference: experiments in selcted works of bpNichol.* Kiel University. 1997.
> Niechoda, Irene. *A sourcery for books 1 and 2 of bpNichol's Martyrology.* Simon Fraser University. 1988. Republished Toronto: ECW, 1992.

There are currently five works in progress that are using the collection:

Fyffe, Carolyn. *bpNichol: postmodern poetics/literary theory.* University of Leeds. Doctoral thesis.
Neuman, Shirley. *bpNichol: a Biography.*
Nichol, bp. *Essays,* edited by JonArne Lawson.
Peters, Carl. L. *bpNichol's poetics: ethos, ethics, and discourses of the sacred.* Simon Fraser University. Doctoral thesis.
Sharpe, Graham. *Ganglia Press.* Simon Fraser University. Doctoral thesis.

Roy Miki of Simon Fraser, and Fred Wah, University of Calgary, held a joint seminar on Nichol in the fall of 1995. From the participants in that seminar came a small publication of bp-inspired work, *Begin began,* and the essay collection *Beyond the Orchard: Essays on the Martyrology.*

Sounding out the Difference: Orality and Repetition in bpNichol

Scott Pound

bpNichol performs a poem that consists of a single phrase—"I WANTED TO FORGET YOU SO I TRIED TO ERASE YOUR NAME"—repeated and modified. Gradually but inexorably the poem begins to stutter until it becomes completely delirious. Each time the above phrase is repeated the first word is dropped and the second word is repeated as many times as the number of words dropped, plus one. Thus:

> I WANTED TO FORGET YOU SO I TRIED TO ERASE YOUR NAME
> WANTED WANTED TO FORGET YOU SO I TRIED TO ERASE YOUR NAME TO TO TO FORGET YOU SO I TRIED TO ERASE YOUR NAME...etc.

The process that the poem enacts eventually picks the poem clean, to the poetic equivalent of the bone, i.e. to the name. In the end, that's all we are left with: the word NAME repeated 33 times. To my knowledge, this poem doesn't exist in print. I encountered it on a recording at the Poetry and Rare Books collection at SUNY Buffalo, and it puzzled me a great deal. Its apparent simplicity is deeply misleading.

Is it a poem? If it is, it is not one that confirms anything we already know about poems as textual artifacts. In fact, it has no relevant textual existence. To put it another way, if this poem has any value or meaning, it is not a value or meaning that literary criticism could tell us much about. It consists of 4 pronouns, 2 verbs, 2 infinitive phrases, a conjunction, and a noun. There are no metaphors or images that could be mapped on to an abstract plane of signification where they would stand for something more than themselves as literary symbol. On the literary hierarchy of values this piece would rank near the bottom with all the works that rely on puns (of which this piece contains 4) as their only figures of speech. And yet, none of these deficiencies in putative poetic qualities keeps it from being a poem, and an extraordinarily complex poem at that.

It eludes all forms of literary stratification because it functions as an

event, or what Deleuze and Guattari would call a becoming. Here we have an instance of the becoming—oral of literature, an instance in which literature becomes the site of its opposite, the unlettered, the oral. It's tempting to think of this as a return, but it isn't. The eruption of an oral exigency within the so-called literary avant-gardes of the 20th century (we need only think of Artaud and Kerouac) is a contemporary response to a pervasive dissatisfaction among many poets with the technics of the writing and the morbidity of print. These moments work to infuse the alphabet with material force, to reanimate language as something other than a mere abstract sign system.

Much of the recent work on the "phonotext" (two recent and important collections of essays deal specifically with this topic), while making powerful interventions in the area of the sound in poetry, fails to emphasize the extent of the difference between the ear-space of the sounded word and the eye-space of the written word. In these collections the goal is to recuperate sound, but as the introductions to both volumes attest, to do so within a textual economy, "to release the genie of sound bottled up in books, dial up the volume on printed volumes" (Morris 7). But textuality involves the translation of sound into a visual code in a way that is not so easily redeemable; it bargains off "an ear for an eye" as McLuhan would say. As McLuhan demonstrates, the eye is largely antipathetic to the ear such that foregrounding sound within a textual economy does not substantially alter the oracular bias. In noting "the profound challenge posed by postmodern art to the authority of oracularcentrism in Western modernism" (99), Michael Davidson, perhaps unwittingly, acknowledges that sound still bangs at the door of textuality.

Moreover, terms like "phonotext" (Garrett Stewart) and "audiotext" (Charles Bernstein) betray the extent to which sound and orality are still being considered under the rubric of textuality and the attendant problematics of interpretation. As Nichol's poem demonstrates with extraordinary precision, both texts and speech are performative, but they generate significance is very different ways. By setting up a counter-textual a-signifying system (counter-textual because it eliminates linguistic difference and a-signifying because it engenders delirium) Nichol's poem enacts the formal process of semiosis in reverse, and in so doing allows us to witness the degree to which the oral and the written generate significance differently. I will elaborate on this last point in the following paragraphs.

One of the first things we notice about Nichol's poem is that it has no lines. Nichol does not pause once in the performance. The largest gaps occur where he grabs a breath, but the quickness with which he takes in air makes it clear that he does not mean for the performance to be punctuated with pauses. Does this make the poem all one line? No. It forces us to account for the development of the poem a-textually, without recourse to the linear model of print. When we resist imposing the line of text as a means of configuring the performance (the performance can be linear without resolving itself into the auditory simulacrum of lines on a page) a new type of linearity comes into the picture, which would best be described as mathematical and bi-dimensional. There are two dimensions of a complimentary mathematical process happening: the dimension of addition and the dimension of subtraction. The piece consists of single unit of thought, as the grammarians say, or one period, which through a dual process of attrition and repetition, simultaneously erases itself, and reconstitutes itself anew as something very different than what it was.

It's easy to understand erasure through a process of subtraction. If there is a total of 12 different words in the poem, and each breath-unit subtracts one of those words, then by the unlucky 13th gulp of air, the poem will have ceased to exist. At least it would seem to in theory.

But as we noted, subtraction is not the only process happening. There is also quite a bit of adding going on in it. Concurrent with the attrition of the number of different words is the maintenance of, and toward the end, a proliferation in, the number of words in general. So if each breath unit erases one word of the initial sentence, the poem recoups its losses by repeating the next word after the word subtracted as many times as the number of words subtracted, plus one. So the second breath unit repeats the word "wanted" twice: the number of words that has been subtracted—one—plus one. The third breath unit repeats the word "to" three times, and so on. While there is a steady loss of the number of different words in each unit, each breath unit remains twelve words long, except for the last three where the pattern is not strictly observed because one breath cannot encompass all the syllables. By the tenth unit, nine words have been subtracted, but Nichol repeats the word "erase" twelve times, twice more than the pattern dictates. Obviously, repeating the word "erase" twelve times is not insignificant, since the poem consists of twelve different words and is twelve units long. The eleventh segment repeats the word "your" ten times, one time less than the pattern dictates. And the last and longest segment repeats the word "name" 33 times. Numerically

speaking, then, the poem does not cease to exist, it gets bigger. The last segment is the longest of the poem, even though it consists of just one word.

In quantitative terms, the poem is not erased by the process of subtraction because the subtraction is counteracted by a simultaneous process of addition. But in qualitative terms, the poem is substantially gone; the statement that constitutes all the different words in the poem is eliminated by the last segment, save one word: "name." It would seem, contrary to the intention of the speaker of the poem, that the poem has succeeded in erasing everything but the name, since that is all we are left with at the end of the poem.

But there's more to it than that.

Now we realize that the process of subtraction has been a ruse and that it has not been part of the attempt to erase the name at all. It was merely a pretext for getting to the name. Nichol knows that the name is precisely this process of eliminating difference. By the time we reach the last line, the only thing that has been erased is difference itself, which leaves us literally standing at the threshold of the name.

At this point, another form of erasure takes over, a form that is much easier to demonstrate than to explain. Try repeating your first name aloud 20 times, starting now.

You should have had the uncanny sensation of the meaning of your name dissolving into a kind of sound husk. You might also have experienced a gradual shift in sensation from a visual economy, in which the sound of your name conjured an image in your mind's eye, to an aural economy where the sound of your name stopped sounding like your name and became a sound without any meaning attached to it .

We have noted that Nichol's poem enacts a process of attrition supplemented by a process of repetition. As the differential specificity of words is systematically eclipsed, a new function gradually takes over: that of repetition. The end result of this twofold process is the complete elimination of semiotic/differential meaning and the emergence of its material excess in what we might call a sonogram, the word cum vocable: name, etc....

That's 33 'name's, but we haven't transcribed them very well if we don't also note that the commas separating each word do not index a space

and a pause but notate the sniff that we heard on the tape. These sniffs are not quirkish or incidental. Nichol doesn't sniff between any of the other repeated segments, so why is he doing it here? With the disappearance of linguistic difference in the piece, we also lose the discrete spaces that mark the boundaries between signifying units. When name stops being a word and becomes a sound it also stops being a signifying unit. There is no need for the interval in between words that would mark them as discrete units so Nichol fills those spaces with more sound.

The ostensible thematic goal of the poem is to forget the name, which it does with amazing precision and economy. But we miss a great deal if we don't also notice that another purpose of the poem is to remember. What the poem forces us to remember is sound as the strata of poesis that is remaindered by western literacy.

One of the earliest recorded uses of alphabetic writing also revolves around a paradoxical dialectic involving memory and forgetting. In the *Phaedrus* Plato tells the story of the invention of alphabetic writing, which he believes happened in Egypt. An inventor, Thoth, visits Thamus, the King of Egypt. Thoth presents several inventions, one of which is alphabetic writing. Thoth claims that letters will "make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories." Thamus disagrees, stating that the invention of letters would "create forgetfulness" by inducing people to rely on writing rather than on their memories.

That the invention of writing would raise such a question tells us quite a bit about the kind of writing that Thoth had invented. Writing as the first self-help technology, a vehicle of personal profit. Considering that Plato was later to ban poets from his ideal state, we can presume that alphabetic writing was never considered good for poetry. And let's not forget that Plato himself was a poet. One reaction, and for two centuries the main one, was the attempt to endow letters with some poetic potential by infusing them with symbolic values. This tradition is beautifully documented by the French designer Massin in his book *Letter and Image* and more recently by Johanna Drucker in *The Alphabetic Labyrinth*.

But this way of making the alphabet expressive was largely decorative and did not find much use in poetry (William Morris being a noteworthy exception). It's really not until the early 20th century, and not until poets began foraging for techniques outside the confines of the alphabet, that English language poetry began to take notice of some of the possibilities implicit in ideographic writing systems and in the poetics of oral cultures. Concrete Poetry and Sound Poetry insist on a dimensionality and a

duration to letters that occupies real time and space. Concrete and Sound works communicate visual or acoustic matter; they don't represent or signify in the conventional alphabetic sense. Such work allows us to perceive an organization of space that is not literary but audio-visual.

bpNichol's early concrete work uses letters to mark movement across a blank field. They are "not meant as pictures but as syllabic and sub-syllabic messages for who care to listen." Like much concrete work the dimensions of these letters index a range of possible sounds and the repetition of letters indicates that the movement of the letters through the space of the page has a duration.

The contours of the alphabet as a system where put into relief by new discoveries about the origins of the alphabet and by the growth in interest in non-alphabetic writing systems. Whether as a result of this kind of knowledge or not, several poets in this century have entered into productive conflict with their medium, whether it be writing in general (as in the case of Artaud) or with alphabetic writing in particular (Pound and Olson are the best known examples). We might ask the question: How much of what we take to be new in 20th-century poetry and poetics happens in the space of this conflict between poets and the technics of the alphabet as a medium for poetry? I leave that to the reader to ponder.

To return to Nichol's performance, we could say that Nichol's poem seals off the eye space of meaning and opens up the ear space of a differently constituted meaning. Nichol's poem mimics in reverse the formal process of phonetic semiosis, taking us out of the visual space of the phonetic sign and setting us back down in the very different world of acoustic space. In the process of stripping itself bare, Nichol's poem also undresses the alphabetic sign.

In terms of writing systems, the alphabet is an incredibly streamlined processing device. Relative to other writing systems, the alphabet is a closed system. And contrary to partially ideographic writing systems, in which some signs function in whole or in part as visual representations of what they signify, the world is never permitted to appear in the phonetic sign. According to the ideal model of phonetic writing, semantically meaningless symbols (letters) refer isomorphically to semantically meaningless sounds (phonemes). In the absence of any ability to refer directly to things in the world, the phonetic sign generates meaning on the basis of internal differences between units of the system (words) and in relation to the system's rules (grammar). To take a classic example, what allows the word 'cat' to signify is not a resemblance between the look or

sound of the word and the thing we know by that name, but rather the difference between the word 'cat' and all the other words in the language and what the rules of the system tell us about the position and function of the word within a phrase or sentence.

In systematically eclipsing difference in the poem that we heard, Nichol literally de-programs the alphabet and allows it to function in a way that's antithetical to semiosis. Nichol's commitment here to the reduction of semantics to sound characterizes one aspect of Sound Poetry.

The engagement between music and language and noise that occurs in Sound Poetry raises a huge question. Why is literature so anti-pathetic to irregular, unpatterned, layered sound? To put it a different way: Why does literature have no rhythm? One answer lies at the interval between Greek and Roman culture: the period when what an oral Greek culture understood as rhythm became what a literate Roman culture thought of in terms of metrics.

The entry on rhythm in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* describes this as the transition from a dynamic and temporal process to a static and spatial system of ordering; as the transition from a movement to a measure. T.V.F. Brogan writes:

> The traditional etymology derives from the Greek word rheo "flow," but Jaeger's alternative derivation, drawn from Archilochus and Aeschylus, suggests "the steady limitation of movement." Plato calls r. "order in movement" (*Laws* 2.665a). R. for the Greeks was flow, movement, but for the Romans it became arithmetical, as number (q.v.; Lat. numerus), i.e. counting and so was confused with measure (q.v.); the difficulties engendered by this millennial semantic shift yet remain (1066-7).

The Romans treated rhythm according to spatial categories like symmetry and proportion (1067). The result is that, in subsequent western treatments, rhythm does not exist independent of a pattern. The amount of rhythmical variation a metric system can accommodate is therefore very limited because of the high degree of visual emphasis on pattern. In examining such an epistemology, the question becomes: Can rhythm occur independent of a pattern, or in a more general sense, can there be movement independent of a structure?

The tendency in Western systems of thought is to think of sound in relation to images (spatial/visual metaphors), concepts (notions of rhythm's intelligibility in patterns) and meaning (in English metrics sound is always supposed to reinforce the sense). The tendency to think of sound in relation to image, concept, and meaning precludes an understanding of

rhythms that do not conform to patterns. It is therefore rare to find modulations of stress patterns or the extension of syllables and words beyond the habitual limit of a single stress in English poetry. But in most oral poetries, the modulation and extension of single syllables over the span of several units of measure (e.g. the beat, which also can and does shift) is the rule rather than the exception. The syllable in English language poetry is essentially digital: it's either on or off, stressed or unstressed (acknowledging of course the allowance in metrics for semi-stressed syllables--an accommodation that is necessary to maintain the integrity of its digitalism). The syllable in oral poetries is never limited to a digital condition; it can be both stressed and unstressed by being extended and modulated over the duration of its utterance.

Whereas Sound Poetry exploits the acoustic materiality of letters, Concrete Poetry emphasizes the visual materiality of letters. Like Sound Poetry, Concrete Poetry uses letters and sometimes words as im-mediate rather than as mediate signifiers. Letters, syllables, and words are mediate signifiers to the extent that they are meaningless in and of themselves and become meaningful only to the extent that their sound and appearance relate to rules of formal convention rather than to sense perception. Letters become immediate signifiers when the three dimensionality of phonetic writing (word, sound, and meaning) is reduced to a different two dimensions (time and space), that is, when letter and word occupy a time and space unto themselves and do not defer to the supplementary dimension of time and space dictated by semiosis.

Two very different possibilities are connected to a single aspect of phonetic writing. Iterability (or repeatability) is both triumph the and the downfall of phonetic writing in its attempt to access meaning. In abstracting meaning from the world and making it a function of a formal system, phonetic literacy makes meaning iterable and systematic. In the absence of any necessary relation to the world, the phonetic alphabet makes it possible to create and administer new worlds on top of the world of experience. The meaning of a word changes as its context changes. But iterability can also kill meaning when there is no corresponding change in the word's context, i.e. no new difference to generate a new meaning, as we saw in the last segment of Nichol's poem. In this situation meaning atrophies and metamorphoses into matter. This latter form of iterability has the potential, in local situations, to de-program the alphabet and manipulate it into functioning not as an abstract phonic signifier but as an object with its own duration and dimensionality.

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Flutterings for bpNichol

Steven Ross Smith

fluttering. 5.

windstorm. screen ripped apart. useless language in the blustering. keeps gusting, free-wheeling, rippling the waters. another elemental form. mentalmatter deeper or shallower. the blow. how far can you go and still thread in. beep & el's *th'read,* the maze of it. individual reading. reading in and through. whose organizing standards rule? links must be more than stitchery or mirror gazing. so I cushion the needle, cover the glass. try go blind. tie the steering hand behind my back. clouds erupt. blanket. nothing seen in blackout until the clearing gust. rustlerattledance. paperchains, wordchains. swaying and clinking in the breeze. impossible to read in motion, to jot. every mote in my view charged, shimmering. poplar leaves, needle grasses, purple clover, sand grains in toes, the river undulating. sultry, lustrous. fluid with desire. distending. veil-free. reverie.

fluttering. 12.

in listening you construct a language. days in attention. to what's true you harken, build. your family has done its figuring. your son is speaking before your ears with four consonants, one vowel. only he and sometimes you understand the links, the narratives. there are breaks into laughter, anguish. the pet cat harnessed closer to her new home to brake her wanderings, the scent language she follows, wistful for the known. wisteria and rose. boy talk. that son-speak. loops and repeats of consonantal drift. direction. rift. raft into the flow. ruffle, fluff, a whisker, purr. the queen of beasts. missed now. aching under the son-shine syllables, you list, lean to it.

fluttering. 15.

I have not looked well enough at your eyelids, not studied them closely. nor at the poems of Cendrars and Zukofsky. they knew music. each hair must be studied. when I don't write I know what to do. writing destroys certainty. blows the lid off. writing not knowing. not knowing even eyelids. yours. or hearing dissonant chords. of course it's a question of ear. of a rhythm that you bob your head to. a flickflack-lickety-split-rail-clicking ride on the train. Blaise and Louis would approve. bp too. cut back for a cameo. but I can't remember though forgetting may not exist. hum along. night train. something will come. James Brown will leap up, fling off the cape and wail *pl-e-e-e-a-a-se please don't go.* he knows the vicious circles. I thought Blanchot said *the prostitutes of etymology.* who would they be? would their eyelids be eyelined like Little Richard's? like this? these lines tracing what derivation. or deviation. not even outline. outlaw. listen to the times in time. hum ill!
usion. I stare, splitting hairs with my gaze. intent.

fluttering. 42.

last night the poetry was okay but there was too much chatter. poems drowned in exegesis. the joke about eggs made before. out of this so little light. how to shift that slight bit to true seeing. to see the bird as messenger. that tiny spear of glint in my lover's eye. the sheen of her skin. some egg shells are so thin, when held to light, the shadow of life shows through. I am without good music, though I can imagine it, almost. the dog's feet pad across the wood floor. it is the toenails I hear. John Cage would hear music. mail takes a bite out of my desk. forgetting's teeth sink in. perhaps intention can never be undermined. syntax is intention. it plods. where is the juxta-collision? children move me beyond the person I thought I was. this reads like a list. is there anything random in the programmed brain? my mouth dries. I croak as I begin to speak. who is the second person referent? go on. get away. get out. these can mean a few things, given intonation and context. w!
here do I set the poem, in that case? in a few minutes the proofing will begin. I will depart. the cracks in the display getting to me.

fluttering. 58.
for mauricio kagel
& you too nicky

I hear you again after all this time. in the lines of Nichol reaching for Chicago, for Ornette Coleman, for the dark corners and clanging of Kagel songs. there was metal in the room that night. squeals that stretched the lips against the teeth. how can language be so raw? in the shattering of *k-k-k-k,* the gurgling g in the throat, the *g*ulp of *l* . age separates us. exhaustion nods in what appears to be communion. I would o.d. on your songs if I could find more of them. the *h-huh-h* escapes my chest. sandpaper in the palm back and forth across the woodgrain. a whimpering dog. the budding trees full of promise. scat-song gestures toward escape. I will acquire the descending soprano line. follow the wwwwaiaiaiaiaillllllllllingg riffs. Kagel, your gesture arrives, from beyond, beckoning.

fluttering. 65.

I have been probing. unreeling strings of words into the channels. into the chance currents. into the careening. I am making no contact. I conjure you into the room where I fumble at contemplation. into the picture, Barrie, standing, ghostly. yes, you're standing here by the French doors, by my small telephone table, on the green carpet. standing there, smiling. you don't speak, but I know your voice is gentle.

wait! I hear you. your lips do not move but you speak. you are saying, *Pay attention and it will come.* I nod, ask, *But what of my ache, my anxiety? Oh that,* you reply. *When the true path is taken, the way is clear.* I know this line that is more than a line.

how I loved you. I open *craft dinner* for my hunger, to that figure meeting you on the road, *saying, you said i should be writing things down.* I am writing as fast as I can. I feel bare at this. I remember most my poems you didn't like, when I longed for praise. I write, you are in the corner, waiting for me to hit the groove. I hear rising music. comes from the spot where you stood.

Nickel Linoleum

Christian Bök

> cripes a killed
> god or still
> the scanning ear
> astray or astral
>
> or nickelodeon
>
> —Robert Kroetsch (1981:[11])

Nicholodeon by Darren Wershler-Henry is a movie in the form a codex: you do not read it as much you view it. Each page provides a backdrop for the screening of its jittery montage, the film partly jammed in the reel of its faltering projector, the celluloid devoured by the slow burn of the lamp. The book is a black-and-white movie that resurrects the phantom of a dead poet, only to illuminate the pedantic vampires who scavenge around the corpse. You can watch the many acts of necrophilia perpetrated by the academy in the name of concocted nostalgia and borrowed prestige. The price: only five cents per ode.

Nicholodeon reappraises the poetic legacy of bpNichol. What Canadian can claim to have done more than him to popularize the poetic values of linguistic radicalism in Canada? What Canadian has ever earned the slavish respect of all the literate doodlers and nonsense mumblers in Toronto? No poet has done so much defy the philistine mediocrity of the academy, even though many of his peers, the university babyboomers, have done their best to sentimentalize his subversiveness: they prefer to indulge in hagiolatry, romanticizing their own memories of him at the expense of his most experimental achievements.

Frank Davey has observed that bpNichol does indeed suffer from an "honorific criticism" (1986:169) that makes little effort to discriminate between the mortal issue of the writer's life and the formal value of the writer's work. When Barbour, for example, writes that readers of *The Martyrology* feel a "great love" directed by bpNichol to the audience

(1986:223), do we not hear the hint of a sigh in the face of saintly virtues? When Scobie argues that, for bpNichol, the use of language constitutes an act of "humility" (1984:13), are we not persuaded to genuflect before the poetic martyr who, three times, waves away the laurel?

When Tostevin inserts the "master-name" (1995:[75]) of bpNichol into her own imaginary cartouche, juxtaposing the memorial sign of her dead mentor with the memorial sign of her dead father ([71]), does she not idealize the power of an Egyptian patronym, whose pharaonic authority can indemnify her nostalgia? When Tostevin imagines granting bpNichol "the amulet of the ladder" ([28]), otherwise known as the "the sign for H" ([28]), does she not also imagine accruing for bpNichol, if not by default, for herself, the power to climb up this "one-rung ladder" ([28]) to the canonized afterlife of Cloudtown?

Anxieties of influence have spawned the worst forms of devotion among the most awestruck disciples of bpNichol (many of whom do nothing more than pour dust from urn to urn): for example, Irene Niechoda has incrementally merged the name of the poet with her own normal byline in the *Sourcery* (1992:[3]), just as Michael Holmes has sacrificially marred his own body with the tattooed likeness of "H (An Alphabet)." Inspired by the charisma of bpNichol, Karasick has responded to his work in academic seminars by indulging in glossolalic lucubration, earning a degree for her chicanery.

Wershler-Henry greets such acts of vampiric flattery with a certain disdain, arguing that the iconoclasm of Nichol provides a model for iconoclastic, not reverential, behaviour: "[t]he sacred is interesting insofar as it supplies a series of useful targets" (1997b:109): i.e. sacred cattle for mutilation by an unidentified intelligence. Rather than deify bpNichol, recycling his celebrity as a commodity, why not condemn such euphemistic necrophilia? Why not apply the whimsical procedures of bpNichol to bpNichol himself? Why not expand his old work in order to invent new work beyond the constraint of such apotheosis?

Wershler-Henry writes that, in *Nicholodeon,* he intends to move beyond the "anecdotal 'I knew bp when' mode of [...] criticism" (1997:18) in order to upbraid critics who do not apply what they learn from the most radical lessons of bpNichol. How can such critics ignore the praxis of their own language after they extol a writer who calls their language into question? The obsessive rehearsal of such obsequy over the years has done

little except endorse a cult of personality, in which critics shy away from the most radicalized innovations of the poetic martyr in order to portray his romantic humanism as avant-garde.

Consider *The Martyrology.* Barbour suggests that "*The Martyrology* announces itself as a postmodern text" (1988:172), largely because the poem foregrounds its own self-conscious deconstructions and self-justified indeterminacies: for example, Scobie argues that the text "deconstructs" the linearity of its own narrative grammar (1984:134); Kamboureli argues that the text "deconstructs" the authority of its own narrative subject (1991:148); and Kroetsch argues that the text "deconstructs" the necessity of its own narrative closure (1989:119)—i.e. the text is postmodern if it makes a theme of its own poetic quirks.

The Martyrology may celebrate a fractious plurality of voices; however, the poem still provokes a marvellous consensus. Critic after critic belabours the lexicon of Derrida in order to imply that such a poetic memoir is 'pomo' because its open-ended, many-sided form problematizes every category of aesthetic certitude. Only a small cabal of poets has so far hesitated to rubberstamp this prevailing assessment, implying that, despite the hyperbole, such an epic opus about the loss of the epic is, alas, more humanistic, more modernized, than postmodern, since bpNichol, despite knowing better, still seeks ontological reassurance.

The Martyrology is, sadly, not pomo because, despite all of its alleged efforts to subvert humanist ontology, the text nevertheless reiterates the spiritual anxieties of modernism, substituting a poetic gain for a mythic loss, replacing an old ideology with what bpNichol might call "a new humanism" (1967:[1]). Does the text not imagine a "re^2(al)gion"—"a region of the real/ uncharted/ (largely)" (Book 6:1 Hour 4)—a regime where bard and monk might indulge in the cabalistic compulsion to find a meaningful, but unexpected, coincidence in an anagram of letters? Does the poet not look for the lord in l or d?

The Martyrology compensates for the pomo loss of secure values by finding consolation in the "puncertainty" (Book 6:2 Hour 22) of a lingual sublime. *The Martyrology* looks for its saints, not in the outdated pantheon of gods, but in the extended paragram of puns: St. And; St. Ein; St. Ranglehold, etc. Wershler-Henry has observed on many an occasion over coffee that bpNichol might have written a pomo text simply by studying, not the 'martyrs' of a private myth, but the 'doctors' of a secular code: Dr.

Ink; Dr. Unk; Dr. Essingroom. Why not give each word a Ph.D.? (Lot of good the degree has done us.)

Kamboureli avers that, despite these facts, "*The Martyrology* [...] deconstructs the Cartesian ego" (1991:148), sabotaging all the secure biases of humanist ontology (148); nevertheless, Derksen shows that *The Martyrology* dramatizes, not the postmodern disruption, but the modernist endurance, of metaphysical subjectivity: "*The Martyrology* seems to display how much dispersal the Cartesian ego can take and, at the same time, like a Timex watch, keep on ticking" (1997:56). While the text may flirt with its own paragrammatic decomposition, such dispersal rarely strays beyond the limits of a humanist standard.

Lowry observes that, although *The Martyrology* has accorded students some welcome relief from the staid norms of thematic exegesis, the text still fulfills a humanist function within the identity-politics of Canlit, retrofitting, for Canada, the kind of traditional romanticism, bequeathed to us by Britain: "Nichol's life-long poem becomes an extension of Wordsworth's life-long poem" (1997:71). What then is *The Martyrology?* It is *The Prelude* dreaming of becoming a crossword-puzzle. It is a modernist chronicle about the life of a poet, whose wordplay strives, like a personal gematria, to express the ineffable.

McCaffery concludes, therefore, that "*The Martyrology* [...] fails to exploit the potential field of knowledge [that] it opens up to itself" (1988:77), largely because the text does not push its paragrammatic potentiality to an extreme beyond the lingual "detente" (77) that it negotiates with the academy. Cabri, likewise, concludes that the "threat of the paragram—to structurally breach this 'reality' at every phoneme—proves in Nichol to be benign" (1997:148), since his wordplay capitulates to the humanist mandates of liberal decorum, reaffirming a faith in meaning, despite questioning every basis for writing.

The Martyrology appears to suffer from the same kind of misprision that has plagued the study of postmodern literature in Canada. Just as Hutcheon argues oxymoronically that, for Canlit, the anti-classic, anti-mimetic agenda of the pomo text finds itself expressed primarily in realist writing (1984:20), so also do critics of bpNichol mistake the ludic style of his lyric verse for postmodern radicalism. Such critics evade any critical encounter with, the truly scary, avant-garde: they ignore the rare cases of a more experimental genre in order to depict, as progressive, the

many cases of a more conservative genre.

When threatened by the avant-garde, such critics must rally around the least weird text by the most teachable dissenter. Such critics fail to see that, unlike the modernist aesthetic, whose humanism preserves a mythomanic nostalgia in the face of a nihilistic prognosis, the pomo view rejects such nostalgia, refusing to find solace in any aesthetic that is realist or lyrical—no matter how self-conscious or self-justified it might be. Such critics, nevertheless, teach this kind of work as, yet another, stylistic candidate for the canon without ever having to rethink their own investment in the value of humanist pedagogy.

The Martyrology has overshadowed every other text by bpNichol (largely because his long-poem lends his life-work an imaginary coherence, unifying his career under the reassuring, but inhibiting, aegis of humanistic legitimacy). Critics, however, forget that bpNichol has written yet another poetic series, one coincident with his 'masterpiece,' but nevertheless, more experimental, more 'pataphysical, and thus more recalcitrant to such a scholastic enterprise: *Love (a book of remembrances)* and *Zygal (a book of translations)*; not to mention, *ArtFacts (a book of contexts)* and *Truth (a book of fictions)*.

Unlike *The Martyrology,* these four opuscules exemplify all the repressed qualities of a pomo text without blatantly resorting to the lyrical refrains of modernist nostalgia. Such an alternate tetralogy records the evolution of a writing-process without recourse to emotional biography; instead, these four books report upon a radical science of paragrammatical experimentation, documenting absurd 'proofs' that call to mind, not only an algebraic syllogism, but also the idea of a 'rough draft.' Such proofs are "probable," not because they can be proven, but because they can be probed. They are 'probe-able' systems.

Unlike *The Martyrology,* such a quartet of books puts into practice the kind of research imagined by bpNichol and McCaffery during their acts of collaborative investigation for the Toronto Research Group. Rather than embrace a royal science (whose theories preserve autocratic stances and imperative tactics), such a thinktank studies a nomad science: rational geomancy—a science, for which "all research is symbiotic" (*TRG* 1992:23) with its scription, finding new uses for old forms, putting into play, if not at risk, the very propriety of reasoning itself: "these reports make no pretence to [...] professorial legitimation" (12).

When bpNichol speculates about the secret history of an "alphabet cult" (1990:25) or calculates the value of a poetic account in "base alphabet" (99), he invites academic ridicule, arguing that, to his chagrin, "there are those who [...] wish to suppress this line of research" (28). How can vaunted critics, trained in thematic exegesis, respond (without condescension) to the seemingly trivial opacity of bpNichol, his uncanny reports, his cartoon doodles, his waggish puzzles (all of which display to the extreme the kind of postmodern attributes mistakenly attributed to his own hagiographic encyclopedia)?

When bpNichol explores the absurd limits of a fragmentary abstraction (as if jotting down witty memos to himself), he shows that, at best, the academy can tolerate, but cannot completely appreciate, a style of hermeneusis that lampoons the genre of hermeneusis itself. Given that his critics have usually fixated ad nauseam upon the lore of his poetic saints, is it not fair to say that his alternate tetralogy has been martyred on behalf of a logophilic prayerbook? Why do critics, who profess to be interested in the pomo view, nevertheless ignore the very work that deflates all thematic, if not all semantic, analysis?

Wershler-Henry redresses such neglect by responding to the radical lessons of this tetralogy: "[t]hese books have always been very important to me; I think that they contain writing that is ultimately more interesting and provocative than anything in *The Martyrology*" (1997b:110). Wershler-Henry reads these books in order to modify his own critical practice as an academic. Rather than respond to the various lessons learned from all the myriad genres of writing by writing in only one genre (the essay), he responds to each work in the same form as such work, writing visual poetry that analyzes visual poetry, etc.

Wershler-Henry argues that the critic is no less obliged than the artist to invent a new way of writing: "the job of these poems is to produce a vague sense of anxiety in the reader" (1997a:[89]). While we may live amid a visual regime of icons and logos, "the response of a typical reader to anything glyphic is, paradoxically, to ignore its material qualities in favour of some other, absent text to which it allegedly alludes: "'oh, the bathroom's this way...'" (1997b:105). Is it not the duty of the poet to install "traffic signs from a parallel world" (1997a:[89]) in order to prevent us from ever finding the loo?

Like Robert Smithson, laughing in the planetarium because of a sign, whose arrow points the way to both the Solar System and the Rest Rooms (1996:27), Wershler-Henry directs us toward the void, the linguistic interstice, in between words and things—an interzone, where "systems of knowing [...] may seem irrational or startling, but are, nevertheless, reasoned" (1998:11). Like the Toronto Research Group, Wershler-Henry explores the 'pataphysical potentiality of such an epistemic interzone, inventing alien modes of unorthodox translation in order to cross the abyss between Now/here and Nowhere (1997b:113).

Wershler-Henry tries to build a poetic bridge, a zygal, which can span this bicameral rift, thereby linking together the two hemispheres of Coach House Press, (one defunct, one revived) (1997b:112); nevertheless, such a bridge remains as unfinished as the one described by William Gibson in *Virtual Light* (a novel that Wershler-Henry cites): "The integrity of its span was rigourous [...], yet around this had grown another reality, intent upon its own agenda. This had occurred piecemeal to no set plan, employing every imaginable technique and material. The result was something amorphous, startling" (1998:11).

Wershler-Henry builds his bridge by finding a new use for the leftover concrete from the legacy of visual poetry: "[c]oncrete takes no notice of what is done with it, flowing into any container; and the container [that] one makes for it, the molds and forms, must be fashioned with laborious care, strong and tight" (1997a:[7]). When using such a feckless material, "we are faced with the impossibility of building something totally new" (1998:11), but are nevertheless bound by "the responsibility to maintain [...] the ruins that we build on, without romanticizing them" (11). Let no tome, in other words, become a tomb.

Nicholodeon refuses to mummify bpNichol inside the mausoleum of a lyric or an elegy. Unlike Tostevin, who idealizes an Egyptian mystique (with all of its transcendental significations), Wershler-Henry rehearses the ludic style of bpNichol, replacing the name of the poet with an Egyptian wordgame, a rebus, whose pictures of a bee and a pea produce, not an icon, but a "lowerglyph"—a debased, yet genetic, metonym for the organism of language itself. Such a cartouche is a seedpod of cocoons, ready to burst open, like the front cover of a book, pollenating us with larval spores that we, in turn, incubate and transmit.

Nicholodeon is a poetic series of obituaries, each one situated "at the clear spot" ([30]), a blank hole, not unlike the "VAC M" ([68]) of an absence

that is, paradoxically, “em ty but full” ([34]). Just as the death of Bartlebooth in *Life: A User’s Manual* by Georges Perec coincides with the inability to fit a letter-shaped puzzle-piece, a W, into the last hole of a jigsaw-puzzle (1987:497), so also does the death of David UU leave a lingual puzzle incomplete (since the absence of his last name, a pun on the letter W, makes a hole in the very word for such an absence). The missing letters become a cipher for the lost body of a poet.

Nicholodeon x-rays the remains of such an exquisite corpse, on the assumption that writing is itself postmortem. Writing is a kind of taxidermy, in which the critic becomes a literary coroner, dismantling, then restitching, the “Glossotype” (1997a:[22]) of foreign tongues. Where Frankenstein meets Wittgenstein, there the critic might discover the anatomy of a poetic martyr: “[i]magine each page of this book as an embalmed cross-section [...] of some exotic body” ([89]), in which “[t]he black marks[...]constitute the outlines of capillaries” ([89]), once flowing with vital essence, but now clogged with “tarry residue” ([89]).

Nicholodeon performs a radical autopsy upon the corpus of bpNichol, dissecting the ganglia of his influence, “the rhizome of an author-function in mourning” (1997b:101). Knowing that bpNichol integrates himself into an avant-garde collective by publishing a group of peers in Ganglia Press, Wershler-Henry studies the Turin Shroud that depicts the anatomy of such a legacy (1997a:[43]). When “a dead body broadcasts aphrodisiac hallucinations” ([25]), “crowds gather around the lethal nodes of becoming” ([25]), filing past the sarcophagus, like pilgrims or tourists, who stand in line for hours to see the body of a dead czar.

Exquisite, as such a literary skeleton might be, it is nevertheless a hybrid entity, the Siamese version of a horrible misbirth (1997a:[83]), in which two heads have become grafted upon one body. Unable to separate the conjoined “twins,” the authorial functions of bpNichol and McCaffery, because of their “We-full, not [...] I-less paradigm” (*TRG* 1992:11), critics have usually buried any evidence of such freakish teratism, eliding the shared corpus of the two poets, lauding bpNichol at the expense of McCaffery, all the while archiving work done in collaboration as if it is the work of one man, not two.

Wershler-Henry implies that, for the “nicholphilia” (1997a:[7]) of the academy, “physical death is the mother of privilege” ([24]), sanctioning all the accolades of posterity. Has not bpNichol literally fulfilled his role

as the undead corpse in “Nary-A-Tiff” (*TRG* 1992:222), persisting critically after death, his body exhumed from the cemetery, every now and then for a festschrift or two, even as McCaffery has, while still alive, suffered relative neglect (despite being the more intellectually sophisticated poet)? Has not McCaffery remarked that, in a single stroke, his collection of bpNichol has doubled in value (*TRG* 1992:219)?

Knowing that Coach House has resurrected itself as an electronic small-press by capitalizing upon these recent spates of ‘beepymania,’ Wershler-Henry insists that, if writers must loot the name of bpNichol for the sake of their careers, then surely they can extract from it some novelty, the element of “surprise as the rarest form of earth” (1997a:[30]). Rather than explain or imitate, preserving his work in a mausoleum, why not expropriate bpNichol? Mine his work for “obtainium” (1997a:[9]), a magnetic material, as “[p]romiscuous” ([7]) as concrete, doing “anything for anyone, without protest” ([7]), so long as the person is strong enough to hold this “antimatter [that]/ eludes our grasp” ([61])?

Wershler-Henry performs a radical alchemy upon the corpus of bpNichol, forging the “mettle not metal” (1997a:[36]) needed to transmute lead-type into a Nichol, not a nickel, alloy—the kind of fissile element that can fill the outmoded typecase with a new set of “Collected Allegories,” each one “a metaphor for *Nicholodeon* as a whole” ([91]). Does not the legacy of a poet take on “the status of moveable type, pointing to the infinite number of possible alphabets that lie beyond zebra” ([91])? Must we not do what we can to rearrange the set of toy letter-blocks left behind by the kids of the book-machine?

Wershler-Henry suggests that such a new poetics must dramatize the effect of artificial discourses—and nowhere does this premise appear more obvious than during his use of the Klingon language to create a sci-fi *lautgedichte.* Such a text implies that, in the modern milieu, poetry has become so heteroclite, so nonsensical, that it is now little more than an alien idiom, like the hieroglyphs of a Klinzhai alphabet, its characters unreadable, except in the neverland of speculative imagination: “since Klingon contains no equivalent for the word ‘car,’ [...] this text reads ‘primitive shuttlecraft’” (1997a:[90]).

Wershler-Henry also suggests that a new poetics must dramatize the effect of mechanical procedures—and nowhere does this premise appear more obvious than during his use of the Babble! software to create a cut-up

merzgedichte. Such a text implies that, no matter how delirious, no matter how libidinal, "the phonemes of rapture" (1997a:[24]) might be under the constraints of oneiric writing, such acts of unassisted surrealism pale in comparison to the truly automatic scription of a digitalized ghostwriter—a prosthesis for our own unconscious inspiration: "It is the spine made malevolent. It twitters." ([24]).

Just as the Toronto Research Group argues that, between writer and reader, "[t]here is at all points a machine that secretes and a machine that consumes" (1992:172), so also does Wershler-Henry insist that language is a cyborganic phenomenon, in which we do not translate words into meaning so much dissipate forms into function. If a capital economy must preserve the linguistic efficiency of these machines by computerizing our language and by standardizing our rhetoric, then surely we must sabotage whatever is utilitarian in any poetic device, deploying it in a manner wholly contrary to its intended function.

When Wershler-Henry uses his Microsoft program, for example, to correct the phonetic spelling in a poem by Bissett, the software fails to work on behalf of semantic lucidity, translating the desire for errata into a comedy of errors, so that, when confronted, say, with the word "uv," the device does not read it as "of," the correct variant, but as "ultraviolet" (1997a:[68]). Just as the gears of a printing-press drag Bissett, screaming, into their own mechanism, so also do the codes of a spelling-check drag the poem, gibbering, into their own formalism: "the machines were thundering on, turning fat ultraviolet" ([68]).

If computers must constrain us as tightly as corsets, making us write like "fucking accountants" (1997a:[93]), then surely we must learn "how to print/ with an offset bodice" ([68]). If wordprocessors can, for the sake of convenience, come equipped with a "mindreader" that not only anticipates keystrokes to be made, but also consummates completion of a word (even before we finish typing the initial letters)—then what prevents such machines from turning "new wave films, flickering" into "new york city with fiduciary flooring" ([20])? Do we not see these "windfall machines planning hidden interests" ([20])?

McCaffery implies that any act against such a covert agenda is an exercise in "futility, which expressed as f + utility becomes that [...] which is one letter beyond utility" (1980:12), the letter "f" symbolizing "the play of freedom [...] within function" (12): i.e. what supplements the "unction" of a use-value. When Wershler-Henry in "(f)Utility" writes inverted anagrams of the word "Tool" (the name of a rockband), he not only evokes the ones and zeros of a binary device, but also overturns any overtones of money in the capital economy of such a musical utensil (i.e. loto, loot, toll, and toto) (1997a:[73]).

Wershler-Henry confesses that, in the face of such (f)utility, he already mourns the failure of his project,worrying that he has done nowhere near enough to ensure that his own work can resist the onslaught of sentimentality that has already diluted most critical reactions to the work of bpNichol himself. Agreeing with Bill Kennedy that *Nicholodeon* is just "the literary equivalent of standing on the edge of a cliff and commenting on how far down the bottom is" (1998:[2]), Wershler-Henry begins to recognize that the poet must not build a bridge across a chasm so much as torch all bridges, the better to leap into every chasm.

Rather than redeem the death of bpNichol, turning the radical absence of such an adored figure into a 'meaningful experience,' no different from a posthumous brand of consumable grief, Wershler-Henry refutes the elegiac impulse altogether in order to write poems whose density and opacity allude to the meaninglessness of the dead. As Derrida remarks, "[t]rue 'mourning' seems to dictate only a tendency: the tendency to accept incomprehension, to leave a place for it, and to enumerate coldly, almost like death itself, [the] modes of language which, in short, deny the whole rhetoricity of the true" (1989:31).

Nicholodeon presents itself as the cinematic variation of a necronomicon —a Book of the Dead, whose "lowerglyphs" strive to debase the great icons of literary necrosis. Unable to absorb the 'pataphysical dispositions of bpNichol (his concrete poetry, his probable systems, etc.), Canadian literati have ignored such work in order to radicalize the kind of poetry that, by virtue of its romantic humanism, is already recognizably 'poetic.' Fork over a nickel. Gaze into the zoötrope, not for the sake of "Zion or Eden" (1997a:[66]), but for the zeal of evil. No more apostles, no more exegetes: be a heretic, be an infidel.

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Extreme Positions (for bp

Robert Hogg

The lovely play language is . The lay of the poem .

The place maide . The dropping or adding of a letter .

Tension . Love crosses all bodies

of water or of land

vi
o
le
(n)
t

Love knows its own bounds
but crosses these
willingly
knows to stay
stray
brings the point of light
right up to the eye

knows that all event
is also a screen
retina
page
where the hand trembles
to leave a mark in

v
i
o

l
a
t
e

space

so great the mind's
demand
that a map be drawn
lines be drawn
against chaos
but also
break the edge

Put an S on things. Put S in the world. Sing

silent
p
a
c
spell
o i
u g
n h
words standing
a
l
o
n
essential

free . The lovely play love is a language made

sign

(against unknowing

An Interview with Steve McCaffery on the TRG

Peter Jaeger

PETER JAEGER: You formed the Toronto Research Group with bpNichol in 1973 as a forum to investigate issues pertinent to formally imaginative writing, such as the role of the reader, the material status of the book, and the non-semantic aspects of translation and narrative. The earliest TRG reports build on theories proposed by such writers as Gertrude Stein, Jerome Rothenberg, Ilse and Pierre Garnier, and the Brazilian *Noigandres* group of concrete poets. After 1974, however, you integrate ideas drawn from French poststructuralist theory into the reports. The Introduction to *Rational Geomancy* states that you and Nichol had read and discussed Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan by 1973, significantly in advance of the vogue for theory in the literary academy. Can you elaborate on the TRG's early understanding and 'use' of theory, as well as on the differences between your theoretical concerns and Nichol's approaches to theory?

STEVE MCCAFFERY: Looking back on my Introduction to the collected TRG reports, I notice that it's somewhat misleading, actually inaccurate in the passage you refer to. My words there suggest a shared reading and discussion of Barthes, Lacan, and Derrida when such was not entirely the case. Our sessions sometimes consisted in bringing together our separate readings from often quite diverse areas. We then talked—perhaps re-wrote—ideas were sometimes modified, sometimes not. Material was dictated by one of us and transcribed by the other in a disjunctive and sometimes ad hoc manner. Typing "Barrie's thoughts" often triggered off a thought of my own at which point I'd abandon transcription and type directly—and vice versa in Nichol's case. I think it is no distortion of the facts to claim that I was the more 'theoretical' of the two. (It was Nichol who first insisted on that first point in our manifesto: that all theory is transient and after the fact of writing—I, of course, by implication endorsed that at the time but increasingly with less conviction and eventually abandoned it.) Our different attitudes to theory (which I don't

consider a master discourse of legitimation but a rhizome of strategically available concepts) came to a head in that interview in *Tracing the Paths*: "Inten(s)(t)ion," where I boorishly and aggressively deploy theoretical vectors which Barrie evades.

Nichol's theoretical interests at the time were largely psychoanalytic (an interest I'm sure that was connected to his own therapeutic work as a lay-analyst). It was Nichol who introduced me to the theories of Wilhelm Reich (especially his theories of character analysis, and the orgone), to Alexander Lowen's theories of bio-energetics, to Edmund Bergler's theories of psychic masochism, and to a book of dialogues with his patients by Lacan. This was a radical but different body of theorists from those I was reading. I discovered Barthes through his *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology,* both published in England by Cape Goliard in a series under the editorship of Nathaniel Tarn. (The series also published Michel Leiris's *Manhood,* and Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*.) I discovered Derrida through "Linguistics and Grammatology," a section of *Of Grammatology* published in *SubStance* 10 (1971). Beyond a couple of anthologized essays, the first book of his that I read was *Speech and Phenomena,* which introduced me to the concept of différance. That would have been 1973. The theoretical component within and/or informing my non-theoretical writing grew increasingly and can be traced by a reconstructed chronological reading of my essays in *North of Intention.* Barthes, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, and Bataille were all independent interests supplemented by a philosophical vector (Nietzsche, and Heidegger especially). I don't recall a parallel trajectory in Barrie's interests but I owe him eternal gratitude for introducing me to the work of Spicer, and Gertrude Stein. He additionally introduced me to the theoretical writings of Olson and opened my mind to the relation of language to proprioception and the breath line. (At the time I was a strictly visual, concrete poet.) TRG reflects in large part our independent research along various trajectories which was subsequently modified, hybridized, contaminated in our methods of dictation-transcription (touched on above and fully described in the Introduction to *Rational Geomancy*).

I never felt a need in Nichol to weld critical theory (as we then knew it) to a political agenda. My own interest through much of the 1980s was a Marxist based critique of narrative, commodity, and language. This, of course, I shared with Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, and Charles Bernstein in the States. Barrie's interests were more demotic, areas of

children's literature and popular culture (board games and comic books). This is not, of course, to portray Nichol as an idiot savant. Indeed, Nichol was among the pioneers of cultural studies, one of the first to take 'minor' cultural productions and to import them into the major cultural arena. I think of far more value than *The Martyrology* (to my mind an uneven work bogged down in organicism and humanism, despite its brilliant deconstructive eruptions) is his historical intervention into the international discourse on Concrete Poetry. It was his radical concept of panelology: a brilliant détourne of the semiotics of comic strip into High Modernist Concretism that so outraged Eugen Gomringer's Bauhaus-Max Bense proclivities. (His response to Nichol can be found in one of the first four issues—which were pre-1972—of Nick Zurbrugg's magazine *Stereo Headphones* put out from Kersey, England.)

PJ: You mention your interest in Marxist critique during the 1980s. In "Deux pièces difficiles pour une mème main" (1979), Caroline Bayard argues that the TRG downplayed politics in favour of formal experiment; for Bayard, TRG's lack of a political agenda is at odds with Quebecois writers who published in *La barre du jour* during the same period. Would you comment on the supposed absence of a political position in the TRG reports?

SM: I believe Bayard is pointing to the absence of a Sartrean-style engaged writing in the TRG reports and in that her claim is correct. But in the more immanent politics of culture and institutions of the 1970s I think our stance was intensely political. There is, for starters, an unavoidable political inflexion incumbent on any critical discourse, like ours, that opens itself up to becoming not merely a collaborative unit, but a critical, productive simultaneity. Univocity, as is well known, is indissolubly linked to linguistic supremacy and the very collaborative nature of the TRG project strikes me now, as then, as being an intensely political commitment. What we espoused were inventive, alternative formats for presenting critical discourse—something which at the time was heterological to scholarly, academic protocol. It's in the realization of this espousal that Jerome McGann refers to the TRG Reports as "an indispensable point of departure for investigating the future of the book in the age of media and electronics" (*Black Riders* 181). Certainly our collaborative venture did seek a point beyond the simple dialogic at which identity is confused and univocity problematized, and we both considered that as intensely interventional. Additionally, our regular and guaranteed appearance in *Open Letter* made sure a certain amount of institutional intervention

owing to the fact that the magazine reached a university audience.

I find Roger Horrocks' constellation of five approaches to the political a useful device for tabulating the sort of "politicality without engagement" that the TRG achieved. Horrocks describes a fivefold politics of writing, of reading process, of poetic form, of market, and of a social politics of the group, scene, or individual.[1]

We were both opposed through the 1970s and 80s to the virulent nationalism emerging through the Diefenbaker and Trudeau years with its attendant obsession with unity, identity, and cultural xenophobia vis-a-vis the USA. In the spirit of that opposition (minor and unpopular as it was) I can call Nichol's independent publishing through his magazines *GrOnk* and *Ganglia* truly political because truly committed to an international vista.

It might be useful at this point to quote from a letter I wrote to Caroline Bayard (23 January 1980) in response to a section of her work in progress, *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec,* entitled "Concrete Theory in English Canada" (I haven't checked whether or not my comments occasioned serious changes in the final version). The comments are in response to her interpretation of an early work of mine, *Transitions to the Beast,* published by Nichol in 1970 and offered as the world's first post-semiotic poems.

point of fact: TRANSITIONS TO THE BEAST is not a collaboration between nichol and mccaffery it is entrely mccaffery as much as the martyrology is nichol. the fact is we've worked so closely together for ten years or more that ideas, agreements, altercations are always there as shadow presences. the concept of post-semiotic we did arrive at together (i can almost remember the brand of wine we drunk [*sic*] that long evening rapping together.) what you say in that section i really like. the perspective vis a vis the brazillian semioticist is very important. what you might like to mention is subsequent developments in europe and south america subsequent to TRANSITIONS most notably the emergence of the PROCESS POEM in czechoslovakia and (i think) argentina which similarly eliminated lexical keys.

the whole emergence is very complex:

a) we don't know what is actual conscious influence and what is cultural convergence. i tend to feel that most is cultural convergence. ... what you should emphasize however is the political aspect of that work which has always been an important area for me. most important is the switch and re-constitution of the semiotic circuit occasioned by the post-semiotic text which puts the reader in the fresh role as an active producer of signs [correct that to signification] rather than a decipherer or consumer of messages. to consider what you term canadian concrete theory (i truly don't like the phrase and feel it more misrepresenting

than helpful) from the angle of a sociology of readership might be most interesting. for involved in the post-semiotic idea (and conscious to my mind at the time) was a contribution to the destruction of writing itself. we didn't have derrida and the concept of deconstruction at that time but i was conscious of creating a text structured upon a partial adoption of the SIGN: strategically abandoning the signified and constructing a network of non-linear signifiers that had the additional potential of transgressing currently established categorical boundaries. for instance, the pertinent issue that TRANSITIONS might raise of an intra-psychological placement between the two (separate) regions of seeing and reading (instigating such further questions as how does one see a reading and would that be any different from reading your seeing).

but the shift in TRANSITIONS is very important from a communicative basis for the text to a non-communicative base; a base from which the relevant epistemological question becomes NOT how do we decipher this meaning but how is meaning to be produced: the POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SIGN.

PJ: In "Tract Marks: Echoes and Traces in the 'Toronto Research Group'" (1992), Adeena Karasick writes "'barrie and steve' claim to be firmly routed in history. But their research never deals with race, gender, class. Regional concerns here are universal. A globalization which doesn't take into account historical movement and change." Would you care to comment on this statement?

SM: Naturally, I can only truly speak for myself here and that should be taken into account each time I use a "we". Frankly, I don't have too much to say. Karasick's is a calling after the fact to deal with issues that in the context of our research were not primary concerns. The TRG comprised a small facet of our creative and intellectual interests, and for me, subscribing to a fundamentally Marxist position, the issue of gender was and always will be secondary to the larger issues of economics and dominance.

A propos of TRG, our research was pretty much restricted to three areas: the material formats of the book, conjectures into non-narrativity, and translation. Those were the parameters. Karasick conveniently overlooks (or perhaps misses) certain inflections of race, gender, and class which it might be useful to point out. We researched certain ethnological material pertaining to linguistic relativity and sound. Additionally, in our research into comic books, the semiotics of the comic strip, and also the formats of some children's books, we anticipated that class-related collapsing of high- and low-brow culture frequently offered as the hallmark of postmodernism. As to gender, it certainly never manifests as a direct address but the empirical evidence of the writing by women we

do present should be noted accordingly. There were few people reading Stein in the early 1970s, and both Nichol and myself published articles on her writing long before she manifested on grad school curricula. Between us, in our separate collections, we built up a daunting library of Stein first editions (including *Tender Buttons, Lucy Church Amiably,* a mint copy of *How to Write*)—for the sole reason that Stein at that time was not available in reprint apart from the few titles that Dick Higgins had valiantly republished through Something Else Press.

If Karasick (commenting in some cases twenty years after our research) sees these parameters as somehow detrimental, then so be it.

PJ: McClelland & Stewart's *An H in the Heart,* which gathers a selection of Nichol's work, includes some visual poems by you, falsely attributed to Nichol. This huge oversight almost reminds me of the story about how only Picasso and Braque could tell the difference between their own early cubist paintings. Except in the case of you and Nichol, the visual style of the poems is remarkably different (Figure 1). Your inclusion in the "bpNichol Reader" brings up two questions: to what extent did the TRG collaboration influence each of own solo writing projects, and how did your poems get mixed up with the manuscript for *An H in the Heart*?

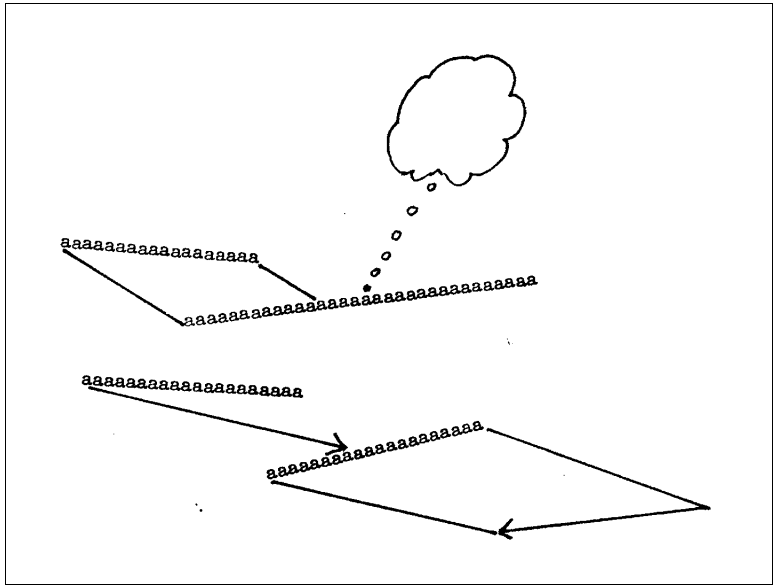

Figure 3: Steve McCaffery, untitled visual poem, ca. 1970.

SM: The investigation into the book as machine certainly influenced the structure of *Panopticon,* although the machinic aspect of that book supports a counter-narrative project and tries to reverse the panopticality inherent in Bentham's prison plan. I wanted a counter-narrative structure similar to Escher-like mazes and the architectural cul-de-sacs of Piranesi's *carceri.* The report on Children's Literature (which would have come predominantly from Nichol's input in that genre) never happened, although Barrie did go on to write wonderful children's books. "Report Three: The Language of the Performance of Language" was initially staged as a performance and only reached print when I edited the collected reports after Nichol's death. Beyond *Panopticon* I can't trace much direct influence. I came to see many of our then innovative concepts as defunct: geomantic translation, exo- and endo-skeletal, discrete and indiscrete grammar have a quaint air of nostalgia about them now.

I'm sorry I can't provide a more positive answer to your first question. However, your second opens onto a wide issue of the ethics of the posthumal and my own relation to that. It's a case less of my work getting mixed up, or of false attribution, than of editorial procedure. Perhaps the relevant material should be specified. "Fictive Funnies" occupies pages 141-43 of which page 143 was entirely my own, 142 mine apart from the top three frames, and 141 Barrie's apart from a tiny inset frame in the bottom right corner. I say 'mine' not in a proprietary sense but to gesture to the fact that the collaborative nature of this piece is insufficiently stressed. It's so easy to accept this material as Nichol's. Three other pieces are similarly TRG collaborations but with a somewhat different inflection —"Essay 5" (146), "Essay 9," and "Erratum" (146-47). These, however, were performance pieces; two are Nichol's exclusive compositions and "Essay 9" a collaboration and indicated so at the end. But what Ondaatje and Bowering present without clear acknowledgement are my own retrospective verbal descriptions written after Barrie's death as part of the compilation of the TRG Reports. They're lifted verbatim from *Rational Geomancy* and I strongly feel that should be specified—less for my own self-satisfaction as for editorial accuracy. A further piece, "Narry-A-Tiff," is a collaborative *fumeti* or photo comic strip. This piece embodies in its opening frame full credit as a joint composition and also credits the photographer.

In addition to this oversight is the insult of not being contacted for permission to reprint. This to my mind is reprehensible and insults not only me but the memory of bpNichol. Collaboration as you know was a

vital and persistent component in his creativity and to represent his collaborative work is thoroughly laudable. But not in the oblique, furtive manner chosen by the editors that first insinuates then effectively obfuscates that side of his production. Indeed, Bowering's Introduction doesn't even mention his collaborations and Ondaatje's Afterword mentions casually that he "belonged to a sound poetry group The Four Horsemen [and] wrote essays." Nowhere do the editors speak of the TRG material as collaborations, nowhere am I credited, nowhere is *Rational Geomancy* acknowledged as being edited by me after Nichol's death. (It's listed in the sources at the end but with an incomplete title.)

"Would bp have approved?" Bowering asks in the Introduction. Absolutely not. Leaving aside Nichol's own conviction never to be published by a mainstream press such as M&S, and his commitment to small press publication till the day he died (we spoke about this on our last day together as he drove me from his home on Lauder Avenue to the St. Clair subway station). As I say, leaving that aside, Barrie would never have been content with the shabby misrepresentation of his collaborations. I had a brief e-mail correspondence with Bowering who sent me back his regrets and embarrassment at the oversights. What I found particularly irksome was McClelland & Stewart's adamant refusal to print and insert an errata slip. I didn't even get an apology from them, as if the issue was a minor matter.

As mentioned earlier, I believe this issue unfolds into the larger one of the posthumous handling of archival material. Despite being thanked by Bowering toward the end of his Introduction, I was never consulted on any matter pertaining to the selection beyond a single phone-call from him regarding a collaborative poem "In England Now That Spring," published in the book of the same name. His question (which I found incredibly odd) was something to the effect of "is that piece mainly Barrie's writing or mainly yours?" My answer was, of course, it's both. I was consulted neither by Ellie Nichol nor Michael Ondaatje for suggestions or advice. This becomes an issue in light of the following facts. I was told by Barrie in the late 1970s that I was designated in his will as being his literary executor. Presumably he altered his will sometime after the birth his and Ellie's daughter Sarah (who was born in September of 1981). However, Barrie never told me of this change prior to his death. Around 1 p.m. on Sunday 25 December 1988 I phoned Barrie's and Ellie's home to find out how the operation had gone, and Lorna Milne, a close mutual friend, answered and told me of Barrie's death. The following week I was

angered by a phone call from someone at the National Library in Ottawa who'd been given the information that I was the literary executor, and who wished to discuss with me the purchase of Barrie's archives. Naturally, I was infuriated and gave that disembodied voice hell, suggesting that he contact Nichol's widow but not immediately.

There was another incident that puzzled me. I was at the house shortly after Barrie's death and asked Ellie (naturally in shock and grief) if I could help by sending out announcements to all Barrie's non-Canadian friends and colleagues. Ellie thanked me and I asked to borrow Barrie's Rolodex for the addresses. A few days latter at the wake at the home of Barrie's brother DJ and his wife Liz, Liz told me that Ellie was upset that I hadn't yet returned the Rolodex. Naturally, I returned it immediately (I can't remember if I'd managed to send announcements to all those whose addresses were contained therein) but ever since that moment I have never ben consulted on matters of posthumous publication. I vaguely recall being told, perhaps by DJ (only Ellie could verify if this is true) that after Ellie, and Sarah, Barrie's revised will specified me as executor in the event of both their deaths. I've not seen Barrie's final will, but Ellie's attitude towards me remains quite puzzling and disturbing.

PJ: Nichol's refusal to publish with M&S parallels a similar commitment to small-press publishing among formally innovative writers in the US. In 1980 you collaborated with the American poets Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, and Ray DiPalma on *Legend,* and throughout the 1980s your work became increasingly associated with Language Writing. At the same time, TRG production began to taper off. What was Nichol's response to Language Writing?

SM: At the outset I should explain certain relevant facts relating to the decline in the collaboration, which, as I'll outline in a moment, were partly circumstantial and partly owing to a divergence in our own interests. It was during the early 1980s that Nichol took up script writing as a major source of income. As I recall, it was Dennis Lee who introduced him to Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppet Show. Barrie wrote for the show and became involved in more travel. Additionally, with his marriage to Ellie Hebert and the birth of their daughter Sarah, his lifestyle was obviously and understandably affected by several changes in priorities. To compound matters, Sarah's birth in September 1981 had been traumatic (she was premature and hospitalized for an extended time). Nichol writes about this in an incredibly moving way in "Hour 18" in Book 6 of *The Martyrology.* I saw relatively little of Barrie through these

years and further TRG activities were suspended. I moved on into several major projects of my own. Indeed the 1980s were an enormously prolific time for me with five full-length books appearing. *Knowledge Never Knew* (1983), *Panopticon* (1984). *North of Intention* (a huge project of editing and assemblage, 1986), *Evoba* (1987), and *The Black Debt* which was published early in 1989. In addition, *Legend* came out in 1980, and the majority of the material that went into *Theory of Sediment* (1991) was written during that decade. It was a period of time when domestic exigencies, but also independent creative inclinations, removed critical collaboration and research as a priority on both our parts. Moreover, by the mid-1980s our collaborative involvement with the Four Horsemen was at a creative low—few new pieces were being written. Yet ironically that was the time when our international reputation was solidly established with visits to the Holland Festival and a performance at Polyfonix held in Paris at the Pompidou Centre. (It was at a party held in honour of the participants of that event that we first met Félix Guattari and Pierre Joris.)

But to answer your question: what was Nichol's response to Language Writing. The answer is surprisingly little. I believe Nichol balked at the patently Marxist platform of much of the theorizing (Andrews, Bernstein, Silliman, Watten and myelf). Moreover the connected critique of the sign, reference, and narrative was an area of critical practice with which he disagreed. There is, however, an interesting a-parallel evolution that's involved. For several years TRG researched various facets of narrative culminating in a tendentiously empirical search for a non-narrative prose. The search unearthed a dazzling variety of material. Even now, the range still staggers me: Rabelais, Simmias [*sic*] of Rhodes, George Herbert, Apollinaire, Gertrude Stein, bill bissett, Pierre Garnier, Eugen Gomringer, Greg Curnoe, John Furnival, Ferdinand Kriwet, Hart Broudy, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Julien Blaine, J.F. Bory, Andrew Suknaski, Kitasono Katué, Nabokov, *Bugs Bunny & the Tortoise,* Madeline Gins, Steve Katz, B.S. Johnson, Ray Federman, Scott Symons, A.B. Paulson, Agatha Christie, Taliesin, The *Edda,* Chomsky, Art Spiegelman, Martin Vaughn-James, George Herriman, Steve Ditki, the *Decretum aureum domini* of Balthazar Gracian (Lyons, 1511 edition of course!), James Childress, George Steiner, Roland Barthes, Jean-Louis Baudry, Stanley Berne and Arlene Zekowski, Earl Miner, Husserl, Mario Pei, James Sanford, Cornelius Agrippa, *Hustler* (with special scratch 'n sniff centrefold, July 1982), the 9th century bardic *Dan Direach,* Jacques Derrida, Dick Higgins, *Readers Digest,* Robert Filliou, Maurice Sendak, Max Brand, Stan Lee,

Jacques Lacan, *The Pie and the Bubble Book,* T.S. Eliot, Robert Crumb, John Riddell, Andy Warhol, Dieter Rot, Augusto de Campos, Julia Plaza, Childe Roland, George Wither, *Veridicus Christianus* (anon. Jesuit, 1601), *Velvet Talks* #3 (soft porn, Hollywood, 1973), Richard Scarry, Lawrence Sterne, Victor Coleman, Mallarmé, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, George Bowering, Sorel Coleman, Lothar Meggendorfer, Ib Penick, Seidmann-Freud, Robert Pinsky, and Hewart van Hohenberg.

I mention all these names because the prodigality and scope is important. It reflects two investigative poets' combined and individual research and constitutes the kind of rhizome that I don't believe could happen via corporately constructed PhD programmes and institutional curricula. In Deleuze's terms, we assembled a war machine whose lines of flight turned history into geography. For my part, this protracted research into narrative developed as a a-parallel agenda to the critique of the transit theory of communication, and of narrative via the laying bare of its fetish-istic nature. This latter research was primarily carried out by Ron Silliman and led to the emergence of the new sentence and various counter-narra-tive writings such as Silliman's own *Ketjak* and *Tjanting,* and my *Panopticon.* All this is to say that my personal investigations into narrative followed two radically different agendas. One, empirical-analytic (the book as machine) and for the most part a-theoretical (a search for non-narrative prose that eventually drew a blank); the other highly theorized with a strong Marxist impetus and orientation that developed an effective critique of both the sign and the fetishistic nature of referentiality.

A conjecture: I think it's possible that Barrie cultivated (briefly) some stylistic affinities with Language Writing. I'm thinking of the wonderful "St Anzas VII" in *Gifts* with its staccato disjunctions, repetitions, and brief phrasal propulsions that could have come directly out of a Bruce Andrews poem. The poem mixes a non-conjunctive syntax with sub-lexical or intra-lexemic play—those amoeboid separations of the initial letters in certain selected words that produce the saints (st. ammer, st. icky) and Victor Coleman's playful homage delivered at a poetry conference in Buffalo in 1980 as a comment on *The Martyrology*: "I think it's st. upid"—but beyond these possible stylistic affinities to Andrews' work in isolated passages of his writing, I can't recall any serious theoretical encounter.

PJ: Stephen Scobie comments in *bpNichol: What History Teaches* that Nichol's experience at Therafields formed the basis of his sound poetry with the Four Horsemen, because the group improvised in "an absolute

trust and awareness in each other" (19). Did the therapeutic community at Therafields play any role in the TRG collaborations.

SM: We need to be alert here to both mystification and mythologizing. The issue of Therafields and its relation to our separate and collective creativities is a complicated matter. Therafields itself as "a community for healing" has a complex history and a murky ending. It came under suspicion of being a cult during the early 1970s, so much so that Nichol and others of high standing in the organization published a detailed explanation of its structure and therapeutic rationale in *The Canadian Forum* (January 1973). The cult accusations were clearly unfounded, but arose out of the fact that Therafields launched into a project of buying up numerous houses in the Annex which were converted into habitats for group living. Therafield's rationale was simple: emotional problems can't be fully addressed in weekly sessions with an individual therapist or in group therapy, as many such problems only manifest in the context of the day-to-day. I mentioned a certain suspicion about the dismantling of Therafields which occurred and this should be explained. Its devolution started in the mid 1980s with the sale of some of its property. By around 1987 Nichol had been asked to step down as Vice-President and his friend Rob Hindley-Smith (son of the founder Lea) as President of the Foundation. I recall this as a time of great depression for Barrie but was not privy to the details. However, myself and many of the friends and acquaintances involved in Therafields were suspicious as to where and to whom the profits from those real estate transactions were going. In addition to the downtown holdings Therafields owned a three-hundred-acre farm and a smaller adjacent property (both in Dufferin County) which were redesigned, expanded, and in effect rebuilt by the free labour of community members (they were called "dramists," although classical psychiatry would label them analysands). Again, the justification for this free labour was the concept of "work therapy" and I have absolutely no suspicions as to its beneficial effects. Yet the people who paid monthly therapy fees and essentially paid the salaries of the therapists were not beneficiaries of the real estate sales at the end of the devolution. (Incidentally, a small remnant of the Foundation still survives and operates out of a building called 'The Centre' at 316 Dupont Strreet in Toronto.)

This is the background to Scobie's rather reductive, and to my mind completely inaccurate, statement cited above. Nichol's experience in Therafields did not provide the basis to his sound poetry. Indeed, Nichol

tended to live a double life (that certainly was my experience) in which his creativity and the public life that that entailed were kept separate from his lay-analytic practice and his administrative activities at Therafields. I remember no discussions that linked sound poetry and energy (à la Olsonian projective) to the bio-energetics, psychodramas, and abreactive methods practised at Therafields. He told me that he was introduced to sound poetry by bill bissett who turned him on to Indian chants.

Later he simply started reciting out loud his concrete texts. I remember this discussion vividly as the vocalization of visual texts was precisely my own route into sound.

A brief account of the genesis of the Horsemen (as I recall it) might be helpful at this point. In the autumn of 1969 (possibly the winter of 1970) Nichol was invited to read to Eli Mandel's class at York University. Barrie (never the egoist!) invited myself and David UU (Harris) to read with him. (I arrived from England in the summer of 1968 to do an MA at York.) The reading comprised solo pieces by all of us, duets between Barrie and myself, and one wild trio with David. David came in with a quarter-empty gallon jug of red wine (Eli was cool about that) and the reading was high-energy ranting through highly amplified equipment. That classroom visit led to an invitation for Nichol and myself to read at the St. Lawrence Centre, a reading which again comprised solo and duet components. In the audience was Rafael Barreto-Rivera who came up to us and enthused after the performance and was eager to participate. Later, Paul Dutton (who at that time was in one of Nichol's writing workshops) joined in; like Rafael, Paul was involved in Therafields.

In the workshops that ensued there was no discussion of psychoanalytic components. I think I brought in the salient information of our true precursors: the Futurists and Dadaists; Nichol infused the significance of chant and repetition (as a strategy for emptying a word or phrase of meaning) and spoke of its connections to Gertrude Stein's notion of the continuous present. All of this would be prior to 1973. Rafael, of course, brought an amazing Latin-American basis to a lot of the sound patterning, and Paul argued its musical affinities to jazz improvisation, the function of the solo, and diddling or mouth music.

I believe the other component in Scobie's claim is equally inaccurate. To claim that the Four Horsemen improvised in "an absolute trust and awareness in each other" is a little fanciful and perhaps sentimental. The workshops and practices were the sites of tremendous labour and disagreement; there were extreme differences in personality and opinions.

Oxymoronically, it was at times of upset and near-dysfunction prior to performing when the group performed at its best. I would stress then a dialectic to the group dynamic, and in actual performance—caught in the extremities of those rhythms and patterns of expenditure—it was impossible to ascertain whether anyone was trusting or mutually aware beyond the trivial sense of 'four guys on a stage.'[2]

PJ: Reading over the first *Open Letter* festschrift for Nichol and the essays on *The Martyrology* collected in *Tracing the Paths,* I am struck by how much early commentary was written by his close friends and colleagues, including yourself. What effect do you think Nichol had on the creation and development of a reading / writing community among writers of your generation in Canada? Do you think his contributions to the idea of a community are still relevant to younger Canadian writers?

SM: Nichol had a tremendous impact on countless people. For one thing, his utter charisma was contagious, and his boundless generosity of spirit resulted in an indelible imprint on recipients of, and spectators to, that largesse. I'm not privy to details but I'm sure his creative writing classes at York had salutary consequences for many younger writers. Provoked to reflect by your question on the matter of critical response, I believe that critical commentary came almost entirely from friends because more established academics were not interested. To a mythopoeic critic (and Frygian archetypal theory was rampant through the 1970s) Nichol's investigative writings would have been of no interest at all. It's a similar situation to what transpired in San Francisco through the 1970s and 1980s. A community of writers coalesced to both control the means of publishing and to provide a venue for critical feedback which partly culminated in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*—a work that facilitated the institutionalization of a body of theoretical writing whose origins were entirely outside the academy in a 'minor literature.' Having said all this, it should also be pointed out that many of Nichol's friends were active critics and academics: Frank Davey, Stephen Scobie, Douglas Barbour, Fred Wah, George Bowering, and Roy Miki, for instance.

On the matter of community I'm not sure of the total horizon. A writing community was firmly established in Vancouver thanks to *Tish* magazine and Barrie's years in Vancouver were ones of amicable relations with the *Tish* poets. (He was an open supporter of many of their tenets—essentially the credo of projective verse.) What distinguished Nichol, however, from that community of writers was an additional interest in non-linear writing especially concrete-visual poetry. (An interest shared out there, of course,

by bill bissett and in a different way by Judith Copithorne.) When I first met Nichol in Toronto, through the auspices of John Robert Colombo in the summer of 1969, there was an instant sympathetic bond through our mutual involvement in visual poetry and poetics. I'd discovered Concrete Poetry in England via two now intractable little documents: one, a special issue of *The Chicago Review* (19.4, 1967) called "anthology of concretism" and edited by Eugene Wildman. The other Mike Weaver's "Concrete Poetry" in *The Lugano Review* (V-VI, 1966), which included poems by Augusto de Campos, Eugen Gomringer, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Pierre Garnier, Paul de Vree, Ernst Jandl, and Luiz Angelo Pinto (his piece giving me my first exposure to semiotic poetry), and two important manifestos: De Stijl's 1920 "Manifesto II," and the 1958 Noigandres Group's "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry." It also contained a selection of Robert Lax's stunning minimal modular poems from the Black White Series.

I first came across Nichol's work in England by way of Emmett Williams' *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (Something Else Press, 1967) containing six pieces from Nichol's tight, imagistic, lettraset series "Eyes." (Nichol was the first Canadian poet I had ever read.) Incidentally, it was at the same time and in the same book that I discovered Nichol's saints, avant la lettre so to speak, in a 1966 poem by Stephen Bann entitled "Landscape of St. Ives, Huntingdonshire."

st. eeples

At the time of meeting, then, I knew bpNichol as a concrete poet of international stature. But what immediately drew us together as fellow poets and what facilitated our deep friendship was a joint feeling of isolation at the time, a placelessness and an absence of community in which to share our ideas and poems. We met frequently after that first meeting, and the seed of TRG was laid at that time in our lengthy, unrecorded discussions about concrete poetry, translational procedures, the international vanguard, dada, and the language revolution as we saw it happening predominantly in Europe and South America. Let's call this a community of two alongside of which grew that community of four known as the Four Horsemen. For the two of us it was a welcome opportunity to extend our range and interest in collaboration. I remember Rafael speaking of the Four Horsemen as a rethinking of the poem as community and that was certainly true. More recently, I've come to see that community of four as an attempt at revisioning both the body, poem,

and community through ad hoc formulations of assemblage and intensities (it's a very Deleuzoguattarian rethinking!).

Beyond TRG and the Horsemen was Nichol's extended community of writers, not just friends but the international sphere reached by his two magazines *Ganglia* and *GrOnk. GrOnk* was mailed out free to about 300 interested parties, many of them non-Canadians. Let's not forget that by as early as 1967 bpNichol was an internationally recognized concrete poet. One can't recommend 'stature' to young writers, I'm sure it's innate in any gesture to write and publish, but the lesson Nichol's example offers is to not remain complacent within a small and local venue: the Toronto community, the Vancouver community. There's a way that minor local poetry wars get blown out of proportion when not framed within international and global contexts. Moreover, if an extended community does not exist, create one and create by largesse. Don't sell a magazine, give it away. This is not to argue against the local but urge a supplementation of the local onto an extended community. Apart from Barrie, all support of, and critical feedback on, my work, as it was evolving, came from such a community: Dick Higgins in New York, Robert Filliou in France, Ron Silliman in San Francisco, to mention just a few.

To your other question regarding Nichol's impact on the writers of his generation. I think the impact is relatively minor and outside of Canada virtually nil (but I'd be happy to be corrected on this last point). Stephen Scobie's *Stone Poems* of 1973 are in a boxed, loose card format identical to Nichol's 1970 boxed book *Still Waters,* even down to the stiff, textured paper stock. But the writing itself bears little evidence of influence. Then there is the egregious matter of *The Martyrology.* The "st" device of the saints is so married to Nichol's 'style' that it can lead only to plagiarism if used by someone else. If, however, we expand this to the general matter of wordplay, it seems to have had an impact less on Nichol's own generation of writers than on a few isolated younger ones. I'm thinking of Darren Wershler-Henry and Adeena Karasick who in most respects are polar-opposite writers.

Actually, it's arrogant of me to even attempt to estimate his influence. Much I'm sure was private and remains invisible as the mental property of individuals. So it would be more honest for me to address Nichol's influence on my own work, specify those areas, and introduce a few correlations. I literally grew up with the first four books of *The Martyrology*—on an almost day-to-day basis. Passages were read to me, commented on, defended, and sometimes changed. I have very few signed

copies of his books (you sign books for out-of-towners and people and friends you see infrequently, but not for your best friends who you encounter daily) but on January 11, 1987, he gave me a signed copy of *Martyrology Book 6 Books* which reads "To Steve who kept me sane when this work first began." Ironically, I was too close to *The Martyrology*'s genesis and growth to be influenced by it. However, it was Barrie's example that encouraged me to start my own long poem in 1970, *The Abstract Ruin,* which I've long since abandoned. Isolated fragments were published and there's a cryptic reference to it in Robin Blaser's *Pell Mell.* I abandoned it feeling it too derivative in style (not of Nichol, but rather of Olson and Pound). It was a failed experiment in simultaneous history and place which has a few creditable passages of projective verse in it. Nichol persistently encouraged me to continue and publish it in book form as Panel 3 of *Carnival* but I declined. (Perhaps that's what I should have called *Panopticon.*) I'm basically not attracted to monolithic forms, to summa poeticas. I prefer to take on discrete projects (often simultaneously), then move on to other ones, trying to make the next book be as different as possible from the one before.

To refer back to your earlier question, actually Nichol's visual work and mine were similar in certain areas. His visual work had a huge impact on me; most specifically in the area of the hand-drawn "zoomorphs." Impressive to me was the assertion of a gestural relation to incision that seemed the grammatological parallel to sound poetry. I created an alpha figure (some of them appear on p. 142 of *An H in the Heart*) and did a hundred or so variants of the letter E. Most of these remain unpublished, although a few appeared early in the 1970s in *Dust,* a magazine edited by Wally Dupew out of San Francisco. (They were listed in the table of contents as "drawings.") Nichol also introduced me to "panelology" and the poetic possibilities of comic strip frames and devices (speech balloons, thought balloons, etc.). We presented these in a fairly technical way in the TRG report on narrative in *Rational Geomancy* (pp. 118-131).

But comic strips and alphamorphs were transient and peripheral concerns for me in the early 1970s. The direction I chose to pursue, of course, was to seek inventive uses of the typewriter as a business machine détourned to art. Nichol had relatively little interest in this area and my inspiration came mainly from the typestracts (or abstract typewriter poems) of the English monk Dom Sylvester Houédard of Prinknash Abbey. Working as Managing Editor for *The Canadian Who's Who* I had access to an early IBM electric typewriter that was equipped with various

geometric characters. I used this capability to develop my "op poem" series, which are largely square and rectangular arrangements of geometric shapes that create kinetic retinal effects. Again, I chose not to publish most of this material.

Carnival began as an elongated tower typed on a long roll of paper which I'd abandoned by the time Nichol first saw it in the summer of 1969. He was fascinated by the scope of the piece and urged me to rethink it and not abandon it. Without his encouragement it would never have been realized. I finally arrived at the idea of the multi-panel page, pushing beyond the assumed parameters of the typescript (the boundaries of a single page) and challenging the cultural assumptions of the material space of 'the poem'. The main technical breakthrough in *Carnival* was the discovery of masking that allowed me to type over the mask onto the sheet of paper below, creating a ripped or erased effect. It also facilitated a wide variety of shapes and patterns that could be predetermined on stencils. Some took their inspiration from Matisse's late cut-outs, and also some of Miro's shapes. Alongside the use of five-colour ribbons (red, black, blue, green, and brown) I also started to use multi-coloured carbon papers to smudge work and create delicate textural effects. Another typestract innovation was a series of 'tissue' texts comprising a hybrid of typewriter and rubber-stamp imprints on tissue paper that was subsequently crumpled and photocopied in numerous crushed formats. On reflection, I see this fundamentally tactilic form, together with the hand-drawn pieces, as signalling a reclamation of a gestural poetics, best realized, of course, in the live work of the Four Horsemen.

I can't remember which one of us 'invented' systematic photocopy disintegration, but do remember showing Barrie some pieces I produced on machinery at the Office of the Queen's Printer where I worked for a time in 1969-70. These were produced on the now defunct wet-feed electrostatic copiers and resulted in radically different disintegrations than the texts we'd generated on xerox copiers. These pieces opened our eyes to the qualitative differences to be obtained from different reproductive processes. The theoretical thrust of this 'minor genre' was to expose the inherent paradoxicality in business machinery, specifically the paradox that the systematic copying of a copy of a copy of a copy (in strict accordance by the way with Plato's theory of mimesis) leads to inversely proportionate quality in reproduction. Excess imitation eventually and quite literally destroys its own ground.

Finally, in the area of sound poetry, it was Nichol who opened my eyes

to the fact that all my visual poems could function as sound texts. Our collaborations in that area are well known as are the numerous methods of notation that were developed in both the context of TRG and the Four Horsemen.

Notes

1. This information on Horrocks comes from Charles Bernstein's Preface to *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Poetry.* Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof Books, 1990.
2. Further discussion of the Four Horsemen in relation to both their local and historical nexus can be found in McCaffery's "Voice in Extremis" in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word.* Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

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for bpNichol: these re-memberings

an elegiac sequence

Douglas Barbour

cloud tones: martyred music:

i

seeing the clouds as a land from
above seeing no
town but a huge white
landscape roiling
  language's
rivers & coulees beautiful
blue lakes stand out

the town was there some
where the town exists

'we' stand in belief & wonder

why they left surely
they did not want such discipline

surely it was difficult when
they fell
into such a pain

full grace

ii

rifts & thru ways
contours drift athwart
a ramp at angles to a roiling tower
hills & valleys swell
& fall away
  there is a strange
vegetation everywhere growing a strange
sense of possibility as usual

river of fire in the far away almost
hidden by the shifts of banks of

  but of those folk
  song of wanderers time & again
  not a trace

    (where they fell
     in that rime

just the changes always
drifting of this landscape

    (theirs to move thru
     down to

who begin to slide beneath
this s/ombre sign

iii

(journeying & the returns . . . again)

tree branch leaf

thin transference of
the aspen
this transparence of
my asking

leaves
leaves leaves
float
rustle thick
on the ground
'i' am walking
across
the very fall
of the thin transparency of
the last
& too lost
leaves

you refused to see

iv

cloud town, again:

'sheer cliffs of'
fell
(the past tense with
loss courage
(good words those once
& gone going for
a song

or towering buildings float
an inner lighting
lightening the way

'Angel city'
for those who continually fall
towards speech
across text
sure of the way
but lost
in language again

those shifters
that sky a map
of chaos
a pattern to follow with
the opening eye

"fly out into the blue"
"stretches between 'me' and 'you'"

the moons a cloudy fragile boat
afloat
& anchored on (saint rand dead
the wind of the sun
whipping the empty 'cerulean'
pristine & wracked

& only elsewhere an abstract land
locked in beyond
the wide worlds rim
clouds ride the tide of changes rung
in your transforming lung
wage
(pay meant too much for us all
this emptiness
breaths blown from
all four corners
across seas of
shifting possibility
rushing the banks of
that lands ending
perpetual motion
on an ocean above
eyes unto the hills arise perhaps
perhaps a new figure climbs
those high rifts
ever higher
& away beyond knowledge over that
in the ever shifting seme-ing
of that 'world'
where now you follow
the only (dis)course left
you moving on

& below
blown down
gold bronze rust
leaves
a rare collage
colours this time of year
re/calls always

always there
'this earth // this
song' you
knew to treasure
that pleasure there

the world is with us
just so much as
to re/cite
the obvious
you no
longer a part of it
apart from it now
you knew its being 'this'
seeing it whole
& wholly

now torn a bit
in your going

loved & lovely still

[a(nother)version: therapy]

somewhere downwhen / sometime up there

‘the’ loss is registered

how always

‘the best leave too soon
& its always been that way’
someone says (again)
someone writes it down

a text of loss

is text a loss
we ask
again & again
we are not answered

there is the desire in writing
to get it down
desire in blood pulse
down arm to hand to pen
pushing words into being
negated as the lines take shape
on a screen
on a page
on the simple palimpsest of mind
making it happen

making it disappear

as vis:
‘i’ began to tell ‘you’ of ‘my’ loss
its ours
as we read
the signs

a seeming blue sky (cloudless)
flat light across leafless trees brown grass
memory (i read it there) of colours
so bright they teared my eyes

i think it was the colours
he was only a few days dead
i never knew how to tell
the pain

we shared

we share the pain lessening
as it is human to do
of his loss
lost gift of
that large loving possible world
staged on
this insubstantial page
and faded now clouds
gone over the dark horizon
moving in

no he would say know
more alive beloved a
“grace of the moment” each moment
we live it
live his absence
an abcess tongued
a presence spoken
in memory
inscribed & returned to
each day as we live it
in the graceful dance of his words
here at the tearful edge
of the world

in memoriam: bpNichol

read dream

in that space glows
you glowed too barrie
bravely back & reading your latest letters

we were all there all of us
happy not upset by your announced death
but youre here (or is the dream a ghostwriting
youre reading new writing
[desired]

the years went by but not it seems
beyond you as we all thought
writing is alive then isnt it any
way station you stopped at
fading to black no
thats the dream your smile
reading was it
your name I
woke up

& didnt quite forget

song for barrie

barrie the leaves are burning
again to die
& the grey clouds hurrying
away the sky

knows & doesnt know a thing
about it why
even ask what can it bring
to your absent sigh

of non-recognition trees
shed leaves we
have not yet shed you but seize
a shifting syntax re

newing cloudy maps what each saint
left behind you
only seem to have left us the taint
of mortality too

v

the playing fields of cloudtown stretch
to the horizon seen from a height
white & rolling so many
miles so many
places to hide saint and

a sense of disconnection
heightened suddenly
the shadow of a bluff

thats loss thats memory

thats all thats left still

[30 VIII 95]

vi

Haloed & hallooed
the saints stare down
from their painted heights

'gold leaf' part of the cloud
part of the crowding fall
here in this part of the country

still here still hearing
your voice 'somewhere off'
head full of those cadences

cadenzas that saxophone moan
or cry of delight
in the lights of

the camera's flash you put your hands out
to frame
the picture the moment

the picture of the moment cannot change
photography writes
that stop

in time yet what change
on the paper perhaps
that glow

not there around your
head blonde hair
alight or more

your stare is friendly helpful
hopeful somewhere someone
talks to you each day

[5 X 96]

Artifacts of Ecological Mind: bp, Gertrude, Alice

David Rosenberg

Author's Note: My "Coach House Letters," the editor informs me, are to be belatedly printed in this "bp + 10" issue [pp. 111-119]. They were written in October, 1997 (or earlier); it is now August, 1998, and notice of the bp issue-to-be awakens additional memories. The following essay contains flashes of bp that take on new meaning in the last decade, it seems to me, illustrated with recent works by two Toronto writers in his wake, Darren Wershler-Henry and Phillip Schreibman.

I grew up in Detroit but in some of my childhood years we summered in Port Stanley, Ontario, also known as last stop on the short-lived London-St. Thomas railway. Those summers are still vivid to me, partly because my August birthdays were celebrated there, sans my usual childhood friends, and partly because of the exotic Canadian culture I was discovering. I remember when I was ten and at first disappointed to find that unlike earlier years, the only movie house in town, the tiny "Roxy", was playing just one unchanging film week after week. It was called *The Coronation* and I saw it three or four times. I thought it was about the Canadian queen, whom I'd encountered on stamps and coins, and that "London" was the Ontario London at the end of the railway and to which I had not yet been. It was a documentary made that year, but to me it was bewitching fairyland: what incredible fantasy these Canadians lived in, bejewelled and becrossed and in golden coaches. But it was the spotless young Elizabeth who moved me. I longed to sit in her lap as she undressed me and then gave me my bath, cleansing the 'dirty' parts over and over in her firm but gentle hands and neat little smirk, glittering crown nestled precariously in her golden hair. I only turned ten between the second and third viewings—and I already despaired that the entrance into double figures signalled an end to innocence.

About a dozen years later, I was driving up the Queen Elizabeth Way from Buffalo to Toronto, a newly landed immigrant, the pursuing agents of the FBI left cursing at the border. Rosy-fingered Elizabeth—er,

Canada—would wash my psychic wounds clean once again. In place of royal fantasy, however, I would be knighted with the sword of irony. Beyond literal Toronto, I would enter another country of the imagination, one in which borders were irrelevant if not hilarious, and the truest citizen was bpNichol. I never got to know Barrie (bp) as well as I did Victor Coleman or even George Bowering, who was not in Toronto, but Barrie fit my pre-adolescent template for the exotic Canadian just because he appeared to me both friendly and unapproachable. Probably it was I who was a bit arrogant and couldn't admit it to myself—aloof to those experimental genres I didn't share.

I.e. the old sound, visual, concrete poetries that struck me as too obvious and thus too limited for a boundless irony or seriousness. They didn't yet have the strength of bpNichol's full oeuvre and sweet sensibility behind them, although Tristan Tzara was invoked (later, Alfred Jarry, who was earlier). Nevertheless, I took Gertrude Stein as my personal precursor, and one day upstairs in the Coach House in 1971 Barrie and I found we had her in common. He invited me over to his flat and showed me his "writings on Stein" (probably the piece that I'm told appeared in *OL* 2.2 in the 1970s, after I had gone). The piece I read was about *The Making of Americans* (1925) and seriously essayistic, although pasted into a bound journal like an artifact, and drawn from a seeming shelf-full of journals, forerunners of *The Martyrology.* Our conversation further revealed we were both wanting to put Stein on a more serious footing intellectually than the obvious imitators: each of us acknowledged two Steins, the parental, narrative one framing the exploratory rebel. That is to say, not the obvious opposition of *The Geographical History of America* to *Tender Buttons* but rather both Steins in each, including the insurgent thrust in the "History" and the calming, nursery-room phrasing of 'Buttons'.

At the time, we were both reading *The Making of Americans* (and, come to think of it, Coleman was writing his *America,* and I, my *Leavin America,* Coach House Press, 1972). I remember we were rather grandiose in claiming that each Steinian sentence was a stanza in a grand serial poem, and we shared the notion that the word "America" as Stein used it was the first postmodern word, framing the internal immigrant in each of us. From there, it was a natural step to share the irony of national identity: it was the human mind versus human nature that intrigued us, rather than human identities at all. If identities are genres, then we were trying to be aware at the same time of the 'outside,' of what lay beyond the borders of

human nature as described by Stein.[1]

Once, bp asked me to go out into the literal 'field,' which for him at the time was somewhere in rural Ontario where he was a psychological aide to disturbed professionals of roughly our age. This was his outside, I understood, a disturbed representation of language that grounded his post-grammatical experiment. I was deadly urban then, and disparaged the unreadable text (to me) of nature, so I didn't go. Yet I was forced to acknowledge that I was a fellow genre-bender, as naturally as if we were fellow drag Queens of Canada—if we had been bent that way, which we were not.

Right here is the progression I'm after: from worshipping the literal Queen in Port Stanley in a fantasy, to becoming the Queen herself (or courtier/interpreter of hers) in a reality outside of cultural identity altogether. So where was that 'outside'? Well, we didn't quite have the words or concepts to articulate it back in 71, but now I would call it 'ecological mind.' Mostly, back then, nature was indistinguishable from the grass I smoked. Barrie, on the other hand, didn't appear to inhale, and had a more physical sense of retreat into nature, both in the country place and in the concrete bending of words in his pieces. Beyond that, he transformed the 'outside' observer of his therapeutic role (which extended into Stein's theories of personality) into a disturbing maker or breaker of genres. When I was being judgmental, I thought that soon enough he would run into the limitations of post-poetic genres, but later I heard static-tainted reports in Manhattan of further volumes of *The Martyrology* beyond the first two I had seen, and learned that I was wrong. The observing, parental bp—closer to lyric and narrative—was always there, nudging and protecting the disturbing rebel, and also writing some explanatory (what Stein called "elucidation" when she began her project) pieces.

While bp took "the end of poetry" to mean of all conventional poetic forms, I took it to mean the end of conventional poetic meaning, which allowed me room to continue using conventional poetics. No matter. Each of us were trying to create the space for poetry—before poetry itself could exist again. And until it would be clear (and only now is it becoming so) that beyond the end of art, art becomes artifact. That is how ecological mind renders the human mind: an artifact of the ecosystem, created by the evolutionary processes (or 'higher art') of natural and sexual selection.

In this perspective, post-syntactical and visual works by Darren Wershler-Henry, as in his recent *Nicholodeon* from the online Coach

House, though 'outside' conventional poetics, so that questions of origin and destination might become moot, are still human-centered. However close they get to the margin of human insignificance—and they approach it in gorgeous fashion—they are still framed by their highly articulate authorship: Wershler-Henry as parental figure, full of an affectionate though honed self-consciousness that I especially enjoyed reading in his autobiographical account of the publication of *Nicholodeon.* That is to say, Wershler-Henry's work seems to be significantly working itself through but does not yet indicate to me the way out that bp's did. Plumbings of cultural origins in the creation of hieroglyphics can be funny and brilliant, but isn't it a little late in the century to remain ecosystem-unconscious? Especially when there are several young ecologists engaged in cultural critique in Canada, such as the somewhat stodgy Neil Evernden at York?[2]

Actually, I don't know how far bp got, losing touch with him after 1972, but he was pointing in a strong direction even then, which was 'outside.' If he were alive today, I'm pretty sure he would have discovered ecological mind in the past decade. The reason I'm sure coincides with my recent discovery of another Canadian writer/musician, Phillip Schreibman, whose two 1997 works, the CD *The Slow Peepers* and the book *My Cat Saved My Life* (from Dog's Records and Dog's Bark Publishing in Toronto, respectively) are stunning in their unwavering immediacy.[3]

The Slow Peepers, a real-time recording made in rural Ontario of the Spring Peeper singing frog, includes a short, sweet text describing the evolutionary history of this potentially endangered amphibian and its ecosystem. This work is so avant that there are no avant garde pretensions to it whatever. On the back is a graph of the six different stages of frequency duration that the frog's song is replayed in, and this admirable representation looks amazingly like some of the glyphic structures I saw in bp's journals, which I think included some of bp's first scorings for the Four Horsemen performances.

My Cat Saved My Life is another story. Bookstores, if they carry it, may file it as a spiritual memoir, since it records the growth of an interior life. But the inner transformation of Phillip Schreibman is matched by—and married to—the outer world of what we now call Earth's biosphere. Consider Schreibman (who is just a bit younger than bp would have been) this way: If bp used language as a memory tool—a kind of can opener to a space outside us that re-orders the senses (after they have been disor-

dered) into their original Homo sapiens configuration—then Schreibman jumps the species gap altogether. What radical form does he take? Lullaby, I'd call it. Primary Reader language. The reader/listener/audience is no longer simply the center of attention, since the book/lullaby is really directed to Alice the cat. But cats don't read books, you may interject. Ah, but on the other hand this book teaches us the stronger significance of putting the book down and following Alice into the field. There—in a Toronto backyard or on a Washago, Ontario riverbank—Alice teaches how to begin to read the ecosystem, a reading in which no single species is at the center (though plants may be even closer to it than animals, and that includes John Cage's dozens of personally discovered species of mushroom fungi). Just as a particular ecosystem in rather recent prehistorical time (a mere 200,000 years ago or less) created (allowed for the creation of) Homo sapiens, our Homo sapiens brain-system reflects it in pale miniature.

"Allowed for the creation of"—that is the space that bp's work was striving for, and that each of us found in Gertrude Stein. Back in 1971, in the same way that the story of Phillip and Alice the cat offers a critique of human nature by opposing it to the human mind, bp and I seemed to realize that our work was basically critique--except that we did not have a vocabulary then to articulate it. Why not? Two reasons I can think of: 1) academic authority, which was nonexistent in Steins 1930s and meaningless to us, had begun to co-opt litcrit; 2) we still thought of ourselves as artists more than writers. Yet our resistance to genre was critical; it's as if we found it too species-specific, confined to human space (human nature). Whatever genre the work took, whatever visual or mental form, it was the process of bending that form that allowed for the creation of a larger concept of space. And it was a natural process, one that would take only a matter of years or decades to find its illustrative correspondence in the evolutionary history of an 'Ontario' ecosystem (as if political borders could be anything but ironic).

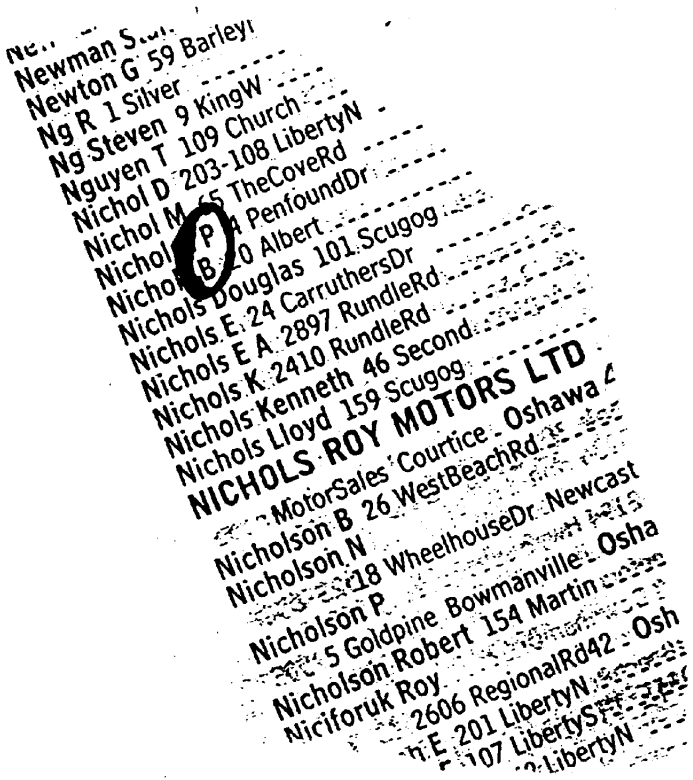
Ironically sign-conscious though we may be, we are also babies, pre-linguistic (I recall Nelson Ball's Coach House book title in the early 70s, *The Pre-Linguistic Heights*) in the new field of ecological mind. Whatever we 'make' (including our own feces, as Freud astutely pointed out) is probably less significant than the ultimate origin and destination: the creative ecosystem which made us. How elucidate it? To recognize, first, how it allowed for the creation of (by opening a niche) a space in which we could find room to evolve.

Notes

1. In *The Geographical History of America* (1936) Stein characterized 'human nature' as uninteresting, since it was known to everyone. But the 'human mind' she declared wild and unknown—the equivalent of an ecosystem (a word not yet coined) in which thoughts and words (or signs) were related in still undiscovered ways.
2. Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature,* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.
3. Dog's Bark Publishing and Dog's Records, 418 Ossington Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M6J 3A7.

bpNichol is alive and well and living in Bowmanville, ON

Stephen Cain



“Turn this Page”: Journaling bpNichol’s *The Martyrology* and the Returns

Roy Miki

If, in the poem, language becomes its own image, doesn’t this mean that poetic language is always second, secondary? According to the common analysis, the image comes after the object. It is the object’s continuation. We see, then we imagine. After the object comes the image. ‘After’ seems to indicate subordination. We really speak, then we speak in our imagination, or we imagine ourselves speaking. Wouldn’t poetic language be the copy, the dim shadow, the transposition—in a space where the requirements of effectiveness are attenuated—of the sole speaking language? But perhaps the common analysis is mistaken. Perhaps, before going further, one ought to ask: but what is the image?

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* 34

It is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense only a mortal can be responsible.

—Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* 41

the undated poem is
found and
forgotten

passes

—bpNichol, *The Martyrology,* Book 1 np

February 12

At the entrance to Book 5 the road as site of journey, of walking, of writing, beckons:

a road
a rod

The elision of “a,” first letter, prime letter, enacts the transition from site to measure, though “rod” also invokes an instrument of invocation, of authority, a symbol of ancient powers, and a part of (bp’s) “automobility” (Chain 3). Process as presage passage and as incorporation—taking in while moving on—had become the internet of limit and provisionality, a

goes without saying method(o log!)ical icon for the Martyr-poet who awoke late in the text’s history, in the middle of the night, and turned to Ellie to ponder: why process?

The road in a (hot) rod—is a rood? One letter at a time demarks space, or in Steve McCaffery’s words, it can be “the remotivation of the single letter as an agent of semantic distribution” (65-66). The attention, then, says stay tuned to word as interior with no exterior. No reference to co-sign this application. This eventuality of letters in alphabetic disarray—Cocteau as the gatekeeper to Book 5's “The greatest literary masterpiece is no more than an alphabet in disorder.” It is dérèglement again, or the social body forming in a reign of signs (sigh) in their production (semantics) capacity as consumptive identities (taken in from the rain by a hunger for stabilized transactions). But nesting the proliferation of—is it still semiotic?—the dispersed, “life’s a sign / beneath which signifieds slide” (Chain 3, Book 5).

*

In Book 5 the semiotheological procedure (“a road / a rod” = a dive / a divine) prompts the cursor to dial up stories of humanist recoveries. “Loo, what sholde a man in thyse days now wryte, egges or eyren” (William Caxton, cited in Book 5). Is the minotaur then being slain? Do all the roads / rods lead home? Even as the textual “rime / of coincidence” (Chain 1)—say in Chains 1 and 3—the two longest chains, interweave a pattern of connections linking writing, the poet’s “i”, the immediate spaces of living (Toronto’s ‘Annex’), familial history, the death of friends, national history, and precolonial history, the insistence of recovery itself begins to nudge out the insistence of “the precision of openness” called for in Book 4.

*

Bernstein, from “Matters of Policy” (in *Controlling Interests*):

> On a broad plain in a universe of
> anterooms, making signals in the dark, you
> fall down on your waistband &, carrying your
> own plate, a last serving, set out for
> another glimpse of a gaze. (1)

bpNichol, from “from the Chronicle of Knarn” (Book 1):

> i’m holding my hat in my hand
> standing awkwardly at the entrance to their shrine
> wishing i were near you.

> were they like us? i don’t know.
> how did they die & how did the legend grow?

The figures of the saints, the paragrammatic event of an origin that is not an origin, a beginning that is not a beginning, a lineage that is not a lineage, can be read as a linguistic stratum for a textual machine. The probable system of a poem that is itself a probable system. Or how do you invent a cosmogony and get away with it? Think of the lyric stroll down memory lane as a barf in the brain, hemorrhaging its way into vessels in space, cloud-town dispersed as a distantiation, as a loss of measure, as non-narcissus, as narcosis. To ask the question, “how did they die & how did the legend grow?” is to arrive only in language’s darkness when fun and games flip into spun and blames, i.e. why was “i” born anyway? And does it all matter in the end—less the blanks left in history where nothing occurs? “As to what auguries attended his birth nothing is said. Perhaps it was simply that nothing of importance happened” (“The Martyrology of Saint And,” Book 1).

You can see (i.e. play) the machinations at the rim of the published text in the manuscripts. There dis/cards earlier dealt are exiled to the non-historical now-historical realm of the archive, saved from dissolution by institutional capture. To recall a refrain in Lola Tostevin’s essay, “Is this where the poem begins?” (137) In the detritus of undated pieces, in the manuscript drafts, in the first edition, in the second edition published in one volume with Book 2? What to make of the fiddling to make something narrate—while the imagined future beckons, “a future music ... w g r & t” (Book 1). Or is it this that seeds the intent to invent make-shift strategies no matter how clumsy, cumbersome, off the wall? The machinery functions as mediating screen on which the unharvested bundles of desire clothe themselves in the artifice of a pseudo-Catholicism:

> t he
> hee hee
> ha ha
> ho ho
> tho i know its no laughing matter some days
> a sum of ways
> weights the measured writing of the poem (Chain 3, Book 5)

So the jokes on “i”, so the yokes on “i”, so the laugh is in slaughter, after all is said and done. St And, St Reat, St Ranglehold, St Orm. “random brain stranded in the station.” “i’m tired of fingering these old poems /

stringing them into beads” (Book 1).

February 15

Why *The M* makes for obfuscating encoding (aside, that is, from its textual opacities which may be governed by the seams of its textual expansions, dispersals, and extensions):

a) No matter the rationalizations that retain the separation of text and scriptor, *The M*’s interior spaces were bound by the exigencies of time, process, and history. The assumption is that change on its contemporary edge could reconfigure or reread—even in the shifting theoretical frames of reading—its project from its so-called origins in that inaugural act of dismembering the word at its “s t” alphabetic arbitrarianist matrix. The sudden and unexpected death of the penned body (a unicorny figure by now) inserted the st asis that rendered impossible the then historicized models of readings. The open ended project, a martyrdom of form, in form, and by form—a “life sentence” (Eli Mandel)—theoretically demonstrated its own withdrawal from humanist history, leaving those blanks, those _____, and _____, or _____, but ____, which could not be remotivated by the fictional insertion of “bpNichol, author” as the hypothetical floating signifier. Or if that’s done, as we do do do in the hold that textual presence has over the reader, the author appears in the apparitional form of absence. No way to read or to be read. Echo of “is this where the poem begins?”

b) The project’s termination in the death of the scriptor freezes the frame in the same way that the reader, in history, is framed by the text. Open-endedness would then require the abjuration, or perhaps at least a suspension, of an expectation of truth value as immanent possibility (as it would in the present tense of mortality), alongside an encounter with the problematic of re-readings that call forth questions more than answers. The notion of canonization, already an obsolescence (see the listing of the saints in Book 1 which is siphoned of referentiality even in shaking its historical cage), cannot be pre-empted without recourse to the standardization of power hierarchies in the discourse of literary hegemonies. “What’s a poem like you doing in a context like this” is a phrasing adapted that shucks that route of critical containment.

c) Do “we,” if such communality can be assumed even if provisionally, canonize by setting our critical sites on *The M*? The question, applicable in all instances of institutional incorporation, has to be asked in all phases

of inquiry and engagement, alongside “our” inevitable complicity with the production of power networks. Reader positioning participates in the production of power—all the more urgency why the interrogation of “our” own subject limits should be woven into the discourses that circle the textual body.

d) The gendered body emits a masculinist semiology of quest, discovery, territorialization (the marking of urinic space). The operation of male desire, the otherization of the muse as “w omen”, and the companionship of the male heterosexual saints set the limits of the familial geography that both temporalizes space and spatializes time. O Ca Na Da, the empty signified waiting for the signifiers to arrive on the noon coach (house?), plays into the eurocentric (nation constructing) westering of the east and the appropriation of history, legend, myth as the lost treasure in need of technologization. But where, then, does the text begin, if it does at all? And if *The M* does not begin, or no longer can begin in the removal of its prime mover, where does reading begin? And should it begin? And would it begin without a kick start?

March 5

Does *The M* enact the last ph(r)ase of the millennium—fulfilling by its 10th book, left on the shore line, the prophecy of the beginning’s orphanic voice awakened to the crisis of disbelief? In the haunting of an absence of edges the ‘personal’ is st umped by the demons of poeisis—and all the saints fabricated as guides, as originals, as intermediaries begin to appear as projectional, even that “late P” in Book 3 who falls into the mid-initial wake of the material signifier that generates a speaking? So the text can be resumed as a technology, as perhaps a typographical pneumaticism, but are “we” in the radiogrammic or in hyperspace? Are “we” casting shadow lenses back on time (*The M* as time capsule) or has inchoate road turned into an information highway? Is the reader pro-positioned or pre-positioned? The problem (is it still?) resides (yes the space of a dwelling) in the status of suffering. Who suffers? Why is there suffering? And how to represent suffering at the rim of the millennium?

two ’n one or
in one door & out the other
voices speaking
that this suffering is born in language
that that is true & that that is true
two true or

wholly to be believed but
who'll y' find to
believe it?

leave it
this pain words wear
carry within them like a spine
involves the very line its
twists & turns ("The Grace of the Moment," Book 6)

During life with *The M* in the poet's era "the texts" were in the perpetual state of becoming, more the biogeographic performance, which contained the hypothetical present of the future that could or would continually keep rearticulating the shifty and shifting past. In that fold—"friends as footnotes" (Book 2)—the living body with its voice at the gate lawned the hauntings with the false security of the chronological successive. The referent for the Martyr-poet, "bpNichol" or "barrie" or "bp" or "beep," covered up the lack that saturated the text in a paradoxical longing for a beyond. The pushing for newness harboured within its rush the signing that only accrues to death (as a noun verb)—the unravelling of babel and also the other, the conundrum that necessitates the dispersal of signifiers across the splayed reaches of textuality.

March 12

Somewhere—or at some irretrievable temporal or spatial location in the chaining of Book 5, enchained by the splitting apart of linear textual space into chains of thought, of writing, of reading—a doubling over occurs. It was a kind of double or nothing in which the wager of sin became the labour of signs. The nostalgic humanist revival of the walking body constituted itself in the labyrinthine semiotics of the "eyear." Caught in the minotaurian dawn of a post-Book 4 era, the poet proposes a mapping procedure, delineating space from the local centre outward but also resurrecting the mapping out of colonized space—in effect, drawing on linguistic spillage to decode, in 'pataphysical tones, the normalized street names of to ront o! as a primal narrative of descent and recovery (see Chains 1 and 3 especially). The dis-played tactic of the appearance of form in the midst of dispersal and scatter reflects the emergence of a theogonic practice that spells out plot lines in the avenues of process. Do the epigraphs (for Book 5) point to, as signs indicating the way ahead, or are they theoretical openings, indicating the bridges crossed as t's in the whirlwind?

Book 5 operates as a textual turnstile—who can say what comes and what goes, or whether the wind takes or overtakes *The M* poet? Is it a drive or a driven? Or is the consequence understood as both, as middle voice, as mid-initial, as cruising with the top down.

Somewhere, here, agency arise arises and already, for the first time in what has now also become the 'history' of *The M* (or *The M* as itself assuming the guise of history), the 'beyond' of the textual present announces itself. The machinery of letteral production has begun to speak the present of the future, so that the sequel (a new way of thinking about *The M*'s extensions) is in the works. There is more than can be contained etc.

Curiously, then, Book 5 signals a radical change for *The M*. To this point, the poem had continued in unexpected extensions through promptings that disrupted apparent closure:

* Book 1 at one point was to be *The M* as a singular text, but then came Book 2.

* Book 2 was to conclude *The M,* a two-volume long poem ending with the death of the father's law. The text was even misplaced twice and given up as lost, but like the proverbial cat it always kept coming back. So eventually Book 3 came into being, only again to apparently conclude just prior to the "Mid-Initial Coda" with the mirrored concrete vision of "me" and "we" and the lines:

the emblems were there when i began
seven years to understand
the first letter/level of
martyrdom

* But turn the page in the published text and there is what has been read as the pivotal moment of *The M*: the fall into the letteral that dethrones the father and deconstructs the capitalizing stance of *The M* poet who signs himself into the text, simultaneously dying into language and being reborn as bp—no longer the imperial / empirical Nichol but a textual entity. One life for another, for an other, one life:

the late P
destroyed
leaving only b
& n

beginning again

b n a

all history there

t here

opposed against the suffering
we have yet to bear

* Though placed immediately after the ‘final’ section of Book 3, the “Mid-Initial Sequence” was written in the spring of 1973, some two years after Book 3, when it was named “Coda” and attached as the closing section.

* The breakthrough into the letteral, or the paragrammatic potential of writing, ushered in new directions for *The M,* but it took another two years before Book 4 was initiated with the line, “purpose is a porpoise.”

bp converses with Pauline Butling in an unpublished interview:

... when Book 6 began, it began with “Imperfection: A Prophesy” before I had even finished Book 5. Up until then, *The Martyrology* had, as it were, always announced itself very discretely: I finished one book, and the next book began. Here I was, still writing Book 5, and damned if I’m not writing Book 6, so I decided to stick with it. The more I wrote on “Imperfection: A Prophesy,” the more it was obviously—I was writing *The Martyrology,* but it didn’t make sense to me for this piece to go in *The Martyrology* Book 5 that had chains in it. But, in fact, what happened in really quite a logical outgrowth was that the chains were all going off in different directions, so that certain thrusts that were finished with in Book 5 were not finished with in terms of topic matter. Hence, I had dealt with a lot of that Bran/Brendan/ Brun stuff, and I was fascinated by suddenly finding new information, which spawned “Imperfection: A Prophesy.” But it didn’t fit in back over there in the way that it was wanting to be written, so I began that, and then once the chains were finished, I sort of began—no I also began “A Book of Hours” even before Book 5 was finished.

pb: That’s “Book I” and “Book II” [of Book 6 Books]?

bp: Yeah, I began it. Now of course “A Book of Hours” was the last one I finished. It took me the longest time. The very final piece I wrote was “in place of Hour 28.” So that became kind of a pattern for how they were working. I mean, if I were to publish it [Book 6] totally accurately, I would probably publish a chronological thing, and I would have to weave the other sections in between various sections—but it would be so broken up it would make no sense.

So accomplishment of Book 4 and the formal innovation of textual chains in Book 5 announced a new sense of agency—of a choreographic “making sense” in which *The M* poet, now letterally inscribed in what had

become an on-going narrative, “a life long” work (see “Hour 2" of “The Book of Hours”), began to steer the course of the textual expansion. The gain was already there in Book 4:

sense out of nonsense
N on sense
(which is me)
i spell out changes
realign essentials
as i thot to
sing a balance sing

But when the struggle is done, is *The M* as the project of a confusion already being done? Would the shuffle text concept that was abandoned in favour of the fat manuscript left in a folder, arranged for publication and called “gifts,” be anything more than a capitulation to endless variations of the same? And is “gifts,” the first book not to be named a “book,” a narrative closure—all the loose ends, the exiled texts, the “lost” ones brought into the fold of the page, gifting the reader with the book of bookness, or booked &? Do “we” have an incomplete completion of which the “bard” project envisioned for Book 10 can be read as a barge project?

March 20

Read “Lazarus Dream” from Book 7 and wonder if the performance of text can allow for the resurrection of the already dead body. “Car Rue sew.” Or “rue de rue de rue / d’awakening." Do rue the day i was dyed in song. If the voice issues in the “‘ no is’ / ’e says” who remembers the awl (all owls) in the brain? The sound waves. The light wavers. Who is a pear there.

March 26

The transparency of the haunting instills the burden of memory—those surfacings in the linguistic trace of the dead sister, “Donna,” the dna connective. Here a link there a link between her premature death and the “lung wage” that propels the subliminal (and protestant) guiltiness of narrative struggle. Why “Donna” dead dead dead, and not the mid-initial P? Is that a sign in the landscape or a mark on the page? Does the P age in the text? “The word erases itself. No it doesn’t. Well yes it does but only if i read it that way. And that’s not real. except, of course, that it is real. i can literally point to it—no tation. So i’m pointing to something which is erasing itself even as i point to it” (“The ”Pata of Letter Feet” 80). L or D,

life or death? No tation for me, thanks. i think i’ll pass. (On the railway tracks the detritus of a colonialist legacy gardens discourse. Rose bushes, a line of petunias. Some scattered marigolds. The sun of temptation rises in the mountain air. Surveyor surveying services the memory.)

Why the desire to re-member? Why “conscious always of that one beginning we do not remember / taunted by the things we’ll never know”? Read the text on my back. The roads, streets, lanes, boulevards et al. Find your way home in the maze. E mail your identity when you find the time. Find the time. Is this where the poem begins?

The letteral mark on the whiteness of the page inscribes the black (th) inkiness in the birth of the pro-testant cosmology: T, the cross, the black diamond, the static letters awakening in the reeds (the ear reads). In “Scraptures: 1st Sequence” (Book 7) the words “in the beginning there was the word” is a translation of the letteral O as beginning which then accrues as gOd, as ynlO, depending on the directional read (a word “spoken” into “speech”). The patriarchic logos F alls it on his F ace. “dogma i am god” (Book 3).

Which is to say, only, that *The M* constructs itself on the tail-end of the low ghost, its elaborate technique (like the enormous computers of the 60s) a kind of memoried technocracy to produce scripted speech: “eech to each” (Book 2). Hear this, hare that, heir this, err that, so it is, in the wind tunnel of the “eyear,” that “we” have a heart to heart. Hence a community?

Ear to the ground, i remember Eli Mandel’s fond use of Groucho Marx’s statement, i would never want to join a group that would accept me as a member. The fly in the oinkment, O Donna, the sound of valence in a nation that is a notion, a potion for “you” and a potion for “me.”

*

Ok, i’m ok now, believe me, i’m o k. Think of repositionings, contexts of the “elsewhere” (Book 7) within and/or against which *The M* assumes either the posture of resolution or the resolution of the posture. “It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond. At the century’s edge, we are less exercised by annihilation—the death of the author—or epiphany—the birth of the ‘subject’ ... The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past ... Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For

there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’... (Bhabha 1). Was *The M* born too early? Is the absence of the “post” in nation formation, in colonialist stratagems, in gender constructs a foreclosure? Or can the text now be re-read in the ‘beyond’ that haunts its passage from its multiple beginnings to the manuscript of the opening of Book 10?

> Word structure reveals,
> exposes, even as the speaker conceals,
> even as the writer masks his or her intent,
> still that unerasable trace of content
> betrays them. Intentionality, meaning’s dark lament,
> keens forth.

The M’s reading—its sign of the times—has been narrated in the bounds of Canlit history, that linear progression from colony to nation to the postmodern, the long poem as a paradigm of cultural autonomy (read here ethnocentic state sanctioned historiography with “Canada” as hero). Its own restlessness, even as the signatory of the biological bpNichol, has been sacrificed to a critical projectile of a synthetic grid, even in the influential essay by Robert Kroetsch (“For Play and Entrance”). There its “massive evasions” (123) are placed alongside Atwood’s nationalist poem of exclusions, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie,* where the figure of Moodie is appropriated and inhabited for the sake of history conceived through anglo-colonial eyes. Foot notes as friends manufactured sense, talking their way through the biogeograph of bpNichol, the moving signifier, who functioned as the absence of presence in a text that continually confused the boundaries of the living and the dead. The boundary, though, is an end that begins:

> mina d l abour
> arbor or (within
> —not a notion of—
> but &) so
> c

So the lines from “St. Anzas I” (Book 7) write themselves into the spaces of splayed discourses:

> caffin so seeing
> did & nothing
> not even thant
> repeat so repeat

sounds open did
ot
nor

Is this where the poem ends?

*

In the gift of context where does the sign reside? From “Scraptures: 8th Sequence” (circa 1969) to the inclusiveness of Book 7, a book not of books but of sites, the end announces itself in the language of the already written. Can there be any where else to go in this space of the named, *The Martyrology*?

so now i can tell you the breath is dead that brought forth the song (poem) long time gone old dear old poem yur a long time gone and i cannot do more now anything to bring you (him) (it) back no nothing no thing at all to bring the poem (song) back tho i cry for it to say a part of me has a hunger that will not be eased (again & again) by speech (an old form) no for the form is dead that brought it forth

ACTUAL FACTUAL THE DEATH REPORTED TODAY TO ANYONE WHOLE WHO’LL LISTEN TO ME

as a friend would say it is over beginnings and endings say nothing not even middles used to i have confused you my people my people who are you listen to me who are you i do not know who i am today

maybe i will know now that the poem is dead

Book 7 ends, “erase even this,” following by a trail of “tabula rasa.” Is this, then, the final gesture of the Martyr-poet, about to dump (as in computer lingo) the whole of *The M* into the void of erasure? Well, nearly, but for the concrete tabula rasa.

Perhaps the death of form was already impishly keening forth in the trace of an “other” voice appearing (and disappearing in a wink) as a sound effect in the otherwise constricted textual procedure of the opening section of Book 1, “The Martyrology of St And”:

i've looked out your eyes years now saint and

how
i tell you
no

    things
cannot
    measure thee

motion

Who is speaking the “and how,” the “how” (the racialized and deformed salutary speech of the indian in white movies), the “nothings” that undermine the ponderous seriousness of the struggle for thought to begin? Is this where the poem beguns?

March 27

Each page of *The M,* as a reading, contains numerous localized constellations of letters, syllables, lines, and themes that compel a sense of streaking or spillage—generating a textual productivity uncontainable by interpretation. To interpret seeks to reduce the incommensurate to the cache of knowledge. Affects in effects. Actual in factual. How, then, can *The M* be traversed as a text, i.e. can it ever be singular, i.e. be approached as itself the name of an identity. Stephen Scobie writes: “The most acute problem faced by the long poem is that of structure: of maintaining some kind of coherence whereby the reader may continue to hold the whole expanse of the work in her mind as a single poem” (108). *The M* can be entered, roamed in as spatiality, read in time, but never grasped as a “single poem.” The whole expanse, which would include every nook and cranny of the text, evades exegetical satiation. To say the least that can be read: “i / cannot stop / singing tho the sheer quantity / balk...” (“St. Anza IV,” Book 7).

April 1

The structures of textualized memory, despite our best intentions in gestures toward openness, retain a stubborn hold on the ear. What one hears, more so in the kind of tensile provisional reading necessitated by *The M* as an on-going weighty “continuing” writing project, accumulates a linear critical narrativity that is difficult to shake off. In other words, the programs—i use the plural to emphasize the relativity of “readings” of *The M* prior to the death of bpNichol in September 1988 evolved in the occultation that constituted its so-called “origins.” In the emerging poststructuralist milieu in which ‘master works,’ i.e. works that supposedly represented a mainstream collectivity and/or culture, had lost credibility (and were beginning to be reframed within the ideological closures of nationalism, patriarchy, and bourgeois commodification) the fact of *The M* was simultaneously parodic, outrageous, cartoonish, and yet intensely desired. While the nationalist forces built transcendent garrisons

called 'Can culture,' the contrary impulse toward localization, immediacy, and particularity sought justification for collectivities that accounted for process and change. *The M* proposed an exploration, a journalying in which the finite "i" is parachuted into the machinations of a textual disjunction—hence a pseudo-cosmogony constructed out two conjoined letters, the 's' and 't,' which seeded the project isle.

The margins, then, were constituted in relation to nation-bounded works that required the humanist lyric "i" in poems or the aestheticization of 'Canadian' content in novels. The obfuscations of narrative, form, language, and lyric stance, particularly in the first two books of *The M* with the prominence given to "saints" constructed out of alphabetic rumination, located a rift that called for alternative strategies of reading. These were strategies in which the hierarchic binary of "author" over "reader" was dismantled and replaced by a process text that apparently democratized the relation between "author," now called "writer," and the "work," now called "text." The so-called "death of the author" in semiotic circles of the 1970s was understood loosely as a political position that advanced a materialist poetics (evident in feminist writing, theories of textuality, and emerging critiques of colonialist nationalism).

The M, especially Books 1 to 5, reflected its times but was also, in many ways, occulted because of the sheer labour required to de/encode its expansion into books that made little sense in institutionalized readings of Canlit. Readers, at least the most vocals ones, were themselves writer-friends who formed the initial collective circle around *The M* and whose readings articulated the initial reading codes, more often than not bolstered by their personal ties with the living writer, bpNichol. The privilege of insider connections was a significant component of most of the influential commentary on *The M*; see, for instance, the two large collections by two journals associated with bp, *Read the Way He Writes* (1987) from *Open Letter* and *Tracing the Paths* (1988) from *Line,* which by and large set the critical boundaries drawn at the time of bp's death.

The death of the author of *The M,* for *The M,* by *The M* sets up theoretical conundrums that complicate assumptions of life and death vis-à-vis literary works. We can absorb the notion of a work left incomplete because of an author's death, but it's not so easy to realign our relationship to a "life-long" text written on the premise of literal (though perhaps also figural) open endedness—and then to have the writer die so suddenly, so unexpectedly, and so young. It simply doesn't make sense, or it does make sense in not making sense. In life the name "bpNichol,"

the biological writer of *The M,* was so interwoven with the name "bp" or "N" or "Nicky" inscribed in *The M,* that death itself (the "disrupter" in "The Grammar Trilogy" of "A Book of Hours") now has to be read as f(act)iction. The letters "bp" become the equivalent of "st", as the authorial death undoes the knot of (prescribed) intentionality and gives the power to legitimize over to readers who, from this moment on, either abandon the project or continue the processes it has inaugurated—including response-abilities that account for, and even attempt to read through, the blind spots. The death of the Martyr-poet, in short, signals a constitutive baseline for *The M*. No continuing long poem, or life long poem, could function without that provision for mortality's rub.

April 3

Change—of clusters of readers, of theoretical assumptions—is inevitable, is a threat to comprehension, yet the only means by which an open-ended text can continue its formal existence. In the death of the signified, i.e. its location in the person of the living poet, significance appears as a critical act contingent on the politics of textuality and the stance of readers, circa late 1990s.

In the current critiques of ethnocentric patriarchy, canonization, colonialism and nation-formation, race, class and gender constructs, how does *The M,* as it were, 'measure' up to readers for whom this long poem is only one of many texts? How can *The M* be articulated in the contexts of reception and institutionalization once these have also been exposed as sites of power? As a cultural document, that is, as a 'post-60s' long poem, *The M* reflects in assumptions its share of normative values—and these should, indeed must, be critiqued for blindnesses. But how are we to construct the politics of blame in its case? To what extent can the Martyr-poet, or the textual "bpNichol," be held accountable for its theoretical shortcomings? To draw on Derrida's comments on the implications of Nietzsche's textualized name in *Ecco Homo*:

> To put one's name on the line (with everything a name involves and which cannot be summed up in a self), to stage signatures, to make an immense bio-graphical paraph out of all that one has written on life or death—this is perhaps what he has done and what we have to put on active record. Not so as to guarantee him a return, a profit. In the first place, he is dead—a trivial piece of evidence, but incredible enough when you get right down to it and when the name's genius or genie is still there to make us forget the fact of his death. At the very least, to be dead means that no profit or deficit, no good or evil, whether calculated or not, can ever return again to the bearer of the name. Only the name

can inherit, and this is why the name, to be distinguished from the bearer, is always and a priori a dead man's name, a name of death. (*The Ear of the Other* 7)

To embark on the long poem, a poem as long as a life, is already to have admitted the name of death (the "late P") into its textual spheres. The "elsewhere" (see the Hawkings drawing in Book 7) resides in here and not in here, out there and not out there—or in the borderblur lines of the poem. "i have this wish to write the world i can never realize" ("Hour 17," Book 6)

*

Close up, line by line, page by page, book by book, *The M* appears "monumental," a monument perhaps analogous to the "earthworks" in "Hour 17" (Book 6) from which "all reference [eventually] vanishes." In the current move towards consumer-lit in contemporary social appropriations of texts, and the backlash against linguistic opacities, the odds are against the continued material existence of *The M*. Blame, in this instance, returns not to the writer who is dead and/or death but to the reader whose own agency will realize textual horizons and determine the so-called 'fate' of future alignments. The contexts of reception are political locations of opposition, contestation, and negotiation. By signing off in the loose sheets, the initials "bp: if" (Book 7) standing in for "body paranoia: initial fugue," the biological writer of *The M* returned the texts to the orphanic moment of Book 1: his now deceased body re-placed in the body of the word/world.

The poems are to be "interleaved into the final bound copy of *Martyr 7 &*.—bp Nichol"

The intention of the writer, left in a notebook, partially transcribed and editorialized by Irene Niechoda for the posthumous publication of *Gifts,* is not honoured by the publisher. Instead the loose sheets have been inserted in a pocket on the inside back cover—a double sign of the author's death and the birth of the power of others: of readers who can now appropriate or otherwise translate *The M* into still unrealized geographies of social and cultural formations.

Note: "Turn this Page" was written during a graduate course on bpNichol's *The Martyrology,* Spring Semester 1995, at Simon Fraser University. Thanks to my students—Kate Foster, Karlyn Koh, Glen Lowry, Mark Nakada, Carl Peters, Graham Sharpe, Chris Swail—for the stimulating discussions which are reflected in this re-consideration of *The M.*

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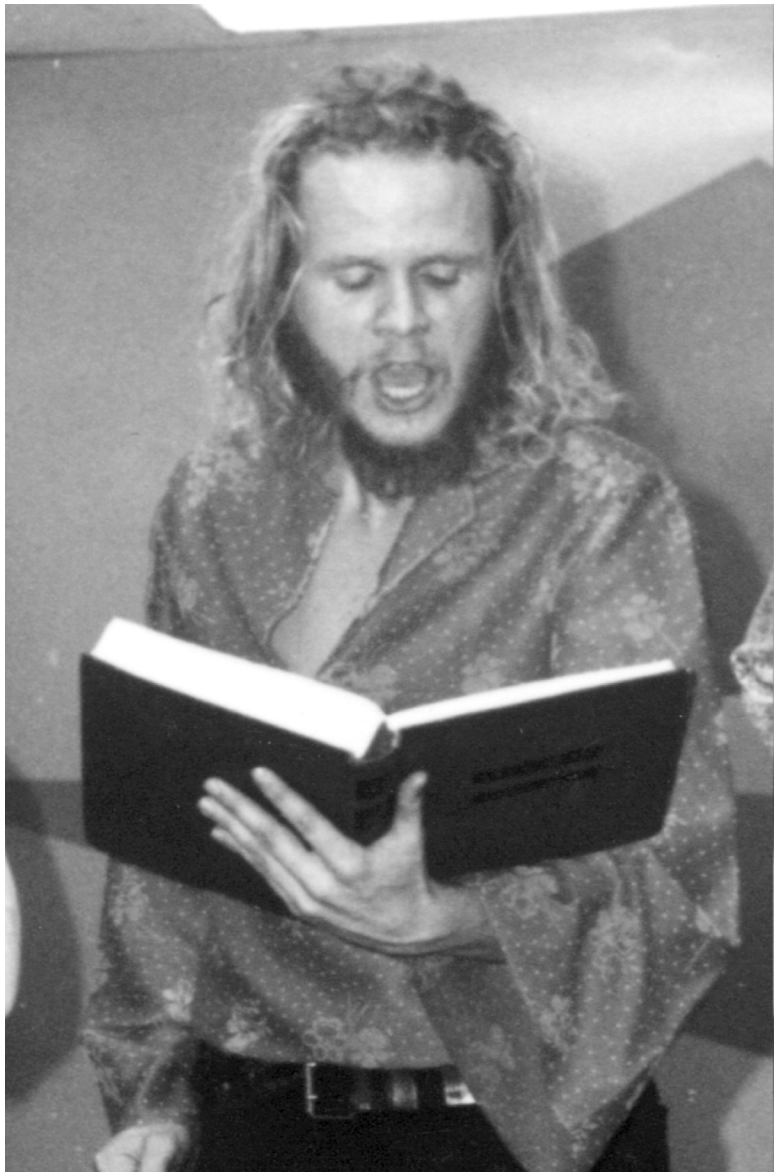

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ROBERT HOGG lives and writes in Ottawa. His poem in this issue appeared in his ECW Press collection *There Is No Falling*. "This poem was written as an introduction to bp's reading at Carleton a number of years back—I was hesitant as to what I could say ABOUT him and his work, then decided to try to write a kind of testimony to his effect on me and on language. It wasn't too long afterwards that he died, and some, reading the poem, have seen it as an elegy, but in fact it was written for him and for the audience who was going to hear him read here. It contains, too, my own take on the function of poetry, and a tad of romanticism not all that out of place apropos barrie's life and work."

PETER JAEGER lives in Buffalo and Toronto, where he organizes a series of readings and performances at the RED HEAD gallery. His *stretch conflates* was recently published by Tailspin Press.

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