THE NEW CANADIAN CRITICISM SERIES

bpNichol: What History Teaches

STEPHEN SCOBIE

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by Stephen Scobie

Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches.
GERTRUDE STEIN

Talonbooks • Vancouver • 1984

Published with assistance from the Canada Council

Talonbooks
278 East 1st Avenue
Vancouver
British Columbia V5T 1A6
Canada

talonbooks.com

Print edition designed and typeset at The Coach House Press, Toronto

Printed in Canada by Hignell Printing Limited
First printing: 1984

Ebook by Talonbooks
2014

CATALOGUING DATA AVAILABLE FROM LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA

ISBN 978–0-88922–879–5

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CHAPTER ONE

Exits and Entrances

We are words and our meanings change
BP NICHOL

bpNichol's work stands at a profound crossroads of modern culture, part of the nature of which may be suggested by the epigraph to this chapter. To say that "we are words" is to insist on a deeply humanist identification between ourselves and the language which is our medium; but to say that "our meanings change" is immediately to throw into doubt any certainty or assurance which we might have felt. On the one hand, Nichol is the inheritor of the modernism of the early years of the century, which found its fullest expression in cubist painting, and which offers the possibility of the "new humanism" Nichol celebrated in his 1966 manifesto.[1] On the other hand, precisely because that modernism and humanism focussed on the medium of language itself, they have become subject to the "deconstructionist" criticism of recent postmodernism and poststructuralism. So Nichol's work is increasingly open to a reading (and a writing) which put into question the values it began by affirming.

It is the purpose of this opening chapter to try to situate Nichol within the play of these opposing yet intimately connected forces. The connection lies, as I have already suggested, in the common concern for language, whether it is regarded as a stable entity – a tool, a raw material – or as a completely unstable one – an endlessly shifting play of difference. A major reference point for this discussion will be another writer who occupies a similarly ambivalent position, Gertrude Stein.

bpNichol's interest in and admiration for Stein are so pervasive, and so well-known, that they need little documentation: a few examples will suffice. His major work, *The Martyrology*, opens with a quotation from "St. Ein."[2] Early in his career, he "started writing a book on Gertrude Stein's theories of personality as revealed in her

early opus *The Making of Americans"*; more recently, he has published a detailed study of the opening pages of her novel *Ida*.[3] One of his early, semi-concrete poems is entitled "Stein Song":

rows
red rows
red rose rows
roads of red rose rows
rode down rows of red rose roads[4]

The allusion in this poem is of course to Stein's famous dictum that "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," of which she herself said that "I made poetry and what did I do I caressed completely caressed and addressed a noun."[5] For Stein, then, the "noun" became a physical *object*, which could be "caressed," though that caressing could only take place *in* language, with another word. Stein's sentence is an exemplary point in the history of modern writing: it shows how language becomes self-reflexive, how the movement of words is directed back at the nature of language itself as much as it is directed outwards, in a conventionally referential way, towards the objects and ideas of a supposedly external world. "A rose is a rose" is mere tautology, but it has to do with real roses; "a rose is a rose is a rose" has to do with language *about* roses, and the gaps it opens up between word and object are profound and disconcerting. Such gaps were always present within modernism, though they were usually tempered by a humanist confidence in the artist's *control* over her material; eventually, however, theorists like Jacques Derrida were to elevate such gaps into a whole theory of language as "différance," which would threaten to undermine the assumptions of modernism.

The self-reflexive movement is characteristic of all modern art; it constitutes a fundamental putting-into-question of the nature of artistic expression. The medium is the message, not simply in the sense that form determines content, but in the sense that the message is a questioning of the medium. In 1917, the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky outlined the notion of "foregrounding" the means of expression in our experience of a work of art. "As perception becomes habitual," he wrote, "it becomes automatic": we cease to notice the words we are using, they fade into the background, they become entirely transparent to the concepts behind them. Such habitualisation "devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war.... Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it

exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*." A stone is a stone is a precious stone. "The technique of art," Shklovsky argues further, "is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." In this way the means of expression are "foregrounded," forced to the centre of our attention. Words are no longer transparent to concepts; the language of poetry becomes "a difficult, roughened, impeded language."[6] It should be clear that many of the tactics employed by Stein and Nichol constitute just such "foregrounding."

It was in painting that modern art's examination of its own means of existence most clearly began, and that the artistic "language" first became "impeded." Twenty years before Shklovsky, the French painter and critic Maurice Denis had declared: "We must remember that a painting, before it is a warhorse or a nude or any kind of anecdote, is a flat surface covered by colours arranged in a certain order."[7] This statement was later adopted as a slogan for abstract art, but, strictly speaking, it refers not to total abstraction but to a balance between representation and self-reflexiveness. The painting is not yet *only* surface and colours: these things may come *before* the nude or the anecdote, but they do not displace them. The paintings of Cézanne, and of cubism in its purest form, are never abstract; indeed, the theory of cubism, as enunciated in its most dogmatic form by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, is violently hostile to abstraction.

This is important to our discussion, because cubism offers the closest analogy in painting to the work of Gertrude Stein.[8] Historically, cubism became – despite its own theory – a stepping-stone on the path towards abstraction. The great cubist painters – Braque, Gris, Picasso – never painted any non-representational canvases; but other artists, like Delauny and Kupka, or Malevich and Mondrian, passed through cubism to the purified realms of, respectively, colour and form. Similarly, Stein's writing remains, obstinately, within the representational field of language. Given the inherent referentiality of words, the drive towards abstraction was much more difficult in language than it was in painting: this difficulty lies at the root of sound poetry in the Dada experiments of Hugo Ball.[9] In Cézanne, Stein saw clearly the paradox of a work that was at one and the same time completely representational and completely autonomous. Cézanne's apples were like Stein's roses or like Shklovsky's stones: "they were so entirely [apples]," she wrote, "that they were not an oil

painting and yet that is just what the Cézannes were they were an oil painting.... This then was a great relief to me and I began my writing."[10]

Stein's writing – opaque, dense, obscure, forbiddingly private – is in one sense the true starting-point of modern writing; yet it is also, paradoxically, a starting-point which led nowhere (and is now here). It was the less radical but more accessible explorations of Ezra Pound and James Joyce (whom Picasso, according to Stein, called one of "the incomprehensibles whom anybody can understand")[11] which opened up the mainstream of modernist writing. Only in the post-modernist period, when the impulses generated by Pound and Joyce seem to have run their course, have writers like bpNichol returned to the seminal decade of modernism, to the literary equivalent of what Apollinaire called "the heroic age" of cubism. And waiting for them there was Gertrude Stein.

It was not a question of imitating Stein, for copying the superficial mannerisms of her various idiosyncratic styles leads only to parody, but rather of absorbing the fundamentals of her attitude towards language, and of finding ways to apply them in the contemporary situation. This is precisely what Stein herself did with Picasso: *Tender Buttons* is not an imitation of cubism, but a re-thinking of writing in cubist terms. The avant-garde tradition is important, not for any specific lessons it can teach (or for knowing who did what "first"), but for the more pervasive and indeterminate lesson of its very existence as a tradition. As Stein herself put it, in the closing line of her "Completed Portrait of Picasso," "Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches."[12] Fifty years later, bpNichol used this line as the epigraph to *The Martyrology*.

Stein's writing has often been described as "experimental," and so of course has Nichol's – although too often it is an undefined word which seems to exempt the critic from the responsibility of saying anything more precise. There is a sense in which *all* writing is experimental and exploratory, seeking out solutions to the problems posed by a particular subject in a particular time and place. Some experimental works, like Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,* may be more important, in the first instance, for the reactions they provoke than for what they actually achieve; only with the passage of time do they settle into their status as classics in the manner outlined by Gertrude Stein in "Composition as Explanation."[13]

"Experimental" is a good word to the extent that it suggests writ-

ing that finds its energy in the exploration of its own limitations, and is thus not yet worried about the high gloss finish of a more assured completeness. But "experimental" should not be taken to imply that the works are merely laboratory reports, not yet ready to be considered as aesthetic creations in their own right.

An interesting recent use of the term "experimental" in relation to Stein, and one which would also be relevant to Nichol, is that of Marianne DeKoven in her book *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*. DeKoven uses "experimental" to "emphasize the fact that [Stein's writing] violates and reshapes not just the conventions of literature, as modern, postmodern, and avant-garde works have done, but, in addition, the conventions of language itself."[14] DeKoven, discussing Stein's work within the context of the ideas of Roland Barthes, Derrida, and Julia Kristeva,[15] claims that, "The modes Stein disrupts are linear, orderly, closed, hierarchical, sensible, coherent, referential, and heavily focused on the signified. The modes she substitutes are incoherent, open-ended, anarchic, irreducibly multiple, often focused on what Barthes calls the 'magic of the signifier.'" She therefore proposes to use the word "experimental" for "that writing which violates grammatical convention, thereby preventing normal reading"; she admits that "This definition is intentionally narrower than the common usage of 'experimental.'"[16] I find the limitation a useful one, with regard to Nichol as much as to Stein, but it is not yet, obviously, a generally available critical distinction.

Nichol himself has said that "I tend to avoid the word 'experimental,' because it's become a rather loaded term. I use the term 'research,' which is a more neutral term still, for at least another five or ten years."[17] Such terms as "research" and "apprenticeship" (which is Nichol's most frequently repeated description of his own work) imply an attitude of humility towards the medium being explored. However skilled she may be in the use of language, the experimental writer never sees herself as controlling it, always as serving it. This humility, however, may be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, serving the medium means learning to use its forms, mastering the technical details of a craft. "I've always seen myself as serving a very long apprenticeship," Nichol explains, "which has involved formal experimentation, precisely because I believe that ... in order to express a full range of contents, emotionally and intellectually speaking, you have to have the ability to be open to go into

whatever form the content or the emotion is pushing you towards."[18] To this end, Nichol revises incessantly: his manuscripts show repeated drafts, cancellations, insertions, reworkings, abandoned projects, and careful self-criticism. But revision, he has also said, "is another state of mind from writing."[19] The second way to view the humility of research is to realise, more radically, that the medium can never wholly be mastered, even by the most patient revision. In this sense, the weakness of the "apprenticeship" metaphor is that it does suggest the eventual possibility of becoming a master. But language, especially as considered in poststructuralist terms, cannot ever be mastered: the signified always slides out from under the signifier into a protean flux in which writing becomes an open-ended game of disseminated meanings, not an exercise in assured control. "Writing," according to Roland Barthes, "is always dense, violent, indifferent to the infantile ego which solicits it."[20] Nichol expresses a similar sense of writing, or poetry, as something "you are drawn into & cannot encompass" in "late night summer poem":

the poem begins & ends nowhere
being part of the flow you live with
starts when you're born
stepping in & out of
such moments you are aware
emerge as pages put in a book & titled
living always on the edges of
you are drawn into & cannot encompass
the flow of which is poetry[21]

So not just Nichol's kind of writing, but *all* writing, is an experiment which can never be concluded.

Humility was never the strong point of Gertrude Stein's character in her personal life, but in her writing it is overwhelmingly evident, in her long, patient, and largely unheeded devotion to the necessary directions of her stubborn imagination. Although her concern for "impeded" language often leads into obscurity and a seemingly wilful blocking of the normal channels of linguistic communication, it is nevertheless a fundamentally *humanistic* concern. This is an essential element which persists through the work of Stein, cubism, and bpNichol, even though its linguistic base is eroded by later developments in the theory of language.

The Scottish poet Ian Hamilton Finlay, in one of the most crucial

and moving accounts of what came to be described as "concrete poetry," said of this work that it was "a model of order, even if set in a space which is full of doubt."[22] Again the analogy with cubism may be helpful in understanding the relevance of this idea to the writing of Nichol and Stein. The analysis or breaking down of the forms of perception and representation in cubist painting was in part a response to a new sense of "a space which is full of doubt." Robert Rosenblum, in his book *Cubism and Twentieth Century Art*, writes that "For a century that questioned the very concept of absolute truth or value, cubism created an artistic language of intentional ambiguity.... In expressing this awareness of the paradoxical nature of reality and the need for describing it in multiple or even contradictory ways, cubism offered a visual equivalent of a fundamental aspect of twentieth-century experience."[23] The awareness here of ambiguity and contradiction points forward to the later "deconstructions" not only of visual codes but of all language; increasingly, the twentieth-century artist has been forced to acknowledge the doubtfulness of his space. But cubism was also, and simultaneously, an assertion of the optimism of its age, of what Roger Shattuck calls "The Banquet Years," or what John Berger calls "The Moment of Cubism."

Berger defines this "Moment of Cubism" in terms of the positive humanism of that brief moment of confidence, before the shattering disillusion of the First World War, when it was truly possible to believe with the poet André Salmon that "All is possible, everything is realizable everywhere and with everything."[24] Gertrude Stein partook of that cubist "moment" (even if her understanding of the painting itself was distorted by her infatuation with Picasso at the expense of Braque), and her work will never be appreciated as long as it is seen as sterile intellectual theorising. Like cubism, hers was a humanistic art; and so is Nichol's.

The "cubist moment" did not survive, but the art did. Pierre Reverdy, in his book *Georges Braque: Une Aventure Méthodique* (1950), offers an exemplary anecdote:

> Then, at the moment [the cubist moment] of the most superb endeavour, came the brutal, all-obscuring rupture of the war. We thought that there would no longer be any question of anything. Georges Braque went off to make war, and paid it his ransom. Like Apollinaire later, it struck him, symbolically, in the head.

In 1917 I met him in the Midi, near Avignon, and one day, while we were going across a field from Sorgues to the hamlet where I was staying myself, Braque was carrying one of his canvases, at the end of a belt passed over his shoulder. We came to a stop. Braque laid the painting down flat, among the pebbles and the grasses. I was struck by something and I said to him, "It's astonishing how that holds its own against the real colour and the rocks." People have said to me, since then, that the really important thing would be to know if it would still hold, even against famine. I respond today. Yes it has held, and against many other things as well, for paintings are afraid of nothing. ("les toiles n'ont peur de rien.")

"Thus art," writes Berger, "however free or anarchic its mode of expression, is always a plea for greater control and an example, within the artificial limits of a 'medium,' of the advantages of such control."[25] The humanist artist retains the confidence of the cubist moment; she believes in the advantages of control; she believes that her work can "hold its own" even after the war has destroyed "le moment du plus superbe essor."

The humanist basis of bpNichol's work was clearly stated at the outset, in the "Statement," dated November 1966, which appeared on the cover of his first major publication, *bp* or *JOURNEYING & the returns:*

now that we have reached the point where people have finally come to see that language means communication and that communication does not just mean language, we have come up against the problem, the actual fact, of diversification, of finding as many exits as possible from the self (language/communication exits) in order to form as many entrances as possible for the other.

the other is the loved one and the other is the key, often the reason for the need/desire to communicate. how can the poet reach out and touch you physically as say the sculptor does by caressing you with objects you caress? only if he drops the barriers. if his need is to touch you physically he creates a poem/object for you to touch and is not a sculptor for he is still moved by the language and sculpts with words. the poet who paints or sculpts is different from the painter who writes. he comes at his art from an entirely different angle and brings to it different concerns and yet similar ones. but he is a poet always.

there is not a barrier. there are no barriers in art. where there are barriers the art is made small by them. but this is to say no matter where he moves or

which 'field' he chooses to work in, he is always a poet and his creations can be looked upon as poems.

there is a new humanism afoot that will one day touch the world to its core. traditional poetry is only one of the means by which to reach out and touch the other. 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, wherever they are, who seek to reach themselves and the other thru the poem by as many exits and entrances as are possible.

This manifesto points simultaneously to the singleness of purpose which underlies Nichol's work and to the multiplicity of means by which he has sought to fulfill it: on the one hand, the "new humanism" and the primacy of "the other"; on the other hand, "as many exits and entrances as are possible."

Speaking to students at the University of Alberta in 1979, Nichol offered a half-joking, half-serious re-interpretation of this manifesto. His compulsion to write, he explained, began, psychologically, with a need to communicate with his parents: "the other" of the 1966 statement was a thin disguise for "the mother"! And if contact could not be made one way, using one type of language, then he had to try another: hence the multiplicity of forms, hence "experimental literature." Beneath the humour apparent in this parody of reductive psychological "explanations" there is, in Nichol's work, a seriousness which sometimes verges on desperation. The appeal to the mother in the final section of *Journal* – even allowing for the fictionality of that work – is almost hysterical in its intensity, and much of the emotional force of *The Martyrology* derives from father and son relationships, both "real" and imagined.

Roland Barthes observes that "every narrative (every unveiling of the truth) is a staging of the (absent, hidden, or hypostatized) father":[26] the idea of narrative as an Oedipal quest should come as no surprise to any reader of *Journal*. Here we may briefly anticipate a later stage of the argument, and observe that the missing parent (a prevalent figure in Canadian literature)[27] is equivalent to the absence of the "transcendental signified" in poststructuralist linguistics. The sign is empty; we are all orphaned in language. As Nichol longs to reach the (m)other through the diversity of language, that very diversity demonstrates the impossibility of concluding the quest. The ending of *The Martyrology* Book 2 identifies the absence

of the father with the death of the saints, who are themselves words (but words cut off from Cloudtown, from Paradise, from origin, from meaning). The central figure of Nichol's work is separation – of the child from the parent, of the signifier from the signified, of friends from each other – and the humanist drive of his writing is a heroic attempt to overcome such separation.

Although the parent/child relationship is the primary one (and in recent years has been repeated with Nichol as parent as well as as child), the "other" is in fact far more than the mother minus the m. The terms of that relationship as "the necessary prerequisite for dialogues with the self that clarify the soul & heart and deepen the ability to love" extend to all personal contacts, lovers and friends, the network of proper names that people *The Martyrology:*

measure friendship by the time it takes to grow
the quality of truth that flows between you
do not destroy each other with your jealousies[28]

.....
open your heart

do what is necessary to love

when the moment comes to surrender your feelings
surrender[29]

It is not part of the intention of this book to provide a biography of bpNichol, but no discussion of his commitment to "the other," and all that this implies, would be complete without some mention of his work with Therafields, the therapeutic community to which he belonged for fifteen years, and for which he worked as a theradramatist. Nichol underwent personal therapy in 1963, and he says of it that "In my case, I think therapy literally saved my life," i.e., that without it he would very probably have committed suicide. In 1965, a group of people who had been involved with Lea Hindley-Smith (Nichol's therapist) decided to work together in what was to become Therafields. "It shifted," Nichol explains, "from a personal therapy into exploring questions of lifestyle, issues of community, issues of working with larger structures among human beings." Therafields did not subscribe to any psychological dogma; its approach was a more pragmatic one, seeking individual answers to particular problems, and "resisting the temptation to plug into a system of any

kind." Nichol saw his own work as "catalytic: my job is not to impress my personality on somebody else, because people change from within themselves. My job is to assist them in that process."[30]

The effects of this experience on Nichol's writing have of course been very far-reaching, as the dedication of *The Martyrology* – "for lea / without whose act of friendship / quite literally none of this would have been written" – makes clear. He speaks of "trying to push beyond certain mental states that I see in a lot of writing which is still caught up with a level of inter-personal mystery that I don't happen to think is a big mystery. I think it's more explicable."[31] Thus, a lot of what Nichol writes about personal relationships proceeds from a basis of knowledge, one is even tempted to say wisdom. It is characterised by a rare and remarkable honesty and openness; it never degenerates into cynicism or satire. Nichol's writing displays, to a greater extent I think than that of any other Canadian author, the "ability to love" which he wrote of in 1966: even at its bleakest moments (say, the end of Book 2), *The Martyrology* is true to its dedication.

More particularly, the experience of Therafields is clearly the basis of Nichol's work with the Four Horsemen, both in their tendency towards forms of drama which give concise emblematic form to fairly abstract concepts or theories, and in the absolute trust and awareness of each other necessary for their group improvisations. "I'm surprised more writers don't do sound improvisation together," Nichol says, "because it radically changes your sense of what is possible in writing. Once you begin to realise how much you get into the 'lonely genius in his shell' routine, it's nice to be in a context where that's not the case."[32] Much of Nichol's most fruitful work has been done in collaboration, not only with other writers, but with artists in other media, such as the composer Murray Schafer and the painter Barbara Caruso.

Therafields offers at least a partial definition of what Nichol was looking for in 1966 when he envisaged a "new humanism": but the word "humanism" should not be taken to exclude a religious sense. And if Nichol finds personal relationships more explicable than mysterious, he still doesn't deny that "there is a level of *real* mystery in the world."[33] In his recent work, this sense of mystery has begun to focus on the concept of the "family"; but the earlier, and still continuing focus is on the mythologies of language. Nichol has referred often to the Micronesian legend of the god Palongawhoya, who set

the vibratory axis of the world in motion by the rhythms of his own breath and speech, and who is, after Lea, the second dedicatee of *The Martyrology*. Book 3 of *The Martyrology* is full of fascinating fragments from ancient cultures and mythologies on this subject. The very first Report of the "Toronto Research Group" (mainly Nichol and Steve McCaffery) traced and compared the "myths about the origins of a linguistically diversified world" in Judeo-Christian, Hopi, and Australian Aboriginal cultures.[34] Where no existing mythology has seemed adequate, Nichol has created his own: in *The Martyrology,* words become saints, and the saints have a history. "A myth," he has written, "is simply a lie that works."[35]

Language for Nichol is always complex and multi-levelled; hence his own need to respond to it (or, more accurately, to live inside it) on many levels, using a wide range of forms and techniques, "as many exits and entrances as are possible." In 1968, in a radio serial for CBC called *Little Boy Lost Meets Mother Tongue,* he wrote:

> language does not exist on just one level it exists on many. and rather than trying to find the one *true* level you must become fluent in all of them.... the levels of meaning are as many as there are stars in the sky, and, in fact, language is like the rest of the universe, an endless wonder of unexplored galaxies of meaning. two truths can exist side by side without contradicting each other. it is our desperate search for the final answer that drives us to the grave. the final answer is a Fallacy. the final answer is, quite simply, that there is none. there is only the truth co-existing simultaneously with other truths, each with other truths, each with their own laws which make them true.[36]

The ability to accept that "two truths can exist side by side without contradicting each other" is similar to the position from which, seven years later, Roland Barthes begins one of the most important poststructuralist texts, *The Pleasure of the Text:*

> Imagine someone ... who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old specter: *logical contradiction;* who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; ... who remains passive in the face of Socratic irony (leading the interlocutor to the supreme disgrace: *self-contradiction)* and legal terrorism (how much penal evidence is based on a psychology of consistency!). Such a man would be the mockery of our society: court, school, asylum, polite conversation would cast him out: who endures contradiction without shame? Now

this anti-hero exists: he is the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure.[37]

In an unpublished theoretical text called *Nautilations,* Nichol also defines "MULTIPLICITY OF MEANING" as a "BASIC PREMISE OF LANGUAGE." Any act of communication then is the "concretion" of one possibility, or range of possibilities, out of such multiplicity. As Barthes also notes, the educational system "attempts to interpret poems as meaning ONLY ONE THING," because it cannot tolerate the possibility that "two truths can exist side by side without contradicting each other." *Nautilations* identifies "primitive fears here. the hydra – the head of many tongues turned men to stone. here the idea that – 'TO SPEAK MULTIPLY MEANS DESTRUCTION.'"[38]

Nichol's embrace of this multiplicity in language offers, in the first place, a rationale for the diversity of form which is itself a constant in his career. He has written poetry in what he calls the "trad" manner: traditional, that is, within the modern tradition of open form, free verse poetry. He has written concise lyrics and extended, book-length, or even (theoretically) endless poems. He has written and designed visual poems, which depend for their effect on the collaboration of a typographer or a visual artist. He has drawn comic strips and poems based on comic strips. He has written poems in which words are replaced by individual letters. He has designed whole new alphabets. He has created poems out of Polaroid photographs. He has written "novels" the length of short stories. He has written prose narrative in stream-of-consciousness style, in the convoluted repetitive style derived from Stein, in the forms of the Western and the detective story, and as a collage of letters, parodies, journals, etc.; in 1982, he won the 3-Day-Novel-Writing contest! He has written theoretical essays, manifestos, critical commentaries and introductions. He has written translations, in a wide variety of experimental forms, both from other languages and from English into English, as "homolinguistic" translation. He has created and performed sound poems, some of which use tape technology, most of which do not. In all these fields he has worked both solo and in collaboration: in both the theoretical essays of TRG and the translations he has worked especially closely with Steve McCaffery, and in the field of sound poetry the two of them are joined by Paul Dutton and Rafael Barreto-Rivera to form the Four Horsemen. As a group, the Horsemen have collaborated on performance texts, on poems, and

on a full-length novel. There is scarcely a conceivable form of literary activity which bpNichol has not touched, tried, and transformed.

But the effects of linguistic multiplicity reach more deeply than diversity of surface form. Once one has accepted this multiplicity – or, to phrase it in the terms of poststructuralist linguistics, once one has accepted that the line between the signifier and the signified divides as much as it unites – then one is open to the whole "deconstructionist" undermining of stable concepts. The signifier "floats," no longer tied down to a single unit of meaning, into a free play of open-ended referral and deferral; the signified "slides," evading the numerous attempts to fix it in a transcendental identity (as the Word, the Father, the Phallus, or even as Common Sense) at the centre of meaning.[39] As part of the Toronto Research Group, Nichol noted that "When the signified begins to slide beneath the signifier we enter the world of psychoses, a world of unsure footing, but we enter also the world of the poem, the writer."[40] And *The Martyrology* puts it even more succinctly: "life's a sign / beneath which signifieds slide."[41]

Deconstruction has been implicit within modernism right from the start: within Saussure's distinction between the signifier and the signified; within the self-reflexiveness of Stein's "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"; within the cubist analysis of the syntax of painting. There could be few more exact illustrations of what Derrida calls "nonlinear writing" than Stein's *Tender Buttons,* and her erotic poetry celebrates what Barthes and Kristeva would call the *jouissance* of the text.[42] The kind of writing prefigured in Stein, given a theoretical base by poststructuralism, and (to a great extent) realised in bpNichol is writing which, according to Roland Barthes, "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language." Such writing is "erotic," Barthes says, because of its "intermittence," which shows up as "controlled discontinuities, faked conformities, and indirect destructions," the effect of which is that "value [is] shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier."[43] Terry Eagleton summarises the characteristics of such a text, saying that it

> has no determinate meaning, no settled signifieds, but is plural and diffuse, an inexhaustible tissue or galaxy of signifiers, a seamless weave of codes and fragments of codes.... There are no beginnings and no ends, no sequences

which cannot be reversed, no hierarchy of textual 'levels'.... A specific piece of writing thus has no clearly defined boundaries: it spills over constantly into the works clustered around it, generating a hundred different perspectives which dwindle to vanishing point.[44]

The idea of such free play enters more and more into Nichol's writing. The element of "play" was always present, of course, and it is a key word in the manifestos of concrete poetry;[45] much of Nichol's early concrete work is manifestly playful in this sense. But it takes on a new seriousness in *The Martyrology* from "CODA: Mid-Initial Sequence" on. The fragmentation of words into letters is in itself a deconstructive tactic (and, it may be said, one of considerably more subtlety and grace than the heavy-handed rhetoric of most deconstructionist critics!) which radically subjects the very text of the poem to the free play of signifiers. The playfulness may be shown in the "deconstruction" of the word "impartial" into "imp art i always wanted to attain / a dance among the little ones."[46]

To be "impartial" is also to surrender the role of the "I" as the determining centre of writing; it is to dislodge the "author" from her privileged position as the transcendental signified. Continuing his exposition of the open-ended text, quoted above, Eagleton observes that "The work cannot be sprung shut, rendered determinate, by an appeal to the author, for the 'death of the author' is a slogan that modern criticism is now confidently able to proclaim.... It is language which speaks in literature, in all its swarming 'polysemic' plurality, not the author himself."[47] The activity of deconstruction extends to both the linguistic and the psychological concepts of "I" as a unified subject. "A certain pleasure is derived," notes Barthes, "from a way of imagining oneself as *individual*, of inventing a final, rarest fiction: the fictive identity."[48] In 1975, Barthes introduced his "autobiography" with the epigraph: "All this should be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel."[49]

What happens then is that "the author" is displaced from her traditional location at the centre of the text: she is, as it were, "distributed" throughout the text. "Act," wrote Gertrude Stein in *Tender Buttons*, "so that there is no use in a centre."[50] Wendy Steiner describes how Stein "deliberately divided the sentences in her early writing into comparable units which could be repeated and combined in ever new relations. She wanted to spread her climax throughout the work, making every sentence an equivalent, self-

enclosed moment."[51] The author's *identity* (the major concern of Stein's later autobiographies) is dispersed in the equivalences of the text, which it no longer controls, just as the linguistic analysis questions the unity and the previously unquestioned referentiality of the word "I."

In an unpublished "Autobiographical Novella" (1967?), Nichol reflects that "when i was younger the signified was nothing that could say itself with any surety only the cheap way the careless saying of yes that's me when somebody made that sound,"[52] i.e. the sound of the signifier, "Barrie" or "Nichol" or "bp." And in the 1979 interview, he offers an even more radical deconstruction of the unitary self: "I think that a person is actually many selves – I don't mean by that schizophrenia – I think that there are literally different selves, that that conglomerate of different selves that we are is, in this case, bpNichol. And writing is one of those selves."[53]

And writing is one of those selves. In *The Martyrology* Book 5, the structure of the "chains" decentres the author, and invites the reader in to the play-activity of creating the poem. The traditional author's privilege of determining the order of reading is ceded to the reader. Several chains of Book 5 (especially 4, 7, and 11) become purely self-reflexive "readings" of earlier sections of the poem, in which the "author" has disappeared into the imp-art-i-ality of "writing" itself, into the free play of the "sumptuous" signifier:

Roy rou
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g h
  tli
ke
  th
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insi
  de
insi
  de
wha
tiam thet he's aint[54]

As early as *Monotones,* Saint And had his vision of "the imminent end of all speech";[55] and in the prefatory excerpt from "The Chronicle of Knarn," the poet intuits that "the language I write is no longer spoken." In such works as *The Martyrology* Book 5 and in the "homolinguistic" translations such as *Translating Translating Apollinaire,*[56] Nichol is moving towards a state in which the writing writes itself, the text becomes self-generating.

In celebrating such writing, *écriture,*[57] Derrida insists upon its primacy over speech, and rejects what he sees as the false prestige of "voice," of speech over writing. Writing may be defined, at least in part, as that which is *repeatable,* or *detachable* from its presumed "source." "Voice" involves the *presence* of the speaking subject; using the term metaphorically and evaluatively, critics often praise a poet's written work on the grounds that they can "hear" her "speaking voice" in it. We say of a maturing writer that she has "found her own voice." Derrida's assault on such semi-unconscious criteria does raise a problem for critics (like myself) attempting to situate Nichol within Derridean categories because, paradoxically, while Nichol has moved boldly into the field of decentred writing, he is also, and still, a major instance of the presence of voice in poetry. Even the most fragmented or "deconstructed" sections of *The Martyrology* can be read aloud, as Nichol has successfully done in public on numerous occasions, to the identifiable rhythms of his speaking voice. And the very notion of "sound poetry" confounds any simplistic deletion of presence from poetry.

The sound poem, at least in its non-technological aspects (preferring live performance to tape manipulation,[58] as Nichol and the Four Horsemen have done), depends absolutely on the physical presence of the poet, the identity of voice and source, and the non-repeatability (non-writing) of free improvisation. While this aspect of Nichol's work certainly takes him outside the province of rigidly applied Derridean concepts (where he probably has no wish to be anyway), it is worth nothing that other poststructuralist theorists, notably Kristeva and Barthes, make more allowance for the *jouissance* of voice (even though neither of them shows any sign of ever having heard of "la poésie sonore").

Julia Kristeva notes that "in the development of speech, the pre-Oedipal phase corresponds to an intense echolalia ... before the phonologico-syntactic structure is imposed on the sentence." A "reactivation" of such speech "recreates ... this pre-sentence-making disposition to rhythm, intonation, nonsense; makes nonsense

abound within sense."[59] It is precisely in that area that Marianne DeKoven situates "experimental writing": "Presymbolic language shares with much experimental writing this ascendency of the signifier: the play of intonation, rhythm, repetition, sound association."[60] DeKoven is again referring to Stein (and to *written* experimentation), but the application may be made even more directly to sound poetry. One of Nichol's earliest sound poems (and one, he says, which is received with especial delight by young children) is based entirely on the letters of the word MILK; it is entitled "The Child In Me."[61] Sound poetry, it may be argued, appeals quite seriously to the child in us; it is, in the most profound sense of the word, "infantile."[62]

Such a description, however, still leaves sound poetry firmly within speech, not writing. The most daring and ingenious cutting of this Gordian Knot is by Roland Barthes, in "Voice," the final section of *The Pleasure of the Text*. Cutting straight across Derrida's dichotomy, Barthes envisions a category of *"writing aloud."*[63] Again, Barthes does not seem aware of sound poetry – his references are to song and cinema – but the passage could well stand as one of the genre's finest manifestos:

> *Writing aloud* is not expressive ... it is carried not by dramatic inflections, subtle stresses, sympathetic accents, but by the *grain* of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language.... Due allowance being made for the sounds of the language, *writing aloud* is not phonological but phonetic; its aim is not the clarity of messages, the theater of emotions; what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language. A certain art of singing can give us an idea of this vocal writing; but since melody is dead [!], we may find it more easily today at the cinema ... [which makes us] hear in their materiality, their sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips, a whole presence of the human muzzle (that the voice, that writing, be as fresh, supple, lubricated, delicately granular and vibrant as an animal's muzzle), to succeed in shifting the signified a great distance and in throwing, so to speak, the anonymous body of the actor into my ear: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss.[64]

It would not be accurate to see Nichol as having moved entirely into a deconstructionist mode of writing; rather, as I said at the

outset, he stands at a crossroads with it. Certainly he is aware of Derrida, Barthes, Lacan, and Kristeva, and is prepared on occasions (especially in his theoretical texts) to use their vocabulary; but his attitude towards them is as sceptical as was that of Therafields to any single psychiatric dogma. After the extreme disseminations of Book 5, the published sections of *The Martyrology* Book 6 show a decisive move back to a more straightforward discourse, and to direct autobiographical narrative.[65] The old concern for "the other" still demands "as many exits and entrances as are possible."

Nichol's humanism, then, remains the basis for his entire work, even admitting the vast uncertainties introduced into it by the poststructuralist critique of language, and by the decentering of the authorial "I." But Nichol has never been too concerned with "I" (he usually uses the lower case): his vision has always been that "we is a human community."[66] If language is one main theme of *The Martyrology,* then family is the other: from the myths of fathers and sons which dominate the early legends of the saints through to his and Ellie's immediate experiences of family. I will close this first chapter, then, by looking at two works which seem to me to summarise many of the issues, theories, and paradoxes within which I have been attempting to situate bpNichol's career thus far.

The 1967 box, variously called *bp* or *JOURNEYING & the returns,* contained a "poem" which consisted of the letters bp, covered on one side with shiny reflecting silver paper. Nichol's use of his lower case initials has always been a bane to bibliographers, and an assertion of his personal style, not as voice but as typography. The shapes are in themselves ambiguous: depending on whether you hold the piece upside down and/or back to front, it can also read dq, pb, or qd.[67] The piece may be taken as a "signature" to the whole collection. (We take it for granted that painters sign their own names as an integral part of the canvas, yet books do not usually reproduce the author's signature on the title page.) The silver "bp" is then a signature, an assertion of personal identity, or a mildly outrageous and/or self-parodying display of egotism. The "reference" of the piece is clearly to the author: we differentiate "bp" as the "correct" reading by referring to our extra-textual knowledge of Barrie Philip Nichol. But at the same time, the surface is *reflecting:* so, when the reader looks at it closely, what she sees is her own face. The "reference" of the piece is clearly to the reader. The poem dissolves the difference between reader and writer: it is an exit/entrance through which

Nichol reaches out to the other. "I" becomes "you" becomes "we." Every reader reads herself into a text, but few poems have so literalized the concept of the reader's role intermingling with the author's. (Looking into this piece, Barthes would doubtless experience bliss.) A layer of cautionary irony is added by the poem's *title*, which is "Narcissus."[68] The irony may be directed either against Nichol himself (the egotism of turning your own name into a poem) or against the reader (the egotism of substituting your own face for the writer's name). Self-absorption is potentially fatal; but self-identification is a necessary stage of psychological growth. A possible sub-title for "Narcissus" might be Jacques Lacan's "Le Stade du Miroir."

In 1979, Nichol wrote a short prose piece entitled "Two Words: a Wedding."[69] It is simultaneously a celebration of the "human community" in its most personal and intimate form, and a linguistic manifesto, in which linguistic instability is seen as the condition of our lives. It both balances and complements the 1966 "Statement," and so it seems appropriate to close this introductory chapter by quoting it also in full.

TWO WORDS: A WEDDING

for Rob & Sheron

There are things you have words for, things you do not have words for. There are words that encompass all your feelings & words that encompass none. There are feelings you have that are like things to you, picked up & placed in the pocket, worn like the cloth the pocket is attached to, like a skin you live inside of. There is a body of feeling, of language, of friends; the body politic, the body we are carried inside of till birth, the body we carry our self inside of till death, a body of knowledge that tells of an afterlife, a heaven, an unknown everything we have many words for but cannot encompass. There are relationships between words & concepts, between things, between life & death, between friends & family, between each other & some other other. We wed words to things, people to feelings, speak of a true wedding of the mind & heart, intuition & intellect, & out of this form our realities. Our realities are wedded one to another, concepts & people are joined, new people conceived within that mesh of flesh & realities, are carried forward in the body of the mother, the family, the bodily love we have for one another. They are creating their own reality each step of the way, daily, another kind of reality is born, each new word, person, expanding our vocabulary, our concepts, new realities are conceived, our old reality changes, the

"real" grows realer every day. We are marrying the flesh to the flesh, the word to the daily flux of our lives we know & don't know, our friends grow older & marry raise children as you once were children with mothers & fathers of your own, grow older, 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 is 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.

CHAPTER TWO

Visual Poetry

Giant H's loomed over empty plains BP NICHOL

THE early stages of bpNichol's apprenticeship to language took place within the context of the movement generally referred to as "concrete poetry." It was as a concrete poet that Nichol first became known, and, since the movement was an international one, his reputation was also, right from the start, more than locally Canadian.[1] As a unified, coherent movement, concrete poetry was short-lived. Although one may trace many precursors in earlier years, there is a clearly defined "classical period," lasting from 1955 until approximately 1970, after which there is a general dispersal of activity, with many of the major practitioners, like Nichol, continuing to develop their personal styles in directions suggested or opened up by their concrete work. This classical period is defined by three major anthologies, all of which appeared within a year of each other at the height of the movement, in the late 1960s (and which may, ironically, by their very definitiveness, have contributed to its closure): Emmett Williams' *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), Stephen Bann's *Concrete Poetry: an international anthology* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1967), and Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Indiana University Press, 1968).[2] These anthologies concentrate on visual concrete poetry (mainly because it was easier to reproduce), but sound poetry was also regarded, in the 1960s, as a branch of concrete. This period is marked by a tremendous energy and joyfulness: the iconoclastic assault on the decorum of the printed page remains an essential point of origin for everything Nichol has done since.

It has always been difficult to provide an exact definition for the term "concrete poetry."[3] At times the phrase has come to seem so elastic, covering so many diverse directions, that its value as any kind

of precise defining or descriptive term may well be called into question. "Concrete poetry," Emmett Williams wrote in the introduction to his anthology, begging the question altogether, "is what the poets in this anthology make."[4] Now, in retrospect, one might adapt that non-definition to read "Concrete poetry is what concrete poets made between 1955 and 1970."

Nevertheless, there do seem to be at least a couple of points which all so-called "concrete poetry" has in common: the idea of treating language as a concrete material, in and for itself, stressing its visual and aural properties rather than its referential function; and a decreased reliance on, often amounting to a complete abandonment of, syntactical linear construction. From these two starting-points, the possible directions for experimentation have proven themselves to be far more various and rewarding than even the first pioneers of the movement could have expected.

The use of the term "concrete poetry" dates back to the mid-1950s. The date which is generally taken to mark the beginning of the international movement is 1955, when the Brazilian poet and designer Decio Pignatari met, in Ulm, Germany, the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer. This meeting does not mark the beginning of concrete poetry itself, for Pignatari (together with the de Campos brothers in Brazil), Gomringer, and other writers in other countries had been working along these lines on their own for several years: what it does mark is the first significant contact between two national groups, each realising, to their surprise and delight, that similar work was being done elsewhere in the world. From this moment on, concrete poetry very consciously saw itself as an *international* movement, and the three central anthologies were all multi-national and multi-lingual.

The initial experience of Gomringer and Pignatari was repeated in country after country, including Canada. Writers who were searching for a new means of expression, and very often arriving at forms which we would now describe as concrete poetry, would suddenly break out of their individual and national isolations (where they were usually regarded as freaks, outside the mainstream of conventional poetry) and discover personal and international affiliations.

The Scottish concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay has spoken of this process in a letter to Pierre Garnier (September 17th, 1963), drawing a comparison to the early cubists:

One of the cubists – I forget who – said that it was after all difficult for THEM to make cubism because they did not have, as we have, the example of cubism to help them.... Just so, "concrete" began for me with the extraordinary (since wholly unexpected) sense that the syntax I had been using, *the movement* of language in me, at a physical level, was no longer there – so it had to be replaced with something else, with a syntax and movement that would be true to the new feeling (which existed in only the vaguest way, since I had, then, no form for it ...).[5]

Exactly the same thing happened in Canada, and some aspects of bpNichol's account of the early days are strikingly similar to Finlay's more theoretical discussion:

in 1964 i was working at the university of toronto library along with dave aylward dave was pretty sceptical about concrete poetry in those days or anyway the things i was into since at that time we didn't know the term concrete that all came later thanx to george bowering introducing me via the mails to cavan mccarthy in england as well as of course andy phillips later trip to france ... from which he sent me a few little things actually mentioned the word helped put a name to what at that point dave & i were already into as were in fact bill bissett & judy copithorne & lance farrell & what in his own way earle birney had been into for quite awhile & then of course there was pierre coupey's influential THE ALPHABET OF BLOOD published in dudek's DELTA in december of 64 oh hell i could go on forever giving you that sense that there were purely canadian roots helped lead us all off in this direction[6]

Just as Finlay sees that the cubists' difficulty was that they didn't have "the example of cubism to help them," and that his own difficulty was that he was trying, "with huge uncertainty," to be true to a feeling for which he had no form, so Nichol describes the uncertainties and confusions which were partly resolved when the poets in Toronto were able to "put a name to" what they had all "been into for quite awhile." However elastic its definition, the term "concrete poetry" has been useful simply as a frame, a context within which experimentation becomes possible in more confident and meaningful ways.

Nichol is right, however, to stress that there were "purely canadian roots" for the movement here, just as Pignatari and all the others in their various countries came to concrete poetry first of all from their own experience. The beginnings of concrete poetry in Canada

are as muddled, as accidental, as haphazard as in any other country. In retrospect, Nichol sees much of Earle Birney's work as headed in that direction, yet Birney has also acknowledged his thanks "to bp nichol, & his generation, for turning me on."[7] The poets of that "generation" – Nichol, bissett, Copithorne, David uu, Ed Varney, and many others, including myself – all came to concrete poetry independently, by our own routes, and discovered each other once we'd already got there. For example: I had known of Finlay's work as early as 1964, in Scotland, and renewed that interest after meeting Finlay in 1967; in Vancouver, I met several of the other west coast poets at a meeting in Birney's house in 1968; and in 1969, I was one of the organisers, along with Alvin Balkind, Michael Morris, Ed Varney, and Michael Rhodes, of a major exhibition of concrete poetry at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery. That exhibition was one of the key stages in Canadian concrete poetry's awareness of itself, with bpNichol coming west to give a reading in conjunction with the show.

Even the term "concrete" itself seems to have been arrived at in several places independently. Working in complete isolation in Sweden, Oyvind Fahlstrom published a "Manifesto for Concrete Poetry" in 1953, two years before Gomringer and Pignatari met. Three years later, and quite independently, Gomringer and the Brazilians agreed to use the term, and it is from their use of it that its international acceptance stems.

As already indicated, one of the central meanings of "concrete" is that language itself is regarded, in its visual and aural manifestations, as a concrete material, to be worked with in the same way as, say, a sculptor works with stone. (Finlay has in fact had one poem constructed in cast concrete – as far as I know, the only truly "concrete" concrete poem.) Theoretically, the name derives from the "Konkrete Kunst" of Hans Arp and Max Bill (for whom Gomringer worked as a private secretary). Arp provides an essential link in the connection between concrete poetry and Dada, since he was one of the original founding members of the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich in 1916. Arp's statement on the nature of "concrete art" still seems to me to sum up what is best in concrete poetry:

> concrete art aims to transform the world. it aims to make existence more bearable. it aims to save man from the most dangerous folly: vanity. it aims to simplify man's life. it aims to identify him with nature. reason uproots man and causes him to lead a tragic existence. concrete art is an elemental,

natural, healthy art, which causes the stars of peace, love and poetry to grow in the head and the heart. where concrete art enters, melancholy departs, dragging with it its gray suitcases full of black sighs.[8]

Much of the theorising which surrounds concrete poetry may appear to be very complex and "difficult": but the poems themselves are usually lucid and simple. Their appeal is often more sensuous than intellectual, more immediate than dependent on long study. To quote Finlay again:

I was thinking that those who discount the poem that can be "seen" in a single minute, often like the poem which it takes ten minutes to "see": they might argue that *their* sort of poem is nine minutes better. (Ha ha). But possibly the real difference is between the poem which presents the fish-rise or pebble-fall, and that which presents those *and* the ripples (not trusting the reader to see the ripples for himself.)[9]

One possible reason why concrete poetry imparts the very positive feelings which Arp describes is that the principles and processes of its construction are so close to the surface: one can see the *making* of the poem, and the joy of it.

The other major characteristic of concrete poetry is its abandonment of syntax as the major structural means of articulating the relationship between the constituent parts of the poem.[10] As Dom Sylvester Houedard wrote in 1963, "Words are wild, sentences tame them."[11] Freed from the linearity of discourse, language revels in its intrinsic resources of sight, sound, and (where necessary) meaning; the reader also is set at liberty to enter the text and discover/create meaning on her own terms. Deprived of all the conventional guidelines, the reader must "intuit the rules of the poem from the form that is given."[12] Finlay explains how this happens:

The reader does not begin at the top left-hand corner and work his way steadily to the bottom right-hand corner. He is first of all aware of the skeleton of the poem – its formal arrangement. Then he isolates groups of words in no special order. His appreciation of the poem is the enlivening of a skeletal form with flesh and blood. Parallel to the reader's exploration of the actual space of the poem is his discovery of the "semantic space" of the poem.[13]

That "semantic space" is almost always non-linear. Although it is theoretically possible to have a long concrete poem,[14] the great majority of visual concrete poems take place within one page (or

poster, or landscape): they depend upon the possibility of the reader's eye taking in their whole spatial field at one glance. The field itself is static, though there may be a great deal of dynamic activity within it; visual concrete depends upon spatial rather than temporal organisation. In this context, it is worth noting that the classical period of visual concrete poetry coincides with the dominance of structuralism in literary theory (structuralism also being concerned with articulating spatial relationships within a stable field), and that the break-up of the concrete poetry movement begins at the same time that Derridean poststructuralism deconstructs the assumptions of a spatially based theory. Sound poetry is to visual poetry what poststructuralism is to structuralism – or, for that matter, what metonymy is to metaphor.[15]

Another general division within concrete poetry is that which was initially described by Mike Weaver as being the distinction between "constructivist" and "expressionist" works.[16] In the expressionist mode, the form of the poem is determined by the impulse to mimic or enact the sense. Thus, almost any statement of spatial relationship can be realised typographically, from "shaped" poems like George Herbert's "Easter Wings" or Lewis Carroll's mouse's tail through Apollinaire's "Il Pleut" to Nichol's visual presentation of a drum roll.[17] Similarly, highly emotional states can be registered through agitated or exaggerated typography, as in political slogans or collages. Nichol's *Strange Grey Town* (co-authored with David Aylward)[18] made a "statement" about urban pollution by using such an excess of smudgy ink that the reader could not handle the pamphlet without getting her hands dirty. Unless very wittily conceived, however, such expressionist techniques are little more than gimmicks (and are in fact widely used in commercial advertising); much of the criticism of concrete poetry as superficial, or good only for a single reading, is directed against this mode. More interesting, and more supportive of contemplation, re-reading, or criticism, is the constructivist mode, in which the form of the poem is determined by structural principles, often abstract or arbitrary, which emerge from the visual or aural *material* of the words rather than from their expressive content. Nichol's early "Cycles" series is basically of this sort, the form being determined by the rigid permutation of an arbitrarily limited number of elements. It could be argued that "Cycle No. 22" [Figure 1] is also expressionist, since it certainly enacts the

continued on page 43

drum anda wheel
anda drum andaw
heel anda druma
ndaw heel andad
ruma ndaw heela
ndad ruma ndawh
eela ndad ruman
dawh eela ndadr
uman dawh eelan
dadr uman dawhe
elan dadr umand
awhe elan dadru
mand awhe eland
adru mand awhee
land adru manda
whee land adrum
anda whee landa
drum anda wheel

FIGURE 1

pulpit tulips
pul pit tul ips
pu l p it tu l i ps
p u l p i tt u l i p s
p u l p t iu t l i p s
p u l t u pl i t i p s
p u t u l li p i t p s
p t u l i up l p i t s
t u l i p ps u l p i t
t u l i p sp u l p i t
tu l i ps pu l p it
tul ips pul pit
tulips pulpit

FIGURE 2

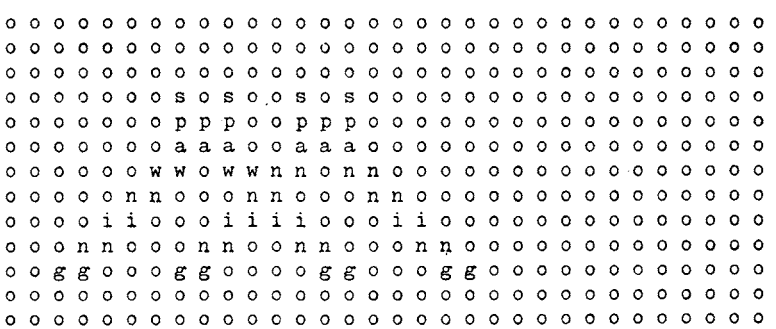

FIGURE 3

21 st Birthday Pome

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o o x o x o o
o o x x o o o
o o o x o x o
o o o x x o o
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x o o o x o o
x o o x o o o
x o x o o o o
x x o o o o o
o x o o o o x
o o x o o o x
o o o x o o x
o o o o x o x
o o o o o x x
o o o o x x o
o x x o o o o
o x o x o o o
o x o o x o o
o x o o o x o

FIGURE 4

moon

owl

tree tree tree shadowy

FIGURE 5

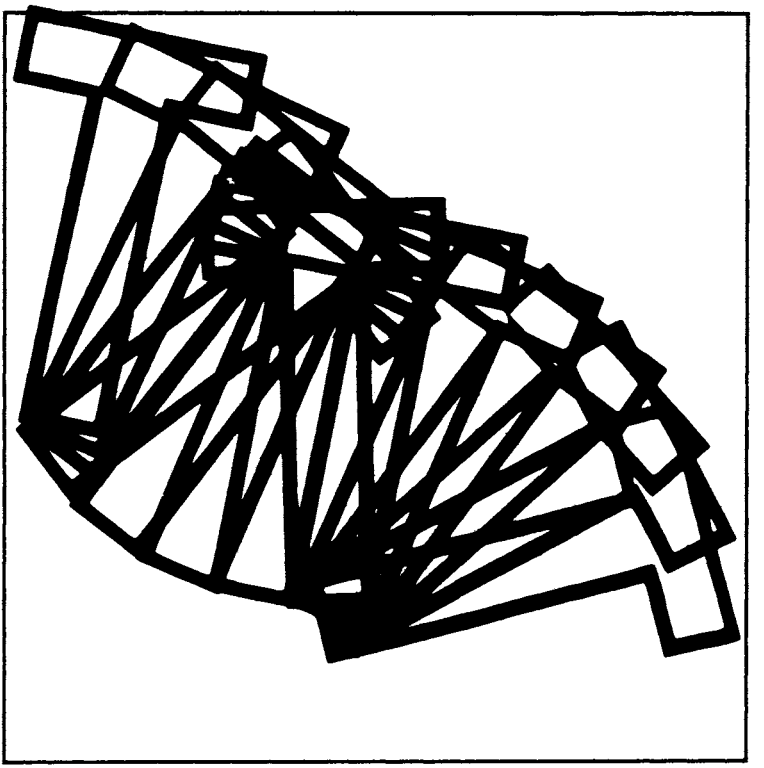
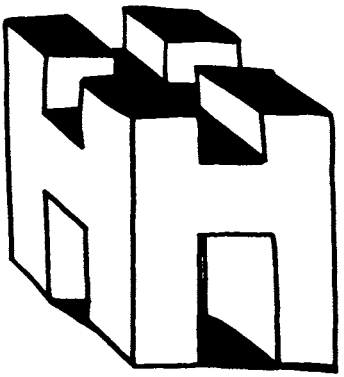


FIGURE 6

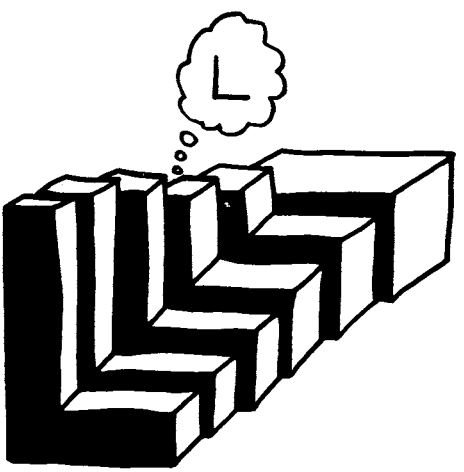
H (an alphhabet)

FIGURE 7 from *26 Alphabets*



Allegory #29

FIGURE 8



Allegory #22

FIGURE 9

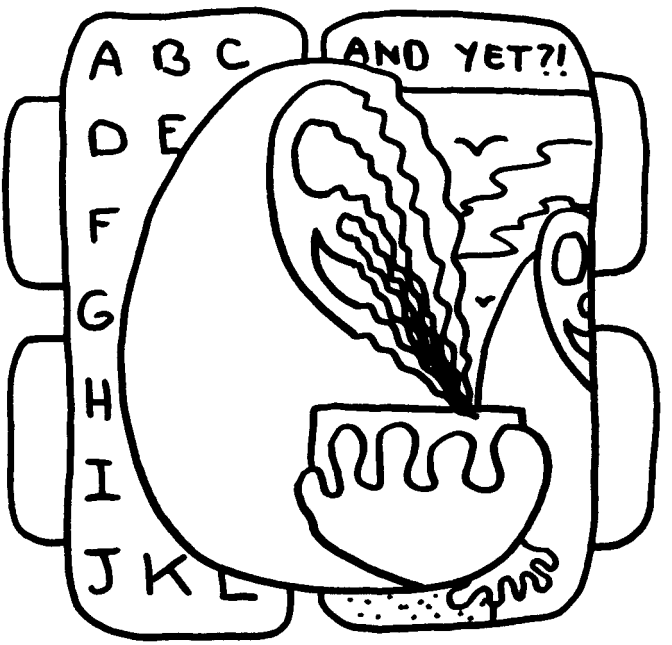


FIGURE 10

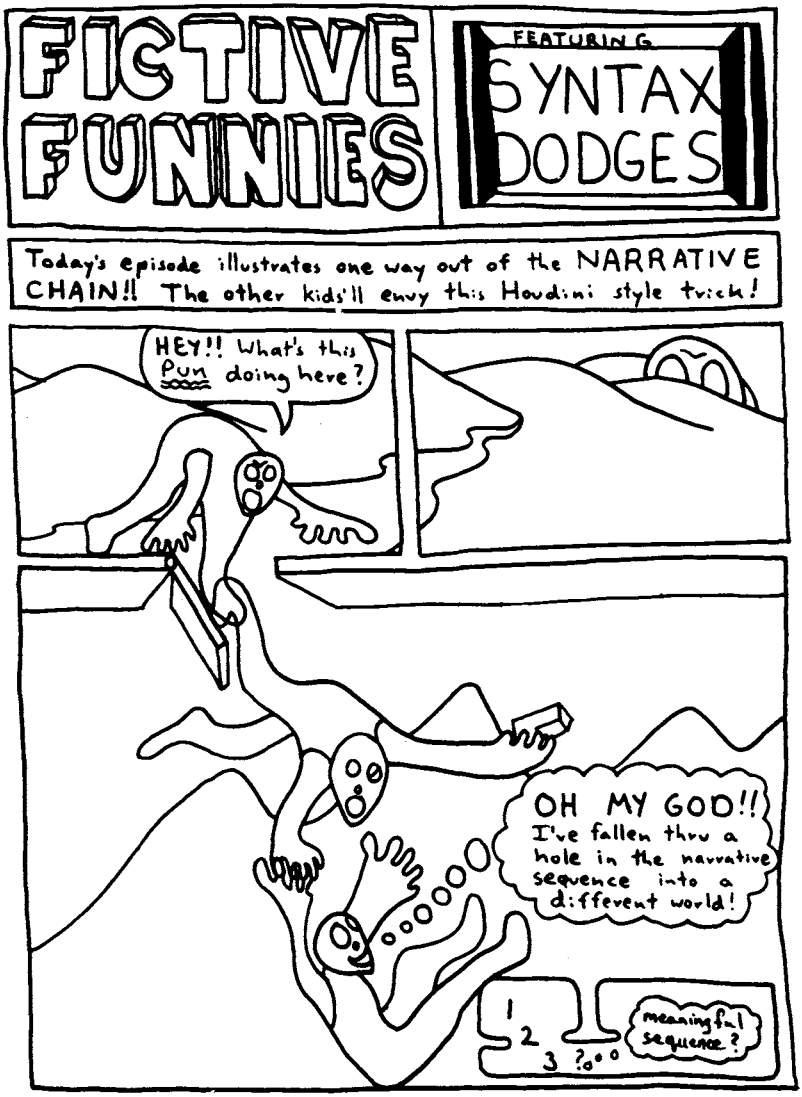

FICTIVE FUNNIES
FEATURING
SYNTAX DODGES
Today's episode illustrates one way out of the NARRATIVE CHAIN!! The other kids'll envy this Houdini style trick!
HEY!! What's this pun doing here?
OH MY GOD!! I've fallen thru a hole in the narrative sequence into a different world!
1 2 3 ?...
meaningful sequence?

FIGURE II

ideas of both "wheel" and "drum," but the visual setting is clearly constructivist in its principle of arrangement.[19] So, while "constructivist / expressionist" is the most useful set of categories for describing tendencies within visual poetry, it is unlikely that any given piece will fall *wholly* within one category: the terms describe the dominant emphasis, not an absolute quality.

There are numerous other sub-divisions of visual poetry (and Nichol has worked in almost all of them), often determined by the physical medium: whether the poem appears on a page or a postcard, as a print, or as a large-scale architectural or environmental construction; whether the poem is type-set, typewritten, or handwritten; whether or not it incorporates non-verbal visual material (drawings, photographs, collage); etc. Indeed, a major difficulty in writing about concrete poetry in any systematic critical way arises from the fact that almost every instance is *sui generis*. The Viennese poet Ernst Jandl commented that:

> There must be an infinite number of methods of writing experimental poems, but I think the most successful methods are those which can only be used once, for then the result is a poem identical with the method in which it was made. (The method, used again, would turn out exactly the same poem.)[20]

This is a problem for the writer as much as for the critic, of course. Ian Hamilton Finlay sums up the challenge, and the potential, of concrete poetry:

> For myself I cannot derive from the poems I have written any "method" which can be applied to the writing of the next poem; it comes back, after each poem, to a level of "being," to an almost physical intuition of the time, or of a form ... to which I try, with huge uncertainty, to be "true".[21]

*

bpNichol's purest work in visual poetry is contained in the package *bp* or *JOURNEYING & the returns* (1967), which was something of a typographical tour-de-force for Coach House Press. Each poem was individually realised as a separate card, pamphlet, or construction, using all the resources of colour printing. Thus, a fairly simple condensed lyric, "pane / rain / pain," appears in four shades of blue, reinforcing the emotional mood and suggesting the transparency of glass to water. A permutation of the letters in "turnips are" (rustpin,

stunrip, puntsir, tipruns, etc.) is printed on an appropriately turnip-coloured card. A configuration of interlocking words – owl, low, how, o, ow, who – is printed several times, in overlapping shapes, receding as if into the depths of a wood. A milk bottle poem is presented in almost illegible white on white. A couple of the pamphlets were designed for action: "Wild Thing" flips through the word "love," and "Cold Mountain" was supposed to be burnt (though very few readers ever did so!) In each case, the visual form has a clearly expressionist rationale, but they are also very beautiful objects, distinguished by the economy of their conception and the elegance of their execution. While this collection established Nichol's reputation as a visual poet, comparatively little of his later work returns to such a classical version of concrete poetry.

Rather, Nichol has developed, in visual poetry as in other fields, a highly personal post-concrete idiom, a good deal of which is based on the idiosyncracies of his own hand-writing and drawing. In this general survey, I will concentrate on four major areas: typewriter concrete; alphabets; letter drawings; and comic strips. I will conclude with a brief note on some of Nichol's collaborations with the painter and print-maker Barbara Caruso.

Typewriter concrete consists of visual poems whose ideal realisation is on a typewritten or mimeographed page; they use letters (and, occasionally, other visual symbols available on the typewriter keyboard) and depend on "the typewriter's tremendous advantage (that each character occupies exactly the same space as any other character)."[22] Nichol's ultimate typewriter poem is called "The Complete Works": it simply reproduces the entire keyboard, and footnotes the asterisk with the explanation: "Any possible permutation of all listed elements,"[23] which would indeed, if it were possible, encompass "the complete works"!

Nichol's major work in this area is to be found in *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer* and *Still Water*.[24] "Easter Pome" [Figure 2][25] is a straightforward example: the almost-identical letters of the two words "pulpit" and "tulips" are arranged in a regular pattern (note that only a typewriter, not a typesetter, would assign the same space to i as to p) which thematically evokes two aspects of Easter (the seasonal and the religious) while visually recalling George Herbert's "Easter Wings." Similarly, in "Tribute to Vasarely" [Figure 3],[26] the visual arrangement mimics the optical effects of Vasarely's paintings, and invites the reader to construct words out of

its fluctuating surface – sing, song, so, spa, span, pan, paw, pawn, won, wow, win, own, no, go, going – all of them appropriately accumulating to "spawning." More purely constructivist is the "21st Birthday Pome" [Figure 4],[27] in which the only obvious semantic link to the title is the fact that the poem has 21 lines.

In *Still Water*, the effects are even more minimal and delicate. Many of the poems consist of only one word, with a slight typographical alteration, set in the white space of the surrounding page:

st*r

groww

em ty

The lovely "closedpen / o pen" not only mimics the opening of space around the o but also turns the word "open" itself into a writer's address to her instrument, as if it were her Muse. Other poems in *Still Water* set out the elements of a landscape scattered iconically across a page [Figure 5].[28]

It was this latter technique that Nichol was to use, extended into narrative form, for his "novel" *Extreme Positions*. Nichol himself has said that this work "uses the techniques of visual poetry to tell the extended tale of a ménage à trois. In a series of quick word stills the stilted violence unwinds as seen from the viewpoint of a terrified, distant, almost peripheral narrator/witness."[29] The reader moves through a visually sketched landscape (moon, owl, tree) towards a house, a window, an eye, a "shh / (adow)." There is also a lake, a boat, a hand in the waves, and something which is "empty." Later in the book, the same scenes are obsessively replayed amidst a welter of emotions – "remembered laughing laughing & / sad hysterical happy" – and uncertainties –

will shout
(shouts)
didn't shout
(shouted)
can't shout
(wants to shout)
shouts out
(should shout)
shh

The secrecy of that "shh" comes to dominate the book: the final page is entirely made up of the repeated letter s, representing the "waves" that have closed over the (presumed) victim(s) as well as the "no / yes / noyes / noise" of hidden guilt. It is entirely up to the reader to construct the narrative of *Extreme Positions;* like all visual poetry, it requires the reader's participation in a "semantic space" which has not been fixed or directed by syntax. Paradoxically, this "novel" represents Nichol's most impressive achievement in the field of visual "poetry."

This kind of visual poetry still depends upon the reader's urge to combine letters into words: for instance, to supply the missing "p" in "em ty." Nichol has also attempted to use individual letters entirely as themselves, as self-sufficient elements of language with no necessary connection to the words they might combine to form. "I reached the point," he said in his interview with Caroline Bayard and Jack David, "where I could take the single letter ... and incorporate it into the breath-line poem.... I realised that there was no reason the letter couldn't be there. Just like anything else, it was an element in the poem."[30] The letters function, rhythmically and syntactically though not semantically, *as if* they were words:

a man in front of a mirror
an h in front of an m[31]

The reader may if she wishes "interpret" these letters and assign them meanings guessed from the context: the h here could substitute for "man," either because of the shape (legs apart), or because it is short for the French "homme," or because the reader may know that H is Nichol's favourite letter; the m could substitute for "mirror," either because it is the initial letter or because its shape is a symmetrical reflection. Often, however, the context will not provide such clues: the long sequence "Trans-Continental"[32] begins "an h moves past an m / an i becomes an r // someone throws a snowball," and then moves into the total lettristic abstraction of

o p
t r s u
v v v

w

i i i i

Here the reader must simply accept the material of the text as opaque, the letter as irreducible. For Nichol, this constructivist use of the letter was a fairly brief phase (its main results are to be found in *love: a book of remembrances)* which led on into the more sophisticated and expressionist use of individual letters in Book 4 of *The Martyrology.*

The source of all letters is the alphabet, and many visual concrete poets have created works based on the primacy and almost mystical authority of this generative sequence of letters. Nichol's major alphabet work is *ABC: The Aleph Beth Book,*[33] whose title and sub-title evoke, respectively, the child's playful apprehension of language and the religious awe of the alphabet as origin. The book begins with a theoretical statement (not, it must be admitted, one of Nichol's more elegant or incisive critical statements), which has been typed, all in capital letters, with smudges and corrections clearly visible:

POETRY BEING AT A DEAD END POETRY IS DEAD. HAVING ACCEPTED THIS FACT WE ARE FREE TO LIVE THE POEM. HAVING FREED THE POEM FROM THE NECESSITY TO BE THE POEM IS NOW CONSTANTLY HAPPENING IN OUR LIVES. WHAT HAS BEEN CONSTANT TILL NOW HAVE BEEN THE ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES WE HAVE PLACED ON THE POEM. WE HAVE PLACED THE POEM BEYOND OURSELVES BY PUTTING ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES BETWEEN OURSELVES & THE POEM WE MUST PUT THE POEM IN OUR LIVES BY FREEING IT FROM THE NECESSITY TO BE WE MUST BE TO FREE OURSELVES FROM THE NECESSITY OF PLACING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN OURSELVES & THE POEM. THE POEM WILL LIVE AGAIN WHEN WE ACCEPT FINALLY THE FACT OF THE POEM'S DEATH.

Portions of this statement are reproduced on each page, as a running marginal commentary on a series of 26 letter-drawings, each of which presents a multiple-exposure of a letter of the alphabet. "I was exploring letter overlays," Nichol explains to Bayard and David. "In a way, the thing I would most compare it to is *Nude Descending a Staircase* by Duchamps [sic]. I was interested in the play of the light through the letters and what happened to the form of a letter when it overlapped with itself."[34] The Duchamp analogy is perhaps most clearly visible in the T [Figure 6]. The letter overlays in *ABC: The Aleph Beth Book* are among the most "classical" visual pieces Nichol has done. Since the basic shape of each letter was taken from

a stencil, rather than drawn free-hand, there is a certain impersonality to them: they seem closer to the works of European typographer-poets such as Hansjorg Mayer or John Furnival. Still, the freedom and visual lyricism with which this book treats the letter-shapes testify to Nichol's interest in transforming the alphabet, in taking it, in the words of his favourite Dr. Seuss poem, "On Beyond Zebra." Nichol has also drawn several experimental alphabets, in which new letter-shapes use older ones as a "base." In the same way as one can construct arithmetical systems on a base 8 instead of a base 10, so Nichol has constructed an alphabet on the base H [Figure 7].[35]

Nichol's most radical transformations and expansions of the alphabet have come, however, in his letter-drawings. I use this term with some hesitation, since Nichol himself confesses that these pieces "come from an area of my work i've never been able to find a useful term to describe. Poem/drawings, hand-drawn poems, drawn poems – none of these seemed or seems accurate enough. Perhaps it is sufficient to say that [these pieces] fall into the general area of the visuality of language & are one of the approaches i have taken to that field or element of writing over the years."[36] Most of these drawings or sequences of drawings – *Love Affair, Unit of Four, Transformational Unit* – have appeared in small, limited editions from Seripress in Toronto; the most widely available are the "Allegories" sequence in *love: a book of remembrances* and *Aleph Unit*, which is reprinted in *As Elected*.[37]

The drawings are all based on letter-shapes, usually represented in three dimensions as if they were sculptural objects, and often set in relation to a landscape which either surrounds them or else opens up inside them. The landscape elements use what Nichol calls the "pared down image vocabulary" of comic strips, e.g. ϒ to represent "bird" and O as either sun or moon. "Into this limited vocabulated landscape ... i placed the alphabet, the visible fact of language. Giant H's loomed over empty plains imaging the macro way i glimpsed these micro particles."[38] Letters become sentient, thinking themselves and each other, and they become organic, metamorphosing constantly into their own interiors.

In the "Allegories" series of *love: a book of remembrances* (Talonbooks, 1974) each drawing is complete and self-contained. Some are static and sculptural, requiring (despite the series title) no allegorical interpretation: see Allegory No. 29 [Figure 8]. Others

imply movement: in Allegory No. 22 [Figure 9], for instance, one could read the "action" from right to left, and see a non-lettristic cube gradually changing, thinking for itself the concept of the letter L, and finally arriving at that state; or, taking the more conventional left to right reading, one could see the L receding into the block, in which case the think-bubble is a rather forlorn memory of what it is losing (provided, of course, that one does interpret the shape in the think-bubble as a letter L, and not just a right angle). One of the most complex of the "Allegories" is No. 7 [Figure 10], for which Bayard and David provide a full allegorical reading:

> In "Allegory No. 7," as in the other Nichol Allegories, large printed letters – here, the capital *I* or possibly an *H* – are the framework. The two vertical *I's* represent the two tablets of Moses: on one is written the letters A-L; on the other, "and yet?!". Allegorically, the letters of the alphabet stand for the Ten Commandments. But the drawing gives another point of view. Here, I might explain that the cartoon character is Captain Poetry, Nichol's major persona, and one who signifies traditional poetry. In the drawing, the central image of Captain Poetry is melting into a pot, just as the Israelites melted their gold to produce the Golden Calf. Captain Poetry stands for the traditional uses of language, and his destruction is language's destruction. On the perimeter, another Captain Poetry is observing the melting, and his smile means possibly that he agrees with Nichol's view that language must be broken up in order to revivify it.[39]

There are various points, obviously, at which one might argue with this interpretation. The vertical columns *may* represent the tablets of Moses, but I would certainly not wish to *limit* them to this interpretation; this reading does not account for the two horizontal frames in the background; the cartoon character is not only Captain Poetry but also the more mischievous and protean Milt the Morph; the question remains of whose hand holds the melting pot; etc. But whatever the details of the interpretation, Bayard and David's account makes clear the potential range of suggestion and meaning with which Nichol is able to invest his drawings.

The drawings become even more interesting, however, when they assume serial form and develop from one stage to another. *Love Affair,* for instance, begins with a solid block of four intersecting H's; the second drawing reduces this shape to its outside perimeter; the third refills that perimeter with vertical columns, or letter I's,

eliminating the horizontal bars which created H; the fourth isolates as black shadows what would be the top surfaces of these columns; and the fifth builds around these shadows a new set of letters, an A, two L's, and two I's. The "reading" of such a sequence does not involve trying to construct words (HALL, HILL, HAIL?) out of these fluctuating letters, but rather in following what Nichol would see as a narrative path through non-narrative elements. As the letters empty and reverse themselves, becoming their outlines, their own shadows, the reader sees and/or establishes connections between the images: "anybody looking at something," Nichol has said, "takes a path through it, and that creates a narrative. So the best you can hope for is to present a text which demands of the reader that they organize it themselves."[40]

The most complex of these narratives is *Aleph Unit.* Nichol describes it as "a serial poem" in which "the Aleph shape itself [is] the frame allowing the successive shifts to be dominated by the memory of that *frame* of reference (ghost image on the retina)."[41] The first image, "Aleph Unit Closed," presents a massive, sculptural A, implicit with all the suggestiveness of the first letter of creation, but also closed, self-contained, defining the frame and the limits of the drawings. "Aleph Unit Opened," the second image, opens the letter into a seascape, with a man on the end of a jetty thinking the letter A (the think-bubble occupies the space previously taken by the hole in the upper half of the original A). In number 3, "Aleph Unit Distance," the man has disappeared, and the think-bubble has become the sun, set amidst stylised birds and clouds in an idyllic and peaceful picture. "Aleph Unit Surface" transforms the sun into an ominous black (eclipsed?) circle, reflecting off a stark surface which may still be the jetty but which also looks like the robes of a prostrate priest. In "Aleph Unit Observed," the sun has become an eye (still surrounded by birds); the sea has almost disappeared into a solid black shape recalling, in jumbled form, the initial A. In "Aleph Unit Enigmatic (for Mona Lisa)," the sun begins to set as a pupil within the eye, creating a burlesque of the oblique glance in Leonardo's painting; the lower shapes have been reduced to a few basic lines which form themselves easily, in "Aleph Unit in Transit," into a boat with a sail beneath a blandly innocent sun. The only problem is that the sea is now *inside* the boat. Each of these six stages (after the initial Aleph) has been a logical development, visually, of the one before,

suggesting a steady expansion of the A (the alphabet, the language of creation) into an elemental world of sea and sky, a world of vision and reversals; the reader is free to attempt a more detailed allegorical interpretation, but is not constrained to do so. The final stage, "Aleph Unit Not," is, as its title suggests, a greater leap. Although the basic shapes remain, the frame of reference has shifted from a natural, if mystical, landscape to a geometrically abstract one. An open cube "thinks" a series of overlapping circles. The square/circle opposition/interaction has been implicit throughout, but is here stated, in generalised terms, as the "subject" of the series: the constrictions of the right-angled lines as against the organic circle of sun, moon, eye – or, in comic-book vocabulary, thought. The range of possible meanings in *Aleph Unit* is so wide because it is dealing in archetypal symbols of origin: the first letter, the sea, the sun. For Nichol, the visual metamorphoses form a kind of shorthand to the mythic consciousness one sees at the same period (1971-1973) in Book 3 of *The Martyrology,* which is also deeply concerned with the myths of origin. Equally, the metamorphosis of the letter in visual terms looks forward to the metamorphosis of the word in Books 4 and 5. *Aleph Unit* is thus a central work for any consideration of Nichol's development.

Several aspects of *Aleph Unit* – its serial form, its manipulation of the frame, its stylised landscape-drawing – are, as I have said, derived from comic strips, which are one of Nichol's abiding loves and concerns. He has a huge collection of first-edition comic books, and has worked commercially in the field, writing adaptations of science fiction stories by Arthur C. Clarke and Jack Vance.[42] Comic strips, he told Bayard and David, are a "universal language system that's already extant [and] can be used very powerfully."[43] This "language" depends on the manipulation of a visual field, divided into frames which normally indicate the passing of time, but which can be adapted (by extending a drawing across two frames, or by using the spaces *between* the frames) to express simultaneity. This temporal/spatial ambiguity of the frame is illustrated in a strip used in the TRG Report on Narrative [Figure 11].[44] The two small frames at the top represent one scene and are therefore simultaneous in time; the larger frame below is temporally subsequent, since it represents the *result* of the character's fall, but it is also spatially simultaneous. Moreover, the bottom of the frame has become a solid floor on

which the character stands and *through* which he may fall if a hole or trapdoor opens up in it: the ambiguous effect here is to confuse the frame as conceptual *surround* with the frame as an actual object *within* the represented landscape. This studied ambiguity in the very mode of discourse is indeed "one way out of the NARRATIVE CHAIN."

The individual frame, out of sequence, was the basis for the series "Frames" in *love: a book of remembrances*. Here Nichol presents brief lyrical glimpses – a single bird in the sky, thinking "lonely"; sky and earth divided by a horizon line along which is written "something which watches quietly" – and also explores the very nature of the frame. "this frame is empty" declares Frame 8, but these words are written *inside* the frame. Frame 7 assures us that "a frame runs around this phrase," but no frame appears on the page: so the frame is the page itself, the book, the reader's peripheral vision, the world. Again, the central point is the ambiguity of the frame, poised between its temporal function, as a comic-book convention for narrative progression, and its spatial function, as the delimitation of a drawing, or of a "timeless" lyric poem.

Thus the metamorphosis of image which occurs in *Aleph Unit* takes place within this ambiguous time/space "frame." The shifts in the image are successive yet also simultaneous: the frame, A, Aleph, remains constant at every stage. In *Door to Oz* and *Movies*,[45] there are no verbal or lettristic elements at all in the metamorphosing images (except for the titles). In *Door to Oz* a landscape of a road winding between mountains is reduced to a sensuous, erotic, curving, non-referential shape; in *Movies* a tree by a seashore becomes a whimsical animal's head. Nevertheless, Nichol still sees these pieces as "language texts ... occurring within the larger realm of my work with the visual aspect of language.... Working within & without the standard one frame unit of the comic strip i was able to image a language change."[46] The comic strip introduces into the static field of concrete poetry the temporal dynamism of narrative, yet every frame retains also the capacity for stillness, for isolation.

Many of these poems and letter drawings were, as I mentioned earlier, published by Seripress and were realised in collaboration with Barbara Caruso. As a painter, Caruso is best-known (though she is not known nearly well enough) for her series of "Colour Lock" paintings, which use shapes which in one sense look *like* comic-strip frames. In terms of Caruso's own work, this intent is not of course primary: for her, the free-drawn squares and rectangles are

"colour-shapes," that is, forms in which colour (in all its delicate variety and complex interaction) *takes* shape and *dominates* the shapes. The subtly varied and complementary shades play back and forth between the shapes and across the spaces between them: the subject of the paintings is first of all colour, not geometry.[47] Nevertheless, in several of her collaborations with bpNichol, Caruso's colour-shapes have been made to function, at least in part, as comic-book frames. In the series of prints, *The Adventures of Milt the Morph in Colour,*[48] two horizontal rows of colour-shapes are invaded, first by words, and then by Nichol's hand-drawn character Milt the Morph, who stubbornly persists, in the midst of the chromatic diversity of a Barbara Caruso painting, in thinking "blue." This process is reversed in *H: An Excursion,*[49] in which a quintessential zygal drawing by Nichol transmutes into a square of Caruso colour-locks. One of their most lovely collaborations is *From My Window,*[50] in which a square of four frames *might* be read as a comic-strip or as colour-shapes, were it not for the title, which enforces the reading as window-panes. In each of the seven prints, the name of one day of the week appears above the window, while below it is the blandly unvarying word "blue." But the actual shade of blue in the panes varies on each day, delicately, subtly, and beautifully: in this case at least, Caruso's sense of the infinite variety of colour wins hands down over the limitations of a generalising language.

*

bpNichol's work in visual poetry began, then, in the context of the international concrete poetry movement, and "Blues," the poem by which he is represented in Mary Ellen Solt's anthology, is a typical example of the genre. But Nichol's work within the classically defined limits of concrete poetry is not in fact all that extensive, being found mainly in *bp, Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer,* and *Still Water.* Even his later use of typewriter concrete in *Extreme Positions* shifts the conventions from the spatial presentation of a visual image to the temporal progression of a narrative. In his post-concrete developments of visual poetry, Nichol has increasingly relied on non-verbal visual elements: either his own drawings, whether of letters or of landscapes, or the colour-shapes of Barbara Caruso's paintings. Many of the later works also rely less on the static individual image than on a sequence, as in "Allegories," or on a

serial development and metamorphosis, as in *Aleph Unit*. In these ways, Nichol has found productive and provocative routes out of the impasse in which concrete poetry undoubtedly found itself by the end of the 1960s, and has perfected a fully personal style which preserves his early interest in the visuality of language and also enables the later works to take their place alongside the evolving concerns defined most comprehensively in *The Martyrology*.

CHAPTER THREE

Sound Poetry

thru sound the chance exists to heal the split that has become
more & more apparent since the invention of the printing press
it is the only thing that makes sense
BP NICHOL

IN THE 1960s, sound was the "poor cousin" of concrete poetry. Most of the attention was focussed on visual poetry, partly for the pragmatic reason that it was easier to reproduce in magazines and anthologies, and partly for the historical reason that it was in the visual mode that the founders of the international concrete poetry movement – the Noigandres group in Brazil, and Eugen Gomringer in Switzerland – worked and met. Yet it was recognised from the outset that the rationales for concrete poetry applied as fully to the aural dimensions of language as to the visual. Visual precedents in Lewis Carroll and Apollinaire could be matched by aural precedents in the work of the Dada sound poets (Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Raoul Hausmann, Kurt Schwitters). The term "sound poetry" predates "concrete poetry" by several decades: Hugo Ball called his works "Lautgedichte" (sound poems) in his diary entry for June 23rd, 1916.[1] Fifty years later, the Viennese sound poet Ernst Jandl described *his* work as "Sprechgedichte" (speech poems).[2] Jandl is, however, the only sound poet whose work is represented in all three of the major concrete poetry anthologies (Williams, Bann, Solt).

The distinctions between sound and visual concrete poetry are not, of course, absolute. Many visual poems invite "reading" in a manner which would produce sound poetry; and many sound poems have "texts" which would not look out of place in anthologies of visual poetry.[3] bpNichol has recalled that his first sound poems in fact grew out of visual texts: for example, "Cycle No. 22" [Figure 1 in Chapter 2] began as a visual permutation, but evolved into a percussive, cyclic chant. The difficulty of "quoting" sound poetry

persists, however, and it is just as much a problem for a critical account as it was for the anthologists. However complete some texts may be (and most sound texts are incomplete, minimal, or non-existent), they are never more than the equivalents of musical scores, never more than inferior substitutes for the actual experience of hearing the poems in performance. There exists, of course, the possibility of tapes – but this leads into one of the major divisions in sound poetry, between those poets who are prepared to use the enhancements and manipulations of tape technology, and those who insist upon the purity of the unaided human voice. For those poets who work in the former mode, tape is often the *only* medium in which their poems exist; for those who work in the latter (and this includes, with only a few exceptions, bpNichol and The Four Horsemen) recordings are only slightly less unsatisfactory than printed texts as records of what are essentially live, often improvised, performances. Nevertheless, in this chapter I will, for reasons of convenience, refer whenever possible to works by Nichol or the Horsemen for which recordings and/or printed texts are available.

The term "sound poetry" covers a wide range of experimental approaches to language, but what they all have in common is the foregrounding of the aural element. Richard Kostelanetz offers as a definition "language whose principle means of coherence is sound, rather than syntax or semantics."[4] This is a useful definition, since it clearly maintains the situation of sound poetry *within language*. Sound poetry always deals with sound not *per se* but with sound *as an aspect of language*. Even when that aspect is isolated from all other aspects, isolated even from meaning, its *ground* is still in language, and its practitioners are called, properly, poets. Given this fundamental insistence on sound, many different directions are open to the poet. Sound poetry may deal with recognisable words, using such techniques as chant, repetition, or multi-voice counterpoint to extend, emphasise, distort, or obliterate their meanings; or it may deal entirely with sub- or pre-verbal vocal sounds. It may be rigidly predetermined and elaborately orchestrated; or it may depend upon free-form improvisation. The sounds may be confined to what can be produced by the unaided human voice; or they may be subjected to all the distortions, multi-tracking accumulations, or disembodied amplifications of tape technology. And any given piece may, of course, situate itself at any or all points along any or all of these continuums.

The modern history of sound poetry is usually traced to the Dada

movement in Zürich, and to the poems performed by Hugo Ball in 1916.[5] There is much evidence to point to other, earlier instances of sound poetry, especially in the *zaum* experiments of the Russian Futurists, but it was Ball's work which became most widely known, and which was thus most influential. The Four Horsemen's first recording, *CaNADAda,*[6] is dedicated "to the memory of Hugo Ball," and it opens with bpNichol singing, to the tune of the traditional Union song "Joe Hill,"

I dreamed I saw Hugo Ball
The night was cold I couldn't even call
his name though I tried
so I hung my head and cried

I dreamed I saw Hugo Ball
and he looked fine he stood tall
but he lived in a world of pain
I never saw Hugo again

The song is an affectionate and accurate tribute. The echo of "Joe Hill" acknowledges Ball's status as a pioneer, while the emphasis on Ball's isolation and pain is true to what is biographically known of his personality.[7] Ball wrote that "In these phonetic poems we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge."[8] His most famous poem is the one beginning

gadji beri bimba
glandridi lauli lonni cadori
gadjama bim beri glassala
glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim
blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbrabim....

Although Ball's poems use invented words with no assignable meanings in any recognisable language, many of these words are clearly onomatopoeic, and he gave most of his poems titles – "Clouds," "Elephant Caravan" – whose specifications of a referential subject-matter must inevitably affect and condition the response of the listener.

Nevertheless, it was clearly Ball's intention to create an abstract or non-referential poetry, and this has remained one of the major thrusts of sound poetry ever since. Nichol's work has moved

constantly back and forth along the continuum between verbal meaning and pure vocal, or "abstract," sound. In describing this continuum, it will be useful, in the first place, to clarify a distinction between two different senses of the word "abstract," and I wish to do so along the lines proposed by Harold Osborne in his book *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth-Century Art.* Osborne speaks of the "Constant misunderstandings and confusion [which] occur, even among artists themselves, owing to failure to grasp the difference between ... two uses of 'abstract.'"[9] The first use, which Osborne classifies as "Semantic Abstraction," derives from the fact that "Both in philosophical and in everyday language 'to abstract' means to withdraw or separate, particularly to withdraw attention from something or from some aspect of a thing." Thus,

> a work of figurative or representational art, i.e. one which ... transmits information about some segment of the visible world outside itself, is said to be more or less abstract according as the information it transmits is less or more complete. In this sense abstraction is equivalent to incomplete specification.... Abstraction in this sense is a matter of degree and the term has no relevance or application outside the sphere of representational art. It is a factor of the relation between a work of art and that which the work represents.[10]

Under this heading of Semantic Abstraction, Osborne is able to discuss such diverse schools of painting as German Expressionism, Neo-Impressionism, cubism and Futurism.

"But," Osborne continues,

> "abstract" is also commonly employed as a general descriptive term denoting all the many kinds of art production which do not transmit, or purport to transmit, information about anything in the world apart from themselves. Other terms that have been used are: "non-representational," "non-figurative," "non-objective," "non-iconic." "Abstract" is the term which has obtained the widest currency although it is perhaps the least appropriate of all both linguistically and because of its established use in a different sense within the sphere of representational art. There are many types of pictures and sculptures within the wide spectrum of twentieth-century art which are not pictures or sculptures *of* anything at all; they are artefacts made up from non-iconic elements fashioned into non-iconic structures. These works are not more "abstract" or less "abstract." There *is* no relation between the work and something represented because the work represents nothing apart from what it is.[11]

Under this second heading, "Non-Iconic Abstraction," Osborne discusses the work of such painters as Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian, and such general movements as Suprematism, Constructivism and Abstract Expressionism.

It is obviously in this second, non-iconic sense that Hugo Ball intended the notion of "abstract poetry," and many of the rhetorical manifestoes of sound poetry have postulated this kind of "abstraction" as an ideal. At the same time, there is a large body of experimental work which fits into the general area of "sound poetry" which is not "abstract" at all, in the non-iconic sense. It may, however, be possible to see this writing as "abstract" in Osborne's *first* sense, especially when we consider the potential of that suggestive phrase, "incomplete specification." I am thinking here particularly of the work which Nichol and Steve McCaffery describe as "homolinguistic translation."

But can language in fact be rendered truly abstract, in either of Osborne's senses? A totally non-iconic art declares its own materials – sound, harmony and rhythm in music; shape, line and colour in painting – to be sufficient, without any need to support themselves by external reference, or to justify themselves in terms of their fidelity to some preconceived standard of "the real." Music – excluding for the moment such mixed media as opera and song – may indeed evoke emotions, but it does not refer directly to objects, or concepts, or fictional worlds. The note B-flat does not signify anything except itself, and its place in relation to a series of other notes: in this it is quite different from the word "guitar," or from the curved line, however abstracted or formalised, which signifies "guitar" in many cubist paintings. That line, in turn, is adaptable: while it may be made to signify a guitar, or a mountain, it may also be made to signify nothing but itself, or its place in relation to a composition of other lines. A word, however, is always significant. The word "guitar" must always direct the listener – provided, of course, that the listener speaks English – to the mental image or concept of a wooden stringed instrument; it can never be construed purely as an arbitrary composition of the g, t and r consonant sounds with the vowels i and a. Language is inherently referential. As a medium, it resists abstraction much more strongly than painting did: the difference is not simply one of degree, but of kind.[12]

If, then, we are to talk at all about the ways in which sound poetry moves towards "abstraction," we must look at techniques whereby

the inherent referentiality of language may be circumvented or subverted. How can this be done? If the word is to be retained as a compositional unit, then it must be placed in a context which will drastically qualify, undercut, or cancel altogether its function as signifier: this will lead the writer towards what Bruce Andrews has called "an experimentation of diminished or obliterated reference,"[13] or, more simply, to Osborne's "incomplete specification," semantic abstraction. If the word is *not* retained, the poet moves to non-iconic abstraction, and must work with sub-vocal elements of speech: individual letter-sounds, phonemes, morphemes, or the whole range of pre-verbal vocalisation: grunts, groans, yells, whistles, passionate gurgling, heavy breathing.

bpNichol, as I have said, has worked in all these modes, both in his solo performances and as part of The Four Horsemen. He has worked occasionally with tape (for example, in the CBC recordings of "Dada Lama" and "The Alphabet Game" included in his cassette *Ear Rational),*[14] but has by and large preferred to work without electronic enhancement. At one stage in the late 1960s he used to carry around his own loudspeaker system, but he came to believe that powerful amplification gave the reader an almost fascist power of domination over an audience, and that the sound poet has a moral responsibility to lead the audience as gently out of a poem as into it. Although he and the Horsemen have issued recordings of their work, singly and collectively, these recordings must still be regarded as secondary to live performance, both because a recording has the unfortunate effect of freezing and perpetuating one version of what is in essence a flexible field for live improvisation, and because the "disembodied voice" produced by tape is, for the sound poet, an ultimate contradiction in terms. All of Nichol's work in sound is aimed at reaffirming the presence of the voice in the body,[15] and much of the Horsemen's later work depends upon theatrical action which could only be perceived by a live audience.

Given, then, the range of modes I have outlined, this chapter will survey Nichol's work under the following headings. With his solo pieces, we shall begin at Osborne's category of "incomplete specification," looking at some of Nichol's experiments with translation. Then we shall move from the verbal end of the continuum, in such works as "Not What the Siren Sang, but What the Frag Ment," through to the non-iconic abstraction of "White Text Sure." Shifting to the collaborative work of The Four Horsemen, we shall retrace the continuum in reverse, going from such pure sound works as "Son

Nada" back to the elaborate verbal constructs of "Seasons" and "Stagelost." As with the visual poetry, this does not constitute a comprehensive listing of *all* Nichol's work in sound, but it does deal with representative examples from the whole range of possibilities which sound poetry offers.

I have included Nichol's work in translation in this chapter, although not all of it depends on sound (some of it, indeed, is purely visual). But it does seem to me to correspond to that type of abstraction which Osborne refers to as "incomplete specification." In every translation, there is a referent (the original text), but the method of transposition by which that source text is translated into the new text usually involves a degree of distortion or inadequacy which impedes (or "incompletely specifies") the process of reference. Even in normal translations, it is generally agreed that the specification of the original is incomplete (poetry is *what is lost* in the translation), but in normal translation that incompletion is kept to the minimum possible. In experimental translations, such as Nichol's, the incompletion, the discrepancy between the two texts, is maximised, since it is the whole point of the exercise. In normal translation, the principle of transference is that of semantic equivalence: thus, the semantic equivalent of the German "baum" is "tree" – but a translation which decided to pay more attention to sound than to sense might prefer to foreground the "reference" to the sound a dog makes, at which stage two punning translations suggest themselves, "baum" not as generic "tree" but as specific "dogwood," or "baum" not as the whole tree but as merely its outer covering, its "bark."

Given the low esteem in which puns are generally held, this kind of "translation" is often seen as merely whimsical (as in *Mots d'Heures: Gousses, Rames)*, but there are more serious precedents. Ernst Jandl published some witty translations of Wordsworth into Austrian dialect ("mai hart lieb zapfen eibe hold / er renn bohr in sees kai"),[16] and the same "gimmick" provided the method for Celia and Louis Zukofsky's complete translation of Catullus.[17] Nichol in fact pays tribute to the Zukofskys in his own version of Catullus XXVIII, in

Pisonis comites, cohors inanis,
aptis sarcinulus et expeditis,

more soberly translated as

You subalterns of Piso, a needy train,
with baggage handy and easily carried,[18]

become in the Zukofskys' version

Piso's own comates, his, corps an inane as
opt sad sarks – kin no less – 'at's expedited!

and in Nichol's version

Piss on his committees, cohorts in inanities
apt as sarcasm & as expeditious.[19]

Nichol's most ambitious exercise in translation is the series entitled *Translating Translating Apollinaire.*[20] Here the original text is itself a translation – a version by Nichol of a fragment from Apollinaire's "Zone," which was the first poem of Nichol's ever to be published, in 1964 – so that all subsequent transformations are from English into English, that is, "homolinguistic" translation.[21] This original text was then subjected to dozens of different transformations: the words were rearranged in alphabetical order or by word length; the letters *within* each word were rearranged alphabetically; words were replaced by their synonyms from Roget's *Thesaurus* or by their definitions from Webster's *Dictionary;* a full acrostic used every single letter of the original text as the initial letter of a new word; other authors who had seen the original text but did not have copies of it were invited to contribute "memory" translations; letters were rearranged in columns so that one could reconstruct the original by reading up the verticals or around the periphery of the new text; one pure sound version, breaking the text down to its constituent phonemes, appears as "TTA 52" on the cassette *Ear Rational.* Nichol has described the whole project as "a pure bit of research ... in which the creativity would be entirely at the level ... of formal inventiveness, and not at the level of content per se."[22] This is of course a very traditional use and justification for poetic translation, which authors have frequently seen as a way of keeping their hands in, practising or perfecting technique while free from the demands of personal expression; in this context, *Translating Translating Apollinaire* can be seen as an exercise in Nichol's self-proclaimed "apprenticeship" to language. But it is also a good deal more: by locating the principle of translation at a point other than semantic equivalence, such experiments provide in their own way (as sound does in its) the key that unlocks language, that deconstructs the bond between signifier and signified, and so opens the text to the free flow of dissemination, of desemanticised play. It is because they

both perform this function, more radically (I think) than visual poetry does, that I link homolinguistic translation and sound poetry.

Considered in this context, some of Nichol's early sound poems are indeed modest, both in their aims and in their achievements. "Salad,"[23] for example, presents several voices (or the same voice multi-tracked) repeating the names of various ingredients – lettuce, tomato, etc. – so that the overlapping of the voices suggests the idea of "tossing" the salad. "War and Peace"[24] splits the word "bomb" into an aggressive repetition of the plosive b and a soothing chant of the mantric "om." Such poems amount to little more than expressionist gimmicks, the equivalent of some of the more facile visual poems which simply mimic spatial arrangements. Many of Nichol's early sound pieces are, in fact, quite slight, albeit amusing and charming: "Flower Eyes,"[25] for instance, in which a series of whimsical adjectives echo the names of flowers ("lonely begonia, loony petunia, gross rose"), leading into the pop-song melody of "daffodil / I was leaning on my window sill." It should be noted, however, that even in these minor poems the essential principle stated by Kostelanetz has been implemented: their coherence, their very existence as poems, is situated only "in sound, rather than syntax or semantics."

Nichol moved quickly beyond such simplistic applications of sound techniques. The idea of sound as the basis for a poem's coherence finds a much more sophisticated realisation in another early poem, "Not What the Siren Sang, but What the Frag Ment."[26] The first line, "leaf autumn sky," presents a standard, haiku-like image, and the second line, "flea umantu kys," begins a visual permutation of the letters. But, as in the "Cycles" (which also progressed from visual permutation to sound), this second line establishes, not a principle of visual structure, but one of *sound:* the rhythmic base (two monosyllabic words flanking a trisyllabic word) on which the rest of the poem plays variations. The words which fit into this structure are then determined, not by any progression or congruence of meaning, but by similarity of sound: Braque, break, brick; element, all it meant, intimate. After the first few lines, the poem is made up entirely of recognisable words, generating multiple suggestions of meaning, and this very multiplicity is perhaps more to the point than any single "interpretation" could be. The poem is ultimately built on two major binary oppositions: that between the concreteness of the monosyllables (clock, cake, kick) and the abstractness of the trisyllables (imminent, emanate, imitate); and that

between the undifferentiated diversity of the semantic suggestion and the comforting regularity of the rhythm.

The rhythm is that of the chant, and so is based on repetition. Nichol, as a student of Gertrude Stein, knows that ultimately there is no such thing as repetition, merely an increase in insistence.[27] The repetitive rhythm of the chant is one of the basic techniques of sound poetry (especially in the performances of bill bissett), since it provides a coherence and continuity for the poem. Repetition can, however, function in two widely different ways: it can be used (as Stein suggests) to *insist* upon a meaning, or it can be used to *cancel* a meaning. One of the intriguing aspects of "Not What the Siren Sang, but What the Frag Ment" is that it exemplifies *both* these uses, simultaneously facilitating and numbing a listener's awareness of the diversity of the poem's semantic content.

A poem in which repetition (at least up to a point) *insists* upon meaning is *Lament: a sound poem (to the memory of d.a. levy who took his own life november 1968*[28] whose basic text consists of a repetition of the lines

you are city hall, my people
and look what you've become, i said
you are city hall, my people
and look what you've done, i said

There is a very clear sense in which this poem is *about* civic politics, and about the responsibility of each citizen for the actions of her government. (The poem allows for some variations, which specify aspects of that government – "you are your own fuzz," etc. – culminating in "you are your own distortion.") The mood of the poem may be angry or mournful, depending on the inflections of the voice: anger can be stressed by delivering the lines in harsh, ugly shouts, while a quieter note of lament can be suggested by a decrescendo on "look what you've done / and look what you've become." The text is no more than a basis for improvisation, so no two performances will ever be identical: mood, tempo, and duration may be modified by the performer depending upon audience response and conditions of performance. (Nichol's ambition, never realised, was to deliver the poem over the loudspeaker system at Toronto City Hall.) In all these ways, the repetition of the lines, and the insistent rhythm of the chant, work to insist upon the *idea* that the words contain. But this works, as I suggested, only up to a point: at that point (which will vary for every listener) the effect of the repetition will shift away

from insistence towards opaqueness; the rhythm and the repetition will come to refer more to themselves than to the meaning of the words. Nichol suggests this in the visual text by moving from a legible single printing of the lines to a multiple overprinting, in which the words have become an illegible blur. (Only this final stage is included in *As Elected.)* This effect of repetition is described by Ernest Robson when he says that a writer

> may destroy contextual meaning with such excessive repetition that attention to grammar or meaning is eliminated by exhaustion of all its information. Once this elimination has occurred the residual messages are acoustic patterns of speech. Then by default no other information remains but sounds, sounds, sounds.[29]

Religious chants have long used repetition as a means of occupying and distracting the foreground of consciousness in order to facilitate the unconscious mind's access to a state of meditation. Ball himself noted that, while performing at the Cabaret Voltaire, "my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation, that style of liturgical singing that wails in all the Catholic churches of East and West."[30]

A very interesting example of Nichol's use of repetition in a context which does start from meaning, but very quickly cancels it, is the chant Generations Generated" (1977).[31] The text here is a list of names taken from the genealogies of the Egyptian Pharaohs; this short text (about half a dozen names) is then repeated over and over, with minimal permutations or changes in rhythm, for an extended period of time. (The version recorded on *Ear Rational* lasts nine and a half minutes, but the length is variable in performance.) The listener is aware of *some* semantic information (the names are identifiable, and the repetition does suggest certain ideas about the passing of generations, the cyclic nature of time, and the fragility of a historical record in which only the names survive), but this information is very soon exhausted (partly because it is so minimal, and partly because the words are in a foreign language) and the listener is left with nothing but non-iconic sound and the rhythm of the repetition. The listener may simply become bored, or may use the chant as a mantra and enter into a state of meditation, hypnotised or entranced by the waves of sound. Again, the effect is more powerful in live performance, where the visible movements of Nichol's body involve the listener in the rhythms of speech and breath; on tape, the

effect of the disembodied voice can be quite alienating; on the page, of course, the poem does not exist at all.

"Lament" and "Generations Generated," then, both start at a level of recognisable meaning, subject it to the semantic abstraction of chant and repetition, and end up very close to completely non-iconic abstraction. Other Nichol sound poems are less straightforward in their progressions, but move back and forward along this continuum. "Hiroshima mon amour," for instance, begins with the phrase "Kon ichikawa," which is meaningful for those in the audience who know that it is the name of a distinguished Japanese film director, but would be an abstract sequence of syllables for those who do not. Most of the poem, which consists of a heavily rhythmic chant improvised on the fragmented syllables of the name, remains at this level of non-iconic abstraction; but it moves, perceptibly, towards the enunciation of "carnage ikawa." (Several of Ichikawa's films do indeed feature scenes of not inconsiderable carnage.) In the opposite direction, "Ballads of the Restless Are"[32] starts from two words – "roam" and "room" – but instantly breaks them down into their constituent letters and sounds. On the page –

ro ro ro
a o
mmm

ram
om om
r o r o

– the effect is clearly expressionist, as the letters "roam" around the "room" of the three-line stanza; but the sound version, in which the voice continues without interruption, loses the visual notion of the "room" and so becomes more purely constructivist and non-iconic. The poem's last link to semantic reference is that the limited number of letter-sounds out of which it is constructed was not established arbitrarily, but on the basis of the two original words. It is, however, very hard to dispose of meaning altogether. Just as, in visual poems, the reader will instinctively supply missing letters or establish non-linear connections in order to create recognisable words, so, in sound poetry, the listener will always be on the alert to resolve apparently abstract sound patterns into suggestions of meaning or, if possible, into familiar words. The listener to "Ballads of the Restless Are" may

find this hard to do without the benefit of the visual text – but stray associations (ram, om, am, armor) are inescapable.

This remains true even in a work as close to non-iconic abstraction as "Dada Lama (to the memory of Hugo Ball)."[33] The first four sections of this piece can only be approached in terms of pure sound: section 1 balances the high back nasal sounds of "hweeeee" and "hyonnn" against the tripping front dentals of "tubadido"; sections 2 and 4 alternate high and low pitches of the vowels E and A; section 3 is made up of non-words, in the manner of Hugo Ball ("dee du deena ... lat lina tanta"), spoken in poetic rhythm as if they were words, and as if they had syntactic continuity. But in sections 5 and 6 the listener inevitably hears meanings: section 5's alternation of "tlic" and "tloc" suggests the ticking of a clock, while section 6 develops its pitch-alternations on M and W, E and A, into a recognisable chant of the word "freedom." The poem then is built on alternations of opposing pairs, some of them contrasting sounds (hyonnn/tubadido) and some of them contrasting ideas (time/freedom). The title itself (as was the case with Hugo Ball) suggests a frame of reference. The Dada poet becomes the Buddhist Lama; sound leads into meditation; and meditation frees the worshipper from the limits of time.

Even such tenuous grounds for interpretation disappear, however, in such poems as "Scraptures – Fifth Sequence"[34] and "White Text Sure: Version I."[35] "Scraptures – Fifth Sequence" echoes some of the effects of the early sections of "Dada Lama," but without any further development: it can be "read" entirely as variations on vowel sounds and the consonants b, d, and y. It also uses a fair amount of overtracking and echo-chamber effects. The 1967 recording does sound rather thin and tentative now, mainly because Nichol's voice has gained so much subtlety and flexibility over the years; still, it is an attractive and impressive piece. "White Text Sure" descends below even the level of the recognisable letter: it is made up entirely of vocal sounds (mainly breathing, some inarticulate moaning, some sloshing around of saliva), and again, the effect on tape is disturbingly alienated from the physicality of such basic body sounds. "White Text Sure" is one of Nichol's most daring pieces, offering *nothing* for the traditional audience to hold onto; it takes us right down to the preconditions of speech itself, to language at its very origin, struggling towards articulation. Of all Nichol's solo sound poems, this is perhaps the one which comes closest to realising the vision of sound

put forward by Steve McCaffery in his manifesto "for a poetry of blood":

> sound poetry is *the* poetry of direct emotional confrontation: there is no pausing for intellectualization ... get down to the wormed roots of poetry: sound & rhythm & pulse – region of interaction of the primitive and the animal ... sound is the extension of human biology into a context of challenge. breath is the purest sound.[36]

"White Text Sure" is dated 1978, but as Nichol himself admits, in the notes to *Ear Rational,* "In the seventies i put the bulk of my energy in sound into composing for & with the Four Horsemen. In the single voice pieces the interest began to shift toward the more narrative & prose-based concerns evident in the most recent compositions on this tape, 'Interupted Nap' & 'Art in Upheval.'" In these latter pieces (as is perhaps indicated by the spelling errors in both their titles, assuming these errors to be deliberate), a more or less "normal" prose text (an obscure lecture in one, a child's bedtime story in the other) is subjected to sudden incursions of pure sound. Words or letters in the text will, without warning, be emphasised, extended, distorted. Bursts of abstract sound punctuate the calm reading of the texts, arbitrary eruptions of a subterranean level of language, disconcerting reminders of the power and volatility of sound that controlled speech holds precariously in check. In "Interupted Nap," the "surface" text is scarcely present at all; only fragments of a conventional story ("Once upon a time") remain inviolate; sound has taken over.

All of Nichol's solo sound poems are directed towards and based upon this ascendancy of sound. "all these words," he writes in *Journal,*[37]

> are only sounds i dance with the sounds i sing with the sounds the sound is all the meaning that there is the sound is the loving the sound is the longing oh god i am so full of sound i open my mouth & sound escapes ... my body fills with it i vibrate with the sound ... the sound flows around me i am lost in it oh surely this is knowing to live & breathe & celebrate the sound

An historical note by Rafael Barreto-Rivera, included in The Four Horsemen's album *CaNADAda,* recalls that the group began in 1970 when "After a bp nichol / steve mccaffery reading at Town Hall ... I approached barrie and suggested the three of us should jam

together some time and see what we'd come up with." Paul Dutton was also asked to join, and

> the group's first public performance happened on May 23, 1970, at Poetry and Things on Yonge Street. It was after this reading that we began to think of working together on a more than transitory basis. We quickly moved from jamming to the use of a notational system designed to establish the kind of discipline we felt would eventually give us the freedom to work improvisationally.

From late 1970 onwards, the group performed more or less regularly, becoming the most important focus for sound poetry in Canada, and an inspiration for other groups, such as Owen Sound in Ontario and Re:Sounding in Alberta, who realised that the possibilities of sound poetry are greatly enhanced by the interplay of several voices. The Four Horsemen have issued two records, *CaNADAda* (1972) and *Live in the West* (recorded 1974, issued 1977), and one cassette, *Bootleg* (1981). Their "Selected Performance Scores" were published under the title *The Prose Tattoo* (1983); their jointly published collection *Horse D'Oeuvres* (1975) contains works composed by all four individually, but no collaborations. They have for years been working on a collaborative novel, but it remains unpublished. Although some of their pieces can, at least in their origins, be attributed to individual members of the group, all of them have been developed in performance, so it is best to regard all their work as having a collaborative authorship. Although the membership of The Four Horsemen has never varied, there have been frequent performances by three or two of them, in which cases the "Four" is dropped from their title. All members of the group carry on active writing and publishing careers as solo authors; Nichol is clearly the best-known and the most widely published, but in the group's performances there is no star system. Rather, the four diverse temperaments and voices blend into remarkably harmonious unities. The Horsemen have always placed their stress on live performance, and very rarely use tape technology; for a brief period in 1971 they experimented with the use of musical instruments, but this was dropped.[38] In the later 70s, perhaps under the influence of the "theradramas" Nichol conducted at Therafields, the Horsemen's shows became highly theatrical, involving a good deal of on-stage action whose effects would be lost in an audio recording. Although they have performed less frequently in the last few years, the group is still alive, and still, as

SON NADA

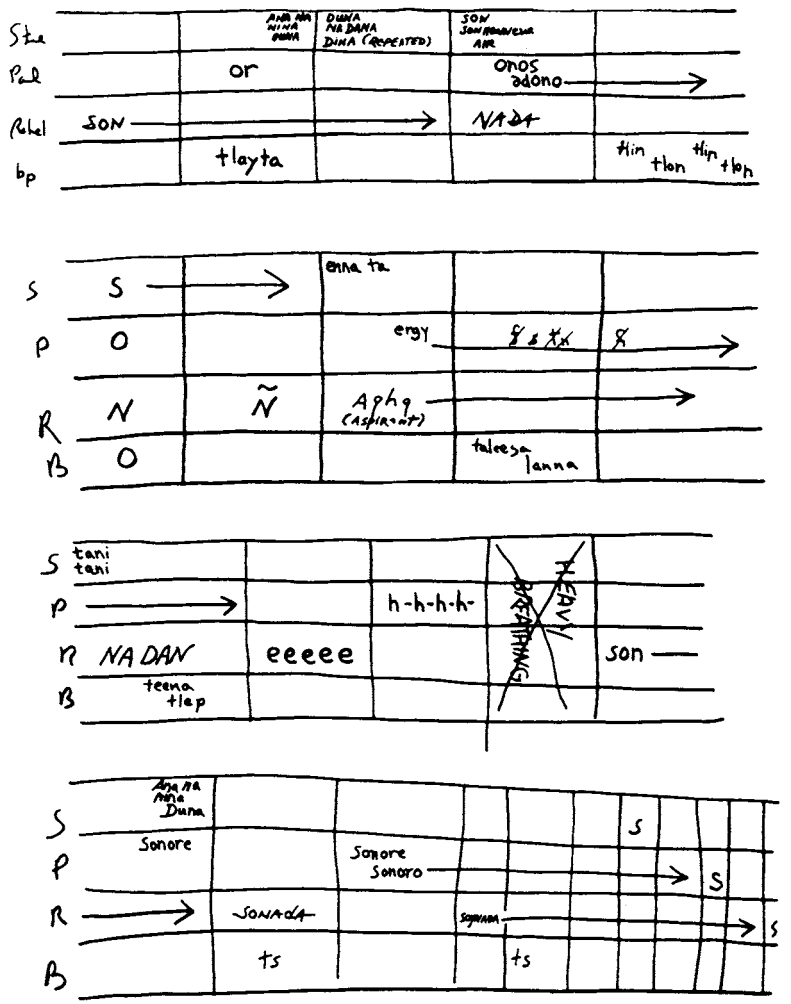


FIGURE I

Barreto-Rivera described it ten years ago, "a living workshop where practice breathed life into theory."

The simple fact of having available to them four voices, or four vocal lines, changes radically the kind of effects sound poets can achieve. All the resources of the single voice are still there, of course, but the other voices give an added dimension, new layers of texture, a degree of spatialization in what is essentially a temporal art. Juxtaposition, or counterpoint, necessarily becomes the central structural technique, and all other effects are subordinated to it. At one point in "Mischievous Eve,"[39] McCaffery's solo voice embarks on a pedantic lecture, "A History of North American Respiration," whose proliferating obscurities are gradually but decisively drowned out by Barretto-Rivera and Dutton repeating, in unison, stressing one word at a time, "One voice alone saying many things still cannot say what two voices together saying one thing can." The effect is first to divide the audience's attention, and then to compel it to assent to the proposition of the two voices. It's a paradigmatic moment within the Horsemen's work. Audiences are not accustomed to listening to more than one voice at a time, except in the case of music. When competing voices are both (or all) speaking recognisable words, the listener is forced into making a choice, or else into trusting her instinctive or subconscious response. When one voice is using words and another is making sounds, the listener will probably *consciously* follow the verbal line, again leaving the instinctive response to register the emotional values of sound. The Four Horsemen have tried every possible variation, and much of the fascination of their work lies precisely in the challenge they pose to the audience's traditional concept of its role as merely passive.

The Four Horsemen's notational system for mapping out these juxtapositions is a simple and flexible grid system, which may be illustrated by the published score for "Son Nada" [Figure 1].[40] The vertical lines mark transition points between the horizontal units, but this is still a minimal annotation. "The grid does not, indeed cannot, dictate pitch, rhythm, duration or any coloration the performer may put on the text. What it does do is define who's doing what when, with whom, & what elements they have to work with."[41] The grid is thus balanced between the freedom necessary for improvisation in performance and the discipline required to keep the four voices in a considered relationship.

"Son Nada" itself, as its title suggests, is a reasonably close approximation of the classical sonata form in music. The First

Movement, or Exposition, states the main theme in the sonorities of the letter N, as sounded by Barreto-Rivera and Dutton; McCaffery establishes the second subject in the more melodic "duna na dana dina," while Nichol provides a counterpoint with the tinkling, high-pitched "tlin tlon." Barreto-Rivera's Spanish N forms the Codetta to the First Movement. The Second Movement, or Development, begins in the explosion of harsh guttural and aspirant sounds at "[N]ergy," and rises to the climax of the "heavy breathing" passage. The Third Movement, or Recapitulation, recalls the first, as McCaffery returns to "ana na nina duna," and Barreto-Rivera and Dutton state the "meanings" most clearly in "Son-nada" and "Sonore, sonoro." All four then join in the Coda on S. Although much of sound poetry might be compared to music, and although The Four Horsemen have used songs and musical instruments within their compositions, it is comparatively rare for a piece to be so clearly analogous to an established musical form as "Son Nada" is to the sonata.

The counterpoint in "Son Nada" is largely between musical lines, or between voices making non-iconic abstract sounds: its only really recognisable word is "nada." It is more characteristic for The Four Horsemen to juxtapose verbal and non-verbal elements, as they do in what is arguably their most perfect work, "Matthew's Line."[42]

The whole of "Matthew's Line" is, in one sense, a "setting" for Steve McCaffery's dramatic, intense reading of the poem "I Am," written by the 19th century English poet John Clare while he was confined in Northampton General Lunatic Asylum. The poem speaks pathetically of Clare's sense of despair, abandonment, and isolation, both within the physical asylum and within his increasing insanity:

I am: yet what I am none cares or knows
  My friends forsake me like a memory lost,
I am the self-consumer of my woes[43]

The poem then moves to Clare's longing for escape, even if only through death:

I long for scenes, where man hath never trod,
  A place where woman never smiled or wept –
There to abide with my Creator, God,
  And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling, and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below – above the vaulted sky.

Out of context, the poem is a fine example of the Romantic desire for transcendence into a pantheistic unity of Nature; in the context of Clare's life, it points to the fineness of the dividing line between extreme Romantic sensitivity, the solitary genius of the poet, and clinical insanity.

In performance, "Matthew's Line" usually follows on directly, without a break, from Nichol's song for Hugo Ball. Historically, Ball was never mad, though he did suffer periods of nervous breakdown; but the portrayal of him in the song, isolated within "a world of pain," certainly suggests a parallel to Clare. At the end of the song, Nichol moves into a high-pitched ululation on the letter E, which is to continue as a background through most of the piece. Barreto-Rivera and Dutton then enter with "Matthew's Line" itself, that is, "My shoes are dead, oh microphone," or in Spanish, "Mis zapatos estan muertos, o microfono." The notes to *CaNADAda* tell us that this line comes from "a groovy 3-year-old." Spoken by a child, the line is cute and precocious; spoken by a poet, it is (especially in Spanish) a striking surrealist image; regarded as a literal statement of fact, it would of course be evidence of madness. These two elements – the abstract eeeeeeeeeee, the surrealist image – together provide the setting for McCaffery's reading of Clare's poem, which is the dominant vocal line of the performance's middle stage. As McCaffery reaches the final line of the Clare text, Nichol chimes in with an echo on "The grass below," and McCaffery stretches the final syllable, "skyyyy," into a long nasal reverberation. All four voices then gather in a chorus of abstract sound, though Dutton's "dead" can still be distinguished. The effect is very much like the assumption or transcendence that Clare longed for: the voices move beyond the sufferings of an isolated sensibility, and beyond the ominous suggestions of surrealism, into the harmonic unity of the whole.

This kind of Romantic intuition of unity is in fact at the heart of a great deal of sound poetry. Many of the manifestoes and theoretical statements are frankly Romantic in their ideology and vocabulary. McCaffery's "for a poetry of blood" celebrates the way in which sound bypasses the "indirect communication" of the intellect and speaks instead directly to the emotions: "sound is the conviction that the senses should be married not divorced, sound is a respect for the purity of immediacy & an utter faith in the human capacity to grasp the immediate."[44] Jerome Rothenberg describes sound poetry as "the search for a primal ground: a desire to bypass a civilization that has become problematic & to return, briefly, often by proxy, to the

origins of our humanity."[45] These ideas also underlie one of The Four Horsemen's most ambitious pieces, and one which, ironically, relies far more than most of their work on a fully comprehensible text, "Seasons."[46]

It begins with a brief passage which both states and enacts the theme of cyclic return:

what is becoming it has passed now
what has passed it is become again
all this it is apparent now
an open ending
an ending opened
into

Each of the four voices, in fairly regular alternation, then takes the lead for a section; each of these sections usually fades out on the repetition of a key word ("to sea," "drifting," "motion") as a new voice comes in above it. The texts present repeated images of death ("skull of the rabbit / the bones that washed in from the sea"; "a major aircrash malton airport less than a year ago people driving out to see the wreckage hoping for a body uncovered"), contrasted against the images of springtime rebirth ("the early buds / the first gesture"; "the warmth again of rising in / the green earth"). The fertility of returning life is presented in traditional images of female sexuality: "trees she became the greenness was intense hills hid in her breasts heaving beneath flat quiet field clinging the loose turf my fingers sink in the brown soil she grew up in." The texts evoke the world mythologies of renewal ("passover haggadah we are thankful ... ishtar vishnu pallas athene") and the folk rituals associated with it ("the children's game / how they stood in a circle"; and Dutton's stirring rendering of the English folk song "Pretty Susie"). But, despite the title, only two seasons are mentioned in the text: spring and summer. In the final stages of the work, the chant of "stop cycle" (each "stop" being underlined by McCaffery on flute) suggests the desire to suspend time, to rest in the "bright summer day" before autumn or winter can come. The final passage of the texts presents a desperate image of failed perception ("i could not see her hair"), but it cannot be interpreted as the onset of winter, since it is specifically dated "march 4." Ultimately the cycle does re-assert itself, as all four voices return to the original "what is becoming it has passed now," thus bringing the piece itself full circle, despite the incompletion of its seasonal evocation. Thus there is in "Seasons" a

continual tension between the Romantic desire for a mythic natural unity ("The grass below – above the vaulted sky") and the mundane frustrations of a broken, stopped, or incomplete cycle. The obvious and easy way to handle the theme would have been to assign one voice to each of the four seasons; the actual counterpoint in "Seasons" is more complex and satisfying, partly because of its very incompletion.

Those of The Four Horsemen's later works which rely, as "Seasons" does, on the interplay of largely comprehensible texts became more self-consciously theatrical, self-reflexively aware of the conditions of performance on a stage in front of an audience. The most explicit of these self-referential works is "Stagelost,"[47] which opens with the announcement, in a humorously exaggerated carnival barker's voice, "And now, the – Four – Horsemen!! Sentences! Paragraphs! Syllables! Sounds! Syntax! Language like never before!" As in "Seasons," various texts move in and out of each other, fading and overlapping: most of these texts are narrative, including a diary of a reading tour in the Maritimes, and some of the stories about numbers which would later appear in Paul Dutton's *The Book of Numbers*.[48] But then Nichol steps forward and announces

> Hullo, my name is Rafael. This here, this thing I'm reading off of, is a page, and it's covered with words that Barrie wrote for me to say, which of course is all a power trip on his part. Actually, I'm the real power behind the group, I'm the one who wrote our autobiography, "In the Middle of a Blue Balloon," so fuck it, I'm throwing this stupid script of his away.

This gesture immediately deconstructs the assumptions of the entire performance. The audience (most of them) *knows* that the speaker *is* Barrie, not Rafael, so appreciate the immediate humour – but the question remains, who *did* write the lines that Nichol speaks? The question inserts a wedge into the most fundamental of sound poetry's assumptions: the identity of author and voice. The text is cut free from any determinable source. The interchangeability of names and identifications, whereby Barrie Nichol can "be" Rafael Barreto-Rivera, might be taken as evidence of the *unity* of the group, the unimportance of the individual ego; but the text attributed to the fictional Rafael is, albeit humorously, redolent of spite and jealousy. As "Stagelost" continues, Nichol also makes a statement "as" Paul Dutton; then the group passes into a section of extended dialogue, each line punctuated by the prose narrative connections of "asked Barrie," "said Paul," "asked Steve," "asked Rafael," etc. – each line

being consistently attributed to the wrong speaker. Again, the confusion serves to separate voice from authorial source, and name from personal identity. (In a 1982 performance, the Horsemen wore four T-shirts, labelled Barrie, Paul, Rafael, and Steve, but exchanged them at random between each poem, so that only by chance would any group member be wearing "his own" name.) The theatrical gesture is a brilliantly simple dramatisation of the theoretical idea of linguistic indeterminacy undermining the very condition of narrative discourse. "Stagelost" ends with a burlesque demonstration of the attributes of a poet and a prose-writer (stomach, breath, throat, mouth) and of an audience (eyes, ears, hands for clapping, but most importantly buttocks), and concludes with Nichol's statement, wryly reflecting the systematic disruptions that have gone before, "the thing is that sometimes things get so mixed up, so confused, that poet, prose-writer, audience, we don't know what to do."

Such confusion may well be most audiences' reaction to sound poetry. If it remains simply at the level of confusion, it is not too profitable; but if it shakes up the audience's whole notion of the condition of being an audience, then it can lead to a fundamental realignment of audience, poet, and poem. Especially in pieces like "Stagelost," The Four Horsemen are staging a kind of guerilla seminar in critical theory. The results are sometimes paradoxical: a lot of sound poetry seems to exemplify the open-ended, indeterminate flux of language that poststructuralism celebrates, yet at the same time sound poetry is primarily an art of voice, not writing. "Stagelost" separates voice from authorial source, so that all that is left is text – but that text is still spoken. One way out of this paradox may be, as I have suggested, to adopt Roland Barthes' category of "writing aloud," and thus to bring sound poetry, vocal as its nature is, into the fold of "écriture." Sound thus becomes, as I said earlier in this chapter, the key that unlocks language; sound is an emblem of différance, inserting itself between the signifier and the signified, and so opening the text to the free flow of dissemination. It is no surprise, then, that Nichol in the 1970s turned so much of his energy away from visual poetry towards sound: that was where the cutting edge was, both in theory and in performance. As The Four Horsemen put it in "Schedule for Another Piece: A Theory of Practice":[49]

> There are no words to describe it and it cannot be defined. We are here simply to be heard and we hear each other there. When we perform this way we are ourselves performed.... Let us say quite simply that sound is that which we do not see.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fiction

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a man is in a room

something happens in the room below him

he ignores it

BP NICHOL, "Novel"

a man is in a room

he ignores it

BP NICHOL, "Novel"
Condensed Book Version by Linda Davey & Michael Ondaatje

OPENING *Craft Dinner*,[1] bpNichol's collection of short prose "stories & texts," and turning to the first page of the untitled preface, the reader immediately finds herself addressed:

you turn the page & i am here that in itself is interesting

The question is, who is speaking? A reader's normal assumption might be (especially in a preface or introduction) that, unless some contrary indication is given, it is the author who is "speaking" (writing). But this is not the case here, for the next line continues "to me at least it is interesting since my existence begins as you turn the pages & begin to read me." So the reader deduces that it is *the text itself* that is speaking to her: the words, the physical ink on the turned page. The idea of a text speaking is itself a paradox. In my critical account of the encounter between this book and the posited reader (who is herself the heroine of that fiction we call Reader Response Theory), I have, at the very first step, fallen into the convention of ascribing ultimate authority to a speaking voice rather than to a written text. Such a privileging of speech over writing is, according to Derrida, the fundamental gesture of Western philosophy and

culture, and it is the assumption which the critical theory of the last fifteen years has undertaken to "deconstruct." What Derrida and his followers do, at great length, in theory, Nichol here achieves, in practice, at a stroke.

The text "speaks." The written text assumes a voice, and a personality, distinct from that of the author.

probably you retreat from what i say probably you push it away saying well after all there is an actual person did write this look there is his name you are fooling yourself he is no longer important to my existence

(The "death of the author" is one of the basic tenets of poststructuralism.[2] The author is dead; long live the text.) The text assumes the traditional "authority" of voice, but simultaneously asserts itself as text: "i am not alive am i i am simply these words as they follow one another across this page." Instead, the text ascribes its existence to the reader: "i exist now because of you only you you are all that gives me meaning ... my meaning is in my being is in your reading of me."

This shifting of the source of meaning from the author to the reader is, as I suggested above, one of the basic assumptions of Reader Response Theory. Douglas Barbour, in his review of *Craft Dinner,* comments that the pieces in it

require an active reader, one whose consciousness of the text is, in phenomenological terms, "intentional," an alive & determined awareness bringing itself to bear upon the aesthetic object so that it may achieve full being in the encounter between writer & reader, what is written & what is actively read.[3]

Meaning, in this view, does not reside in the text as some kind of quasi-objective quality or attribute of the text; meaning exists only in the process, or *event,* of reading. (All meaning is thus, like the true history of Billy the Kid, "eventual.") As an event, meaning is dependent on the initiator of the event, i.e. the reader.

so now you have begun you have begun reading what i am saying & i am once again finding a beginning ... i am because you read me.

The text "is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an *event,* something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader."[4]

If the reader's role is viewed as active, she is no longer simply a passive receiver of meaning, but rather a participant in the

production of meaning. The reader, writes Wolfgang Iser, "sets the work in motion, and so sets [her]self in motion, too."[5] Stated at its most extreme (as, for instance, by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*), the conclusion is that the reader is "no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text."[6] Nichol's "speaking" text holds out precisely this promise to its reader: "have you ever said to yourself oh i wish this book would never end it doesn't have to end you can change this book." There are, of course, *some* limits to the extent to which a reader can change a book, but these limits, critics like Stanley Fish would argue, are inherent not so much in any supposed objective inviolability of the text itself as in the very nature of the reader and of the process of reading. (See, for instance, Fish's whole concept of the "interpretive community.")

If the act of reading initiates the meaning of the text, it also creates the role, and thus the identity, of the reader (who, in Iser's words, "sets [her]self in motion, too"). The reader may also be defined as a function in the process; she is the one who reads, that is all. Nichol's text is not aware of any personality in the "you" who brings it to life – "each time you are different ... i am not aware of your difference" – and yet "i depend on you for my being." The reader matters to the text only *as* reader, and when she performs that function they merge together like mutual parasites. "at this moment i exist only thru you at this point i am you there is no distinction between us we are this writing." Without the presence of the reader's consciousness to give it awareness of itself, the text is nothing. In the long stretches of time during which it is not being read, the text is aware of nothing: "my existence is one of waiting waiting without consciousness of waiting." Sympathetically, the text contrasts its own total impassivity with the pain of being human, and therefore of being conscious:

> for you waiting must be a terrible thing waiting that goes on with no knowing of an end that must be a terrible thing ... for me it is not terrible for me there is no awareness of waiting there is simply being & not being.

Nichol has often recalled the time he spent working in a library, painfully aware of the thousands of books sitting unopened on their shelves, and something of the curious pathos of their fate informs the final repetitions of this preface: "always i am waiting somewhere i am waiting waiting without consciousness of waiting waiting."

For the text, the reader is a necessary fiction who may never materialise.

This preface to *Craft Dinner* presents, then, a view of the text which may profitably be read within the context of Reader Response Theory. To some extent it is a dramatisation of such theories, to some extent a commentary upon them. To some extent also, it is a quietly ironic undermining of them, testifying to the persistence of more traditional concepts of fiction. Douglas Barbour comments that

> the "preface" is a brilliant piece of writing because it paradoxically *creates* character by *denying* it. There is simply the "voice" of the text, telling us over & over again ... that it is only words we read, words which wait without consciousness for us to read them & thus give them momentary existence; yet this "voice," these words, exist as a bare-bones character, someone we do read, we do listen to, whose quiet but effective speech, a subtle self-aggrandisement we almost fail to recognize because it denies itself so cleverly, touches us, moves us, possibly changes our minds a bit about what it is we do when we pick up a text & read.[7]

As soon as the reader restores to this speaking text the ability of "voice" to create a fictional "character," she begins to suspect irony on Nichol's part. The text's repeated assertions of its own non-entity, its lack of being, become, as Barbour notes, a "form of subtle self-aggrandisement"; the text's attitude towards the reader, ostensibly one of almost grovelling humility and subservience, may be read as latently hostile and vampiric; and the text's increasingly desperate assurances that it feels nothing become evidence that it does indeed feel something. The text, in short, becomes a complex fictional character: proud and demanding, yet also tragic, or even pathetic – a kind of Beckettian tramp existentially waiting for Godot, who in this case is the reader.

If one were to use the "tone of voice" in a conventional way, as an indication of "character," one would also have to point, in this piece, to its use of repetition. The text makes its points, as Barbour notes, "over & over again," pedantically spelling out every variable of circumstance, repeating versions of "the same" idea with only minimal changes in the phrasing. In realist fiction, this would be read as a sign of an obsessive character, suffering from some kind of mental fixation. Nichol is not of course writing realist fiction, but the obsessive quality is nevertheless a fundamental aspect of the characters in

his novels, most of whom (especially in *Journal)* are emotionally disturbed people, and repetition is one of the techniques Nichol uses to embody their fixations in his prose. Repetition is the expression of *desire,* which is always a movement towards an absence, towards that which is not there. Repetition, in Nichol, is not so much the repetition of events, as of the gestures of consciousness which demand and evoke these events: it is the repetition of desire. It is also, in the narrower terms of literary influence, an inheritance from Gertrude Stein.

Stein used repetition, especially in her early phase around the time of writing *The Making of Americans,* as a form of insistence on meaning. She believed that every human being has a fundamental character, or "bottom nature," which remains constant throughout their lives, and which may thus be observed/described as the only thing that stays the same beneath the flux of superficial change. As Donald Sutherland explains it,

> If the character does not change, if its interior and exterior history has no important influence upon it, and if it is the definition and description of types of character and the demonstration of these types that interest the writer, the problem is one of projecting character in time without a sequence of events and all the context of irrelevant accidents. This leads naturally to repetition, the constantly new assertion and realization of the same simple thing, an existence with its typical qualities, not an event.[8]

Sutherland's description here of the aims of Stein's fiction seems to me to be applicable also to Nichol's. In Nichol also, repetition is the mode in which character is formed, and in which it is revealed to us. In Nichol also, there is often very little concern with any "sequence of events": "plot" in his fiction is frequently disrupted or displaced. However, Nichol does at times allow for the possibility of character change and development, and this is sometimes difficult to portray within a narrative style based on non-sequential repetition.[9]

For Nichol, the "bottom nature" of his characters is always expressed as emotion; he uses repetition in order to isolate and express deep human feeling, which exists (in Stein's terms) not in event-bound "human nature" but as an aspect of the timeless "human mind."[10] Therefore, in Nichol's fiction, there is often a degree of abstraction of emotion – in the terms of Harold Osborne which I used in the previous chapter, an "incomplete specification" – in which the accidental particulars of a situation are absent from the

text. In *Still,* for instance, the names, ages, appearances, and even genders of the two characters are never revealed; in works like *Journal,* the sequence of events is broken up, rearranged, overlapped, repeated, to prevent the reader from getting caught up in the seriality of a story. Rather, these works present a pure, or idealised emotion, rather like the "supremacy of pure feeling" which Kasimir Malevich claimed for his Suprematist paintings.

bpNichol's prose fiction may be divided into two very general categories or directions (which, of course, frequently overlap and interact with each other). Some of it, like the preface to *Craft Dinner,* is metafictional: fiction *about* fiction, self-reflexively concerned with its own modes of being and communication. Nichol enjoys traditional genres for their very conventionality, and such works as "Three Western Tales" and "Gorg: a detective story"[11] delight in the deconstruction of cliche. *Still* is not so much a novel as the analysis of a novel, isolating for inspection two elements – description and dialogue – which are normally bound up organically with the rest of the narrative. But all these metafictional techniques are used not only for their own sake but also as a way of reaching the "bottom nature" of the characters, of putting aside the particularities of a realist story in order to find the emotional core. So the second category of Nichol's fiction consists of those works which explore, through techniques derived from Gertrude Stein's use of repetition, obsessive states of mind and emotion. The division between these two categories corresponds, very roughly, to the division between *Andy* and *For Jesus Lunatick.* But the very fact that these "two novels" do form one book, *Two Novels,* is a further indication that the two directions or categories of Nichol's fiction are not, and cannot be, sharply distinguished from each other. Consider, for example, these lines:

> when you read this i want it to be me when you read this i want to be there
> ... when you put this book down i wont be there.

It sounds like the "theoretical" preface to *Craft Dinner,* but it isn't: the lines come from the final page of *Journal,*[12] and they follow directly on from that novel's climax, the primal scream of pure emotion.

*

bpNichol's first major publication of fiction was *Two Novels* (1969), which contained *Andy* and *For Jesus Lunatick.*[13] The format of the

book is itself a challenge to the conventions of reading: each novel starts at the "end" of the book and works backwards, so that the reader has to read the right-hand page first. *Andy* leaves numbered spaces for illustrations to be pasted in; the illustrations themselves (comic-book style drawings by Nichol) are inserted on pasted paper, ready to be cut out, in a special section in the centre of the book, between the two novels.

Andy is an extended exercise in collage. Apart from the juxtaposition of the text to the illustrations, the text itself consists of six separate narrative strands (several but not all of which coalesce as the novel progresses), which alternate rapidly and irregularly, like fast cutting in a movie. There are some thematic similarities between the strands (travel, exploration, discovery), but these seem less important than the idea of collage itself.

The first strand is a series of letters written to "Barrie" by a friend called "Andy." These were in fact real letters written to Nichol by Andy Phillips; in the novel, this autobiographical reference stands in ambiguous relationship to the avowed fictionality of the other strands. On the one hand, the letters seem "more real," providing the reader with a touchstone of fact against which to measure the fantasy or parody of the other narratives; on the other hand, the letters are drawn into the world of fiction, until we can question whether "Barrie" and "Andy" have any greater claim to reality than "Bob de Cat" or "Gravestone McHammer." They are all, as far as the novel is concerned, simply functions of the text.

Andy's letters describe a three-month stay in Paris, from December 1964 to March 1965. They are full of mundane and muddled arrangements for travel, with Andy repeatedly expressing the wish to meet Barrie in Vancouver in March, and appearing progressively more anxious that this won't work out. They contain very ordinary and superficial tourist's impressions of Paris: "One always sees the Eiffel Tower or the Basilica Sacre Coeur.... The latter is the most beautiful structure in Paris I think. I have taken pictures & will show all" (p. 13). Andy's naivety and gauche awkwardness extend to his personal relationships: "I want to ask this girl out but she is surrounded by people all the time & she speaks little english. I lose my courage every time I see her.... You know Bar I'm a very funny character. I'm living in fantasies all the time. I've fucked about 10-18 girls in my fantasies & not one in reality. Oh well" (p. 37). Although there are some hints of more serious matters between them ("the people back home will or might be probing so be a bit careful" (p. 26)), the

letters remain at a chatty, superficial, fairly inane level.

The second strand consists of the journal and letters of "the once famous Bob de Cat (a pseudonym if ever I heard one!)"(p. 7), an explorer undertaking a dangerous journey through supposedly impassable mountains. It's a conventional adventure story, with disasters and hair's-breadth escapes, a loyal native guide called Yaboo, mysterious valleys hidden in the mountains, legends of a city of gold, etc. Nichol deploys the clichéd elements with enough restraint that the reader is able to react to it as convention rather than parody. On the other hand, the next three strands – romance, pornography, and detective novel – are all stated in such outrageously exaggerated terms that they can only be taken as parody. The romance features characters called Cynthia and Calabreth discussing a vital operation and exclaiming "Oh darling! what must you think of me?" (p. 12); the pornographic story is full of sentences like "Sophia's breath came in lewd gasps. 'rrrrrorryyyyy,' she moaned, fingers clawing his heaving buttocks" (p. 13); and the detective story is in the American wise-cracking tough guy mode: "stoned out of my mind picked up the phone to hear someone saying 'Gravestone McHammer?' I had to admit that was my name" (p. 16).

The final strand is that of a metaphysical science fiction story with literary overtones. An undefined "ship" (at various times it sounds like a spaceship, or a submarine, or a time machine) is sounding the depths of an ocean, or of the human mind, or of time, or of narrative. Measures are given of its distance from the "actual bottom" (p. 10), a phrase which may recall Stein's "bottom nature." In a moment of crisis the order is given to "jetison [sic] reference" (p. 25). The language of this strand is the most experimental of the six, moving in a stream-of-consciousness flow with fragmented syntax and some invented words; however, the element of parody is also present. The quest of this "ship" is, it appears, to break down the barriers of time, space, and genre which separate the other strands: "fragments of incomplete. bits of probables. unlikelies. the whole thing welded as it were ungainly" (p. 8). This "moving into ultimate reversal of linear sequential thinking" (p. 13) is achieved in the first place by collapsing the three parodied stories into each other, all of the characters being revealed to be the same under different names: "Calabreth's eyes widened in surprise. 'Gravestone McHammer! But you're not supposed to be here!'" (p. 29). This collapsed story is then drawn into the sphere of the science fiction story: the ship's Captain, who is also

Rory, who is also McHammer, declares, "In the decision to jetison reference I drew you together in an improbable manipulation of set theory" (p. 31). This super-story then attempts to claim the Bob de Cat strand as well, asserting that he is also Rory (p. 36), but this narrative, perhaps because it is less obviously a parody, resists assimilation.

What are in effect now three strands all close together: the science fiction expedition admits its failure ("no further delineation possible. closing now"); Bob de Cat and his faithful guide transcend the cold death of the mountains into a place where "There is no end to the light. The warmth is overwhelming"; Andy returns home from Paris, closing his last letter "I send this with the love of our friendship" (p. 39). Throughout the novel, the various strands have at times commented on or run into each other; similarly, these three endings interact in very suggestive ways. All are in some sense failures: the ship is lost; the explorers die; Andy gains very little from his trip to Paris. Yet all are in other ways successes: the science fiction story has gone a long way towards breaking down generic narrative barriers; the explorers do reach a strange, mystic country beyond death; and there is a feeling of emotional satisfaction and completion in Andy returning home.

For Jesus Lunatick takes its title from an epigraph quoted from Christopher Smart's "Jubilate Agno": "*For* I pray the Lord *Jesus* that cured the *Lunatick* to be merciful to all my brethren and sisters in these houses. For they work me with their harping-irons, which is a barbarous instrument, because I am more unguarded than the others" (emphasis added by Nichol). Smart, like John Clare, was confined in a mental asylum; he is remembered for his strange, at times child-like visionary poems, in which he "considers" his cat, Jeoffry.[14] Both madness and cats play prominent roles in *For Jesus Lunatick*.

Whereas one can still trace the progression of events in each of the narrative lines in *Andy*, in *For Jesus Lunatick* (as in the later novel it most closely resembles, *Journal*), the narrative sequence has been obscured or suspended. There are a series of dramatic scenes, which may be similar events repeating themselves or the same event described over and over again, but their temporal or causal relations are not clear. Nor is the reader really called upon to reconstruct a narrative sequence, any more than the viewer of a cubist painting is called upon to rearrange the pieces like a jigsaw puzzle into the shape

of a single guitar. The point is rather to read the fragmented and repetitive images as they occur, with their echoes of themselves and their juxtapositions to each other, and to see them as constituting the narrow emotional range of an obsessive consciousness.

Most of the text is presented as the consciousness of the central character, Phil or Phillip; the novel's scenes are experienced, remembered, or fantasized (there is no clear distinction) by him. The other characters include Frank, who lives in the next room; Phil's unnamed girlfriend or lover; and Phil's parents (though his mother is not entirely distinct from his girlfriend, nor his father from Frank). Phil "remembers" violent quarrels with his girlfriend; scenes where he is mocked and humiliated by her and by other people; and scenes where he pleads with the silent and indifferent Frank to talk to him.

Much of the narrative material is clearly Oedipal. There is one long passage in which Phil remembers/fantasizes being in a bath with his mother (p. 33), and another in which he witnesses his father (or Frank) assaulting (or making love to) his mother (p. 43). All these scenes have the vividness and illogicality of dream narratives: each momentary detail is clear, but the transitions between them are shifting and phantasmagoric. By the time Nichol wrote *For Jesus Lunatick* he had already made contact with Therafields, and was certainly deeply aware of Freud (though Therafields itself was eclectic in its use of psychological theories, and was by no means committed to dogmatic Freudianism). In his fiction, especially *For Jesus Lunatick* and *Journal,* Nichol has repeatedly dealt with the primal themes of sexuality and violence, and with the child's relationship to his parents; further, his treatment of this topic has always focussed, almost exclusively, on the male experience. The emotional tension and bond between father and son is the central psychological theme of the fiction, and it continues, in a different mode, throughout *The Martyrology.*

In attempting to write about this primal material, Nichol has moved beneath the rational level of clearly articulated sentences, whose achievement of correct syntax is itself a distancing from the emotion, and a protection against it. Most of *For Jesus Lunatick* is written in a loose "stream-of-consciousness" style, with no clear distinctions between external and internal events, spoken dialogue and unspoken thought, actual occurrences and fantasies or memories. The result is very intense, and is concentrated into short, sharp

bursts, which are punctuated by long periods of silence. These silent periods, which may be read as indicating unconsciousness or repressed feelings, show up in the text as blank spaces; the reader is invited to experience them as part of the rhythm of reading, and, ideally, to allow as long for "reading" the blanks as for reading an equivalent expanse of text. Of the 46 pages in the novel, 18 are entirely blank, and a further 22 carry at least as much blank space as print. When the voice bursts out of these long silences, the effect is at times on the edge of total breakdown or hysteria:

> laughing no dad no crying didn't you ever listen boy fool shuttup fool you be never listenin i be tellin yu please for god's sake dad you'll kill her hands bleeding and watching the knife slip in and out the hole in her belly crying please phil hold me please crying oh god dad no not again oh god crying every night please and i told you shuttup no god NO SHUTTUP don't let go phil just hold me please make love to me screaming lips opening lear face above back hunched and sobbing please dad don't hit her again laughing again (p. 43)

One might analyse the component elements of this passage (father punishing son; father attacking mother; father making love to mother; son making love to girlfriend; etc.), but disentangling its parts seems less important than the intensity of the emotion which collapsed them together in the first place. The strong association of sex and violence (the father's penis as a knife slipping "in and out the hole in her belly ... every night") has severely damaged Phil's capacity for mature relationships, either with the unnamed girl or with Frank, to whom his relationship is clearly one of suppressed homosexuality.

The circling and repetitive form of *For Jesus Lunatick* thus defines Phil's psychological state as one of fixation, paralysis, retarded development. Towards the end of the novel, Nichol does introduce more hopeful images, but it is difficult for the novel's basically static style to allow for a convincing sense of change or development. On the final page, a meeting in the park, arranged or promised several times, finally takes place, and Phil and his girlfriend "walked thru the park looking up at the stars talking home and took off their clothes and made love the river beginning its slow murmuring in their heads" (p. 54). In a more traditional novel, this image's status as "the last word" would give it special significance and weight; but *For Jesus Lunatick* has paid so little attention to sequence that the final

page's privileged position is greatly diminished, and the reader may still *choose* how much importance to attach to this "resolution."

There remains the question of the relationship between *Andy* and *For Jesus Lunatick,* the degree to which they fit together as a single volume. The most obvious direct link is between Phillip, the name of the central character in *For Jesus Lunatick,* and Phillips, the surname of the "real life" Andy. Nichol has himself commented on the relationship, though in a very indirect way, in his unpublished novel *John Cannyside: An Autobiography.*[15] Since that novel (which I will discuss later in this chapter) is an extremely elaborate maze of fictional levels, in which "bpNichol" appears as a character, any statement in it should be regarded with considerable caution as to its autobiographical authenticity. But at one point it contains a dialogue between Gravestone McHammer, the detective from *Andy,* and a character called George Collender, who reveals that in an earlier draft he had been called Phillip Workman.[16] Collender says that

> "*Andy* & *For Jessuss Lunatick* were obversse & reversse. Both were about the ssame period of time in Nichol'ss life, but he sset about desstroying the autobiographical content, particularly in *Andy* where hiss ressponssess to Andy'ss letterss are replaced by the narrative ssectionss" ....
>
> "Let me get this straight," said Gravestone, draining his bottle of rye & standing up. "If *Andy* and *For Jesus Lunatick* are about the same period of time then *For Jesus Lunatick* must be the narrative of the events in Nichol's life that Andy refers to in his letter!"
>
> "Right."
>
> "And the invented narrative is what?"
>
> "An admissssion of ssomething. I'm not quite ssure what tho," said George.

The reader may then (cautiously, as I have said) make thematic connections between the two novels, and may see the highly personal, emotional tone of *For Jesus Lunatick* as completing the lacunae of the more impersonal *Andy.* The very fact that the two novels are included in one volume reinforces this complementarity. Together, they act as signposts for the directions Nichol's fiction was to take. *Andy* sets out the basis for his interest in the manipulation of narrative form, and in the writing of metafiction, the strand in his work which leads on through "Three Western Tales" to *Still; For Jesus Lunatick* is an equally clear basis for his studies of emotional and psychological trauma, leading up to *Journal.* The later works

may be the more assured and subtle creations, but these two novels have the freshness and energy, if at times the rough edges, of first statements.

I have been following Nichol's own practice in referring to these works as "novels," though by conventional standards they are all far too short. The actual text of *For Jesus Lunatick,* minus its blank intervals, would be no longer than an average short story; the longest of the fictional works, *Journal,* runs to 80 pages. But for Nichol the term "novel" is clearly flexible: he applies it also, as I noted in Chapter 2, to the visual narrative of *Extreme Positions,* and the epigraph to this chapter quotes a "novel" that is three lines long (or, in the condensed version, two). The pieces collected in *Craft Dinner* are not called novels, but simply "stories and texts." Out of this collection, I intend to concentrate on the sequence "Three Western Tales," whose composition extended from 1967 to 1976. The most famous (or notorious) of the three tales is "The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid," whose original publication in 1970, along with three other books *(Still Water, Beach Head,* and *The Concrete Chef)* brought Nichol the Governor-General's Award, and an attack in Parliament.[17]

I have previously written at some length on the images of Billy the Kid presented by Nichol, and by Michael Ondaatje in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid,* which came out in the same year, and also won a Governor-General's Award; here I will briefly recall those portions of my argument that apply to Nichol's work.[18] "The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid" is one of Nichol's metafictions: it is not so much "about" Billy the Kid as it is about stories about Billy the Kid. It is a commentary on the popular genre of Western fiction; I would be tempted to call it a "deconstruction" of the genre if that term didn't seem rather disproportionate to such a small and humorous jeu d'esprit. For Nichol, as for Ondaatje, Billy is not a historical figure but a literary one; he is *already* subject to the deferrals of language, and to the deconstructions of intertextuality.

Nichol's title stands in a long tradition of books claiming to be "true," "real," or "authentic" histories of Billy.[19] Very few of them, of course, are any such thing; all of them are more or less avowedly fictional. But it is with a much more sophisticated awareness of the issues involved that Nichol assures us that "this is the true eventual story of billy the kid." The first page of Nichol's book is a demonstration of the relativity of any definition of "truth" in a case like this.

it is not the story as he told it for he did not tell it to me. he told it to others who wrote it down, but not correctly. there is no true eventual story but this one. had he told it to me i would have written a different one. i could not write the true one had he told it to me.

Compare this with, for example, Pat Garrett's "Authentic Life," which opens with the claim "I have listened, at camp-fires, on the trail, on the prairies and at many different plazas, to [Billy's] disconnected relations of his early and more recent life." Garrett lists a number of people who knew Billy or whom he has personally interviewed or written to; he can therefore "safely guarantee that the reader will find in my little book a true and concise relation of the principal interesting events therein, without exaggeration or excusation." The whole is intended "to correct the thousand false statements which have appeared in the public newspapers and in yellow-covered, cheap novels."[20]

Nichol's opening may be read as a commentary on these and all similar claims. The "true" and "eventual" story cannot be told by an eye-witness; the more "reliable" their claims are, the less they are to be trusted. If Billy himself had told the story to Nichol, "i would have written a different one." The paragraph is a dismissal of any possibility of objective truth in reporting; it insists that any observer changes what he sees as soon as he attempts to express it. Language does not report reality: it creates reality. From this, two conclusions emerge: first, that even if Billy himself were to tell his own story, he could not tell it truly; and second, that the only "true" story is the one which rejects any attempt at historicity and aims instead at the "truth" of a work of art; "eventually all other stories will appear untrue beside this one." Of course there is a tongue-in-cheek element here: Nichol is fully enjoying his outrageous claim that his fifteen paragraph joke is going to replace all other versions of the story, including, presumably, that being written by his friend Michael Ondaatje. But beneath the joke is the serious claim that truth does not depend on the authority of an original "voice," but is rather created, repeatedly, in the "eventuality" of writing. What matters, then, is not the factual record – how many men Billy actually killed (4 to 7, according to most recent estimates) or how long he actually lived (probably 24 years) – but the legendary image that he lived 21 years and killed 21 men. The "eventual" story of Billy the Kid is beyond history.

The "historical" view is even more explicitly rejected in Nichol's second chapter. The first paragraph reads:

history says that billy the kid was a coward. the true eventual story is that billy the kid is dead or he'd probably shoot history in the balls. history always stands back calling people cowards or failures.

This condemnation of history as an impersonal process which coldly "stands back" from its subjects and thus judges rather than sympathises is a Romantic view. History is seen as the official view of an Establishment which has to reject all rebels and outlaws as "cowards or failures." It is only at a safe distance in time that a figure like Louis Riel (the hero of the second "Western Tale") can be officially viewed as a hero. The task of the rebel, then, is not to stand back, but to get in there and "shoot history in the balls." But Nichol's Billy, being dead, can't do this. In fact, as becomes clearer, Nichol's Billy is the ultimate loser.

What, then, is beyond history? It is legend, or myth. This is the level at which Ondaatje's book operates, but not Nichol's. For Nichol, legend is as much a liar as history:

legend says that billy the kid was a hero who liked to screw. the true eventual story is that were billy the kid alive he'd probably take legend out for a drink, match off in the bathroom, then blow him full of holes. legend always has a bigger dick than history and history has a bigger dick than billy had.

This view sees legend as more potent (literally as well as metaphorically) than history, so even more dangerous. And the danger lies precisely in its power, its stability, its vividness, its energy – all the qualities, in fact, of Ondaatje's book. But Nichol's Billy is at the bottom of the power structure, he always has the shortest dick. His status is that of the ultimate loser, and he is always ephemeral:

rumour has it that billy the kid never died. rumour is billy the kid. he never gets anywhere, being too short-lived.

This idea underlies the difference in length between the two books. It is not simply that Nichol's is a small joke tossed off in fifteen paragraphs: the shortness, the casualness of the book are intrinsic to its view of Billy. The difference between Ondaatje's 100 pages and Nichol's 5 is the difference between legend and rumour. Ondaatje *fixes* a certain view of the Kid into an intense, fully realised image; but for Nichol, the "eventual" truth is beyond even this, and his image of Billy is insubstantial, flickering, changing, dying. Ondaatje creates a myth; Nichol tells a joke.

Similarly, Nichol's "explanation" of Billy's violence is a joke, but

again, a joke with serious implications. The central conceit of Nichol's book is the reversal of "Kid" to "dick." Indeed, reversal of the normal image is Nichol's central tactic. So he presents the extended joke that all Billy's activities were due to his having a small penis. At one level, this is a light-hearted version of the too easily oversimplified theory that guns are used as compensation by males with fears of sexual inadequacy. Nichol recognises that this can be used too simplistically, and so makes fun of psychological determinist attitudes by revealing that "the sherrif had a short dick too, which was why he was sherrif & not out robbing banks. these things affect people differently." But behind these jokes is the continuing awareness (as we have seen in *For Jesus Lunatick* and will see again in *Journal)* of the real connection between violence and sexuality, and the centrality of that connection in contemporary American life. Make love not war – if you can. And it is surely no accident that Nichol twice points out that Billy's dick is "short for richard." Richard, that is (1970), as in Nixon.

Nichol's jokes on Billy's motivation also touch on the subject of the power of language, the almost magical efficacy of words.

> could they have called him instead billy the man or bloody bonney? would he have bothered having a faster gun? who can tell.

Names make you what you are; you become what you are called. The historical Billy went through several changes of name – Henry McCarty, Henry Antrim, Austin Antrim, Kid Antrim, William H. Bonney – but to history and legend he is only Billy the Kid. The naming is all-important; it fixes the image, it creates the personality. In Nichol's study of Billy's motivation, that noncommittal "who can tell" is the most loaded phrase of all.

Nichol's portrait of Pat Garrett, like his portrait of Billy, is determined by the reversal of the legendary image. Pat Garrett is "the sherrif" [sic], and

> the true eventual story is billy & the sherrif were friends. if they had been more aware they would have been lovers. they were not more aware.

Nichol's sherrif does not betray Billy: Billy is betrayed by history, by legend, by god, and ultimately by himself, but not by the sherrif. Nichol takes the idea of the symbiosis which binds together hero and villain, assassin and victim, and turns it into an identity of interests

directed against the outside world. The sherrif shares Billy's predicament, but, as already noted, "these things affect people differently." The sherrif simply "stood on the sidelines cheering." This can of course be read as a cynical comment on the collusion between lawmen and criminals; but it seems more important as Nichol's only expression of community, of a harmonious relationship between two people. The two outsiders, losers of society, join together; their friendship is beautiful, the fact that they "were not more aware" is tragic, the farewell they take of each other is touching in its simplicity. And the sherrif does not destroy Billy: Billy in the end destroys himself, as his own violence catches up with him in a furiously self-destructive joke:

> the true eventual story is that billy the kid shot it out with himself. there was no one faster. he snuck up on himself & shot himself from behind the grocery store.

Nichol's Billy is in fact a much more violent character than Ondaatje's: but he is not betrayed. Whatever God, history, or legend say, rumour and the sheriff remain true to him.

Nichol presents a much more radical image than Ondaatje does of the outsider's consciousness, for it rejects any notion of substance whatever. The "truth" lies, and it lies only in what the words can say; but what they say is never fixed. It is a process, an event, a becoming; the truth is always eventual.

Many of the techniques used in "The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid" reappear in the second part of the trilogy, "The Long Weekend of Louis Riel." The first two sections, "Friday" and "Saturday," present the heroic historical figures in the same spirit of cheerful irreverence; in the same way as Billy's exploits are brought down to size (as it were), Riel's rebellion becomes a matter of diet.

> louis riel liked back bacon & eggs easy over nothing's as easy as it seems tho when the waitress cracked the eggs open louis came to his guns blazing like dissolution like the fingers of his hand coming apart as he squeezed the trigger
>
> this made breakfast the most difficult meal of the day

The third section, "Sunday," moves to more serious issues, though the text is still comic, detached, and wryly aware of the outrageousness of its own reductiveness. Three white men are debating their

liberal guilt for what's been done to the blacks, the japanese, the indians – ignoring, as always, the problem most immediate to them. "outside in the rain louis was dying." Riel here makes essentially the same complaint as Billy did against the appropriations and misrepresentations of history, indeed of all writing. "its always these damn white boys writing my story these same stupid fuckers that put me down try to make a myth out of me they sit at counters scribbling their plays on napkins their poems on their sleeves & never see me." In the same way as neither history nor legend can tell the "true eventual" story of Billy, so Riel cannot be captured by white liberal guilt ("they killed louis riel & by monday they were feeling guilty maybe we shouldn't have done it said the mounties as they sat down to breakfast"), or by plays, poems, novels, or other "prestigious" literary works. Only something as fleeting or evanescent as Nichol's brief jokes can express the destabilisation of Riel's "eventual" existence. Just as Billy escapes into rumour, so Riel and Dumont, in the final section, "Monday," get sick of their own written representations and escape from the entombment of fixed forms:

> in the distance he could hear the writers scratching louder & louder i'm getting sick of being dished up again & again like so many slabs of back bacon he said ... louis clawed his way up thru the rotting wood of his coffin & struggled up thru the damp clay onto the ground they can write down all they want now he said they'll never find me

The third of the "Western Tales," "Two Heroes," is more complex in structure. It gathers up elements from both the previous tales, and places them within successive layers of story-telling; more than ever, it is a story *about* stories: how they're written, how they're told, how they're read. It begins at the end of the story: two old men sitting in a garden talking to each other. For these old men, the familiar stories they have to tell each other are the only remaining reality: "Around them things are growing they are not conscious of." Their narrative excludes everything else, and when a potential audience (identified here only as "we," the standard form for drawing the reader into complicity) approaches, they stop talking (and so, presumably, die). Fiction has become for them a totally self-enclosed world, which permits no opening; entropic, the text decays within its own closed system.

Their story is then told in flashback. As young men, they "had gone west ... to fight in the metis uprising," that is, in "The Long

Weekend of Louis Riel." Their military career is saturated with textuality: they enlist because of "accounts they read in the papers"; while at war they "made copies of the letters they mailed home, prepared a diary"; once home they talk, tell their stories, re-read their diaries. Becoming bored, they set out for the Boer War (the pun is surely intended by Nichol), and again write letters and keep journals, locked in tin boxes. But "Time passed. No one heard much from either of them"; when they aren't writing and being read, they don't exist.

Nichol moves then to a third level – a story within a story within a story. The men's friends read a story entitled "Billy the Kid & The Clockwork Man," which obscurely reminds them of the two men, "even tho it wasn't signed." The first section of this interior story surveys the various legends of how Billy survived his supposed death at the hands of Pat Garrett; concisely summarising the truth/fiction argument of the earlier part of the trilogy, the narrator of "Two Heroes" writes "I read what I read. Most of it's lies. And most of those liars say Billy the Kid died." These "liars" include, presumably, bpNichol, who is thus not to be identified with the "I." This "I" is the first emergence of the narrator as a separate character, after his (or her) initial appearance within the "we." He is characterised by his evident contempt for Billy the Kid, whom he curtly dismisses as "a pimply-faced moron." Nevertheless, Billy is again a hero in this new story.

"Billy was in love with machines," it begins. "He loved the smooth click of the hammers when he thumbed his gun.... He loved to read the fancy catalogues, study the passing trains." Intertextually, this Billy sounds remarkably like Michael Ondaatje's:

Or in the East have seen
the dark grey yards where trains are fitted
and the clean speed of machines
that make machines
that is why I can watch the stomach of clocks
shift their wheels and pins into each other
and emerge living, for hours[21]

The "clockwork man" who becomes Billy's companion in the new story is thus another intertextual character: a strange compound of Ondaatje's Billy's fascination for clocks and, of course, the Tin Woodsman from *The Wizard of Oz* (another of Nichol's favourite

books). But it is Billy who, in the course of the action, discovers his heart. Together they set out for Africa, but there they "became deranged ... began seeing things like their future, a glimpse of how they'd die, & they didn't like it." They have, as it were, skipped ahead and looked at the ending.

At this point an interpolation takes us back to the frame narrative, the friends of the original two men reading this story and trying to identify "which one of them was Billy & which one the clockwork man." The men's mothers do not want to read further, but their fathers "read it all the way thru to the end tho they didn't understand it & hoped they'd never have to read it again." Again, we have a comment on the process of reading, which suggests the mothers' Oedipal attachment to their sons, and the fathers' willingness to see their sons die.

Billy and the Clockwork Man embark on a strange quest. Haunted by the vision of their own death, they "took to killing people just to make the pain less," and push further and further north, like the explorers in *Andy,* until they reach the Sahara. Here the Clockwork Man finally dies, and Billy mourns for "only the second friend he'd ever had" (the first, presumably, being the "sherrif" in "The True Eventual Story"). Nichol toys briefly with another myth – "I heard once he met up with Rimbaud" – but then the narrator enters again, still expressing his distaste for Billy, but in a sentence which simultaneously reinstates him as a truly tragic figure: "He's not a fit man to tell a story about. Just a stupid little creep who one time in his life experienced some deep emotion & killed anyone who reminded him of his pain."

The final section returns to the two men, and shows them coming home, never opening their diaries, talking only to each other. The narrator now emerges as someone who eavesdrops on them, hoping to gather a coherent plot for a book, but garnering only "fragmentary sentences ... random images." So instead of telling a conventional tale about two heroes, he is forced to present this recessive account, in which all the levels of narration reflect and comment on each other. The "true" story of the two men remains unwritten, contained within their unheard dialogue and their locked tin boxes, while the "false" stories proliferate and are told in full, yielding at their centre the one moment of piercing emotional pain. The would-be story-tellers (the narrator, and the two men) are all foiled, and only the hack fiction writer who doesn't sign his name gets to finish

his/story. The narrative of "Two Heroes" is situated as much in absence as in presence, as much in what cannot be told as in what can.

Together, the "Three Western Tales" make up Nichol's most brilliant, and most entertaining, reflections on the theory and practice of fiction. With incredible concision (in *Craft Dinner,* the entire sequence takes only 14 pages), they present, dramatise, and analyse the most complex issues of truth and representation, history and invention, what it means to tell a story and what it means to read one.

Craft Dinner also contains a short story called "Early April," which describes a man called John Cannyside taking an adulterous trip on the ferry to Victoria and worrying about his wife finding out. Cannyside is a recurring figure in Nichol's fiction, but this story is his only published appearance – a fact which is noted with great interest by the unpublished characters in *John Cannyside: An Autobiography.*[22] As I mentioned earlier, in relation to *Andy* and *For Jesus Lunatick,* this is an unpublished novel by Nichol, though a complete draft is available in the Nichol Collection at SFU. It is without doubt his most elaborate exercise in metafiction: an outrageous and hilarious escalation of self-referential levels of narration.

The initial narrator, George Collender, is ghost-writing the autobiography of his friend, John Cannyside, using tapes of Cannyside's recollections of his life; Cannyside, however, has recently been murdered, and Collender would really prefer to be writing a history of the letter H. Then the narration is taken over by Cannyside, who reveals that his supposed murder was an invention by Collender, which he (Cannyside) discovered when he read Collender's papers after his (Collender's) murder. A little later, Collender reappears, claiming that his (Collender's) supposed murder is a fiction created by Cannyside... etc. This goes back and forth several times, both characters frequently dying, until the end of Part One. In Part Two, the investigation of John Cannyside's disappearance is taken over by Gravestone McHammer, the detective from *Andy,* who deduces that it was Cannyside who eventually won control of the narrative in Part One. McHammer, however, has to struggle for control of *his* section of the narrative against the intrusive author, bpNichol, who frequently enters the text and is himself murdered at least twice. There are also minor intrusions into the text by authors as various as Charles Dickens and Gertrude Stein.

What is at stake, beneath all the joking, is the idea of "control over

the narrative." At its simplest level, this means that the author can direct and bias the reader's responses to the characters: when John Cannyside takes over George Collender's narration, he reflects:

There was the bastard making up all these lies about me & if the prick hadn't died he'd've published it & everybody'd think, so *that's* John Cannyside, & it's not! Now it looks like the table's spun around & I'm the one gets to finish the book, gets to tell it the way I see it. (p. 33)

But once fictional characters are granted a quasi-autonomous existence, they may well be conceived as resenting and resisting the author's control.[23] Later in the novel, Gravestone McHammer, faced with a problem in interpreting the narrative, proposes that the characters should consult the author:

"Ask bp?" queried Harry, startled, "How do we do that?"

"I've got control of the narrative," said Gravestone, "more or less. All we have to do is direct some questions at him."

"I'll try anything once," said Harry.

"You're telling me," laughed Sophie.

Gravestone stared at her suspiciously. Actually I wrote that. I just took control away from Gravestone because he was getting too close. Questions might prove embarrassing. So I thot, as we writers sometimes do, why not throw in a little ménage à trois complication? Sophie grabbed Harry's dick as Rory burst into the room.

"Stickem up!" said Gravestone menacingly. "Shut up Nichol!"

Wha!

"None of your sleazey porno take-offs this time baby. This isn't the ANDY caper. I want answers & plenty of them," said Gravestone.

I stared at my pen reflectively. Damned if the thing doesn't have a life of its own I say said mused. (pp. 71-72)

Authors of fiction do in fact often speak of characters "taking on a life of their own" and determining the direction of the writing; this is usually recognised as a figure of speech (one which Nichol here literalizes), but it does refer to a recognisable aspect of the novelistic process. A great deal of recent critical theory pushes this idea further, proposing that writing writes itself, and proclaiming the death of the author. Again, Nichol's method is to dramatise the theory, to take an abstract or metaphysical idea and render it in literal terms:

Gravestone pulled open his desk drawer & took out another bottle of rye. "Here! Have a drink," he said, as the door crashed open & the body of bp Nichol thudded onto the carpet, a daffodil clutched in his left hand (p. 60).

The method of *John Cannyside: An Autobiography* is unfortunately one which yields diminishing returns. The escalation of narrative twists becomes self-defeating, and the later stages of the novel are tentative and unconvincing. Despite the brilliant humour of its early sections, it is not (yet) a completed work, and Nichol's decision not to publish it in its present form is probably justified.

Journal, on the other hand, is the most completely realised and finished of Nichol's fictions – although even to talk about it in that way is to deny the extent to which the gestures of *in*completion, the refusals of closure, are built into the text. There are metafictional elements in *Journal,* but they are neither as prominent as in "Three Western Tales" nor as playful as in *John Cannyside.* Rather, *Journal* returns to the style of *For Jesus Lunatick,* or of the preface to *Craft Dinner:* repetitive, hermetic, emotional, obsessive. To say that it is "influenced by" Gertrude Stein is to do less than justice to the extent to which Nichol has here absorbed Stein into the patterns of his personal style (a remarkable feat, for it is much easier to copy or parody Stein than it is to make something genuinely new out of her example).

One of the effects that Stein achieved through repetition was to suspend, or at least to impede, the linear temporal progression of conventional narrative. While writing must always (unless it uses the techniques of visual poetry) be linear, in the sense that words follow each other on the page, repetition can suspend that linearity and turn it against itself, so that the reader, rather than progressing forwards in time, finds herself circling the same point, or else spiralling downwards towards the "bottom nature" of the characters and the story. Stein's term for this was the "continuous present." Although *Journal* contains distinct narrative elements – characters, situations, events – these elements are not arranged in the neat patterns of plot or character development or climax or beginning-middle-and-ending. The language of the book creates its own temporal arrangement, not so much leading the reader along the marked highways of a fictional route as suspending her above a linguistic map of the whole terrain.

> maybe there are stories make sense maybe theres a point you can start from mother where it all ties together the untying oh i do shift plots or points of view stepping in & out of people who are not real to me so involved in apologies & shame because i am not really me alright mother i start over again (p. 69)

This description of the time-sense in *Journal* must, however, be qualified, to a certain extent, by the division of the novel into

consecutively numbered sections and sub-sections. While there is no linear progression within each section, it is possible to see some changes *between* the sections, and thus to see the narrative moving towards some sort of tentative resolution. Douglas Barbour describes *Journal* as

> a story told over & over inside a head full of characters who are all one person or who represent the primal family the person once or never had. It is a book of memories *happening* again & again, in everchanging combinations but with a continual intent: to let the journal-writer break through by holding him to his words.[24]

The structure of the book affords more justification than was the case with *For Jesus Lunatick* for seeing the central character as developing through time, and thus for accepting the final section as, in an almost conventional sense, an "ending" – and a happy ending at that!

Barbour's reference to the "primal family" points towards the explicitly Freudian framework of *Journal,* whose narrative elements are clearly Oedipal. "as these things are they are only dreams," section 1 chapter 1 opens, "as i have told foretold the wish it seems to be made whole" (p. 7). The dreams circle obsessively around a man in a grey cloak, a woman in a red dress, and a child playing with a spade. The man is usually seen in the role of the father, the patriarchal authority which imposes its will by its power of primogeniture, and of *naming.* In a fictional world in which to name something is to bring it into being, naming becomes an image of fathering; the father thus assumes the role of the Transcendental Signified, the ultimate *source* or *origin* of linguistic meaning. (Derrida equates the power of logocentric "presence" with phallic authority, merging the two in his term "phallogocentrism.") But this source is also restrictive, inhibiting language from the free play of dissemination; the father is always an authoritarian censor; the name itself limits, classifies, inhibits, *marks:*

> who entered that room behind the other & named me to be named & oh to have that mark upon you ... he puts the mark on you & you take it up
>
> father father the mark is on me father you cover my body in names & longings ... father you never wanted this son why did you leave your mark upon me i never wanted this life i never wanted your name father i hate you father i never knew you ... i lie in this bed as you enter father
>
> you enter & put this mark upon me i lie in this bed your mark upon me & i hate you you wrap me in your grey cloak (p. 8)

The Oedipal jealousy of father and son springs from the act of naming (Oedipus's very name, "swollen foot," is the *mark,* the scar of his father's fear and hatred, of his father's attempt to kill him), and it focuses upon the mother (the m/other) whom they both desire. For most of *Journal,* the mother appears as the woman in the red dress[25] (red as the sign of sexual attraction, of danger, of menstrual blood) and as the object of sexual fantasies which become more and more polymorphously perverse as the different personalities and even genders merge into each other:

yes i love you i said he lay inside me i love you i do love you i said he lay inside me my cock inside me i do love we i said we lay inside me our cock inside me we do love we we said yes we do love we (p. 23)

As this shifting point of view indicates, it is difficult to speak of a single narrator for *Journal,* but insofar as there is one central figure he is associated with the son. The son is pictured as a boy in a blue sailor hat who plays with a toy spade. The spade is clearly phallic, and the standard male anxieties are played out in repeated references to its diminutive size; it is also associated with the pen, so that the son's narration becomes an exercise in sexual potency, the pen/is creating the world. But the spade/pen is also a weapon to be directed against the father. In a central scene of the novel, which recurs several times in several guises, the boy in the sailor hat meets the man in the grey cloak at a spot "where the roads came together" (p. 18) – that is, at the Delphic crossroads where Oedipus killed Laius – and violently attacks him:

he stood there with his blank eyes looking thru me fuck off i shouted i smashed the shovel against his face i watched the wound grow where his nose had been cocksucking motherfucker just get the fuck out of here (p. 19)

The obscenities are of course exactly to the point: the father is the mother-fucker, and after the son's sexual union with the mother the cock is sucked, as "we touched our broken face we picked up our tiny shovel we licked it clean" (p. 23). The primal action is cyclical, repeating itself in each generation: the boy in the sailor hat is also identified as having a scarred nose (pp. 16-17), and in section II of the novel the father takes a graphic revenge by repeatedly slashing "your" face with a razor.

The early sections of *Journal* are, then, repeated exposures of sexual trauma, expressed in the explicitly Oedipal images of Freudian

psychology, but they carry also the overtones of a politics of *writing*. The son's attack on the father "marks" the father's face in the same way as the naming by the father had marked the son; and the reciprocal attack, the razor slashing, is also a perverse and violent image of writing. The "writer" enters the novel, in section I chapter 3, *as a character,* who is again playing several roles in the Oedipal drama. The narrating voice describes the attack of father on son –

maybe he pulls out the knife i feared he carried & slashes you across the cheeks ... your whole face is bleeding & all one can see is the blood & your eyes full of terror & all one can hear is you screaming & the swishing sound his blade makes

– and then intervenes to comment

it excites me to write this i bite my lips & taste blood on my tongue it excites me to write this (p. 36)

The narrator then appeals to the "you" (who is partly the son, but also the reader) to "say what happened," and so put an end to his (the narrator's) *writing*. The narrator's anger at "your" failure to speak is equated with the father's anger, and thus becomes the cause of the slashing, the origin of the writing:

why wont you speak now why wont you say what happened perhaps that is what angered him perhaps it was your not speaking that angered him why wont you speak i become so angry when you wont speak (p. 37)

But the reader cannot, *qua* reader, "speak" – and so the attack, and the writing, continue, inscribing lines/scars with the pen(is)/razor on the reader's face/page.

This extreme violence proves, however, to be cathartic. In section II of *Journal*, some of the same stories are replayed, but with less immediate intensity, more distanced into fiction, and by section III the cast and the narrative have been simplified down to the central encounter of mother and son. "i have shut all the others out to talk to you," the narrator explains (p. 74); "alright mother i start over again i start over again with you just so the head can rest from wandering like i always wanted to mother always wanted to stay there in your arms for hours just to have you comfort me" (p. 69). The monologue of section III is highly emotional, the recollections of a child longing for more love than his mother was able or willing to give him, but it

has moved through and beyond the Oedipal crisis. The toy shovel and the red dress reappear, but they are innocent now of their darker meanings. With a degree of achieved insight into himself, the narrator can now say

> yes its painful mommy yes i miss you & no i can never have you really not the way i wanted you sometimes i have thot that yes sometimes i have thot that i could i cant mommy he is gone with his tiny shovel & his sailors hat gone away grown from you as he had to (p. 70)

So in the final chapter (III, 3) the narrator can turn again to the reader and speak of that relationship, of the challenge it poses for absolute honesty:

> its so simple isnt it all one has to do is speak honestly all you have to do is say what you feel to speak to anyone is so simple to speak to anyone you just put your book down look them in the eye & tell them what it is exactly that youre feeling (p. 80)

It is just such an attempt to "speak honestly" which we see being made by the two central characters in Nichol's most recent novel, *Still*.[26] But in order to see it, we must first move through the form of the novel, for *Still* is again a metafictional work, though not in the flamboyant or whimsical mode. Rather, as its title suggests, it is a quiet, deliberate, almost contemplative analysis of the elements of narrative. It isolates two of the most important features of conventional fiction – description and dialogue – and presents each in turn in a singularly pure form, as if distilled down to its essence.

Long descriptive passages which present in great detail every aspect of the physical appearance of a house – its external appearance, its setting in the landscape, the layout and furnishings of every room – alternate with passages of intense and emotional dialogue between two protagonists. The reader is almost irresistibly tempted to "skip" the descriptive passages in order to get on with the "story": what holds her back is the metafictional awareness that this response has been anticipated by Nichol, and that it would be a deliberately pre-programmed exaggeration of what readers often do, especially with long 19th century novels. *Still* thus foregrounds a common aspect of the reading process and, by making the reader so aware of it, paradoxically ensures that the descriptive passages *will* be given their full weight.

That "weight" is one of stillness, and it is a major contributing

factor to the emotional mood of the novel. The outstanding feature of the descriptions is that they are completely unpopulated: until the very last page, there is no direct mention of people anywhere in the house or its surrounding landscape. But it is not an *abandoned* house: the livingroom contains "recent numbers of technical journals ... a poetry magazine" (p. 66), and the kitchen is in current use (pp. 43-44). So the physical environment is shaped by people, lived in; its present emptiness therefore conveys a mood of expectancy, of waiting, of stillness.[27] Only in the very last sentence of the description, which is also the last sentence of the novel, is the reader allowed to become "aware of two other chairs, another table, & two people who suddenly begin talking" (p. 70).

Just as the description is emptied of all human presence, so is the dialogue stripped of all descriptions. *Still* tells us nothing about the two people who are talking: we do not know their names, appearances, ages, or even genders. We do not even know for certain (although the form of the novel strongly implies it) that their conversation is taking place in the house that the rest of the novel describes. This is indeed a case of "incomplete specification." By cutting these voices off from their *source* in all the conventional gestures of fictional characterisation, from the very grounding of voice in the presence of body, Nichol creates for his fiction a kind of Derridean space in which speech takes on the functions of writing. (The effect is in some ways similar to the disjunction of voice and name in "Stagelost.") At the very least, the reader has to "create" these characters by imagining for them gender, age, appearance; or else the reader has to accept the flux and indeterminacy of these "characters," preferring to preserve the incompleteness of the text's specification.

All that the reader can tell about the two voices is that they belong to two lovers, one of them upset by the recent death of a woman, who have decided to break up, but who, in the course of a long conversation about the reasons why they should cease seeing each other, decide instead to resume their relationship.

"Maybe we could make this an annual event."
"Breaking up?"
"Seems to help."
"Weird but it might do the trick eh?" (p. 61)

Their conversation is, to some extent, an example of the attempt to "speak honestly" called for in the final page of *Journal,* and, as in so

much of Nichol's fiction, there is a very acute understanding of the ways in which personal relationships work. This insight derives, certainly, from Nichol's years of working at Therafields, and from his attempt "to push beyond certain mental states that I see in a lot of writing which is still caught up with a level of inter-personal mystery that I don't happen to think is a big mystery. I think it's more explicable."[28] At the same time, however, the conversation in *Still* remains, for the reader, at a fairly abstract level. Despite all the realist details – the quarrels over petty subjects like socks, the frequent interruptions to get a drink, etc. – the characters cannot make an emotional impact in the manner of characters in traditional fiction: the disjunction of their voices from their bodies is too fundamental. The progression of their conversation from break-up to reconciliation is a little too pat, too predictable, too neatly worked out as if it were an exercise. For all the fascination of its form, *Still* is one of Nichol's thinner works emotionally, and it never comes near the power or intensity of *Journal.*

It is difficult to make absolute distinctions of genre within bpNichol's writing. He himself sees no great difference between poetry and prose: "it's actually a visual distinction. And it has to do with the type of line.... I use the distinction from time to time. But I don't think it's all that vital or important."[29] In writing this book, I have chosen to include one work which Nichol calls "a novel," *Extreme Positions,* in the chapter on Visual Poetry. I have quoted a passage from *Journal* as a manifesto on sound poetry. And the founding gesture of *The Martyrology* – the invention of the lives of the saints – is a narrative one. Nevertheless, the body of work I have described in this chapter is, I believe, both distinctive and important. Even if bpNichol had never written a line of poetry, drawn a single H, or opened his mouth to chant the names of the Pharaohs, it would still be possible to argue that he merits a not inconsiderable place in contemporary Canadian literature as a writer of fiction.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Martyrology

---

the words you trust to take you thru
to what place you don't know
(Book 2, "Friends as Footnotes")

Look out, the saints are comin' through!
BOB DYLAN

The Martyrology[1] is the culmination, the cumulous accumulation, of all of bpNichol's work. Ever since its beginning, in 1967, it has been the centre around which all his other books revolve; it is the direction towards which, and *through* which, all his experiments lead. It has become not just a long poem but a life/long poem; it may even be regarded, after Eli Mandel's punning title, as a "life sentence," from which the author occasionally gets out "on parole."[2] Certainly there have been occasions on which Nichol has attempted to escape from it: he mentions at the end of Book 2 that he misplaced the poem "three times," as if unconsciously willing it not to get started; and the work has made several ostensible attempts to get itself finished, such as those at the end of Book 2, the end of Book 4, and the end of Book 5, chain 8. In 1979, Nichol proclaimed not only that *The Martyrology* was finished, but that it belonged to a whole division of his work, "The Books of the Dead," from which he was now prepared to move to "The Books of the Living."[3] But soon afterwards, he had to admit that the first "Books of the Living" were in fact Book 6 of *The Martyrology,* keeping on going in spite of its author. At the moment it seems safe to assume that *The Martyrology* will continue, in one form or another; its structure is now one of such radical open-endedness that, while it may come to an ending, it can never come to a *conclusion.*

It is that very open-endedness which, increasingly, sets *The Martyrology* apart from traditional notions of the long poem. As long as

the structure of the long poem was founded upon the notion of narrative, it implied closure: the story must come to an end. But although *The Martyrology* began with a narrative base, in the legends of the saints, it has moved further and further away from that base, until now it is possible to argue that its fundamental structural principle is sheer *duration* – extent, in time and space, for its own sake. "What is a long poem?" Nichol has written: "perhaps it is simply a long life or some trust in the durational aspect of being alive. it's a tremendous leap of faith to even start one, to even think 'hey i'll be alive long enough that this form seems the best way to say what i have to say.' certainly some faith in process pushes me on."[4] Similarly, Frank Davey writes, "The first sign we see in a long poem is its length"[5] – and what appears to be a statement of the obvious is in fact a profound insight into the way in which a poem like *The Martyrology* becomes self-generating, self-perpetuating.

> The first sign we see in the long poem is its length, promising to the reader that its matter is large in depth or breadth. Its length also speaks about time – that the writer will take his time, engage time, encompass its passage. Unlike the collection of 'occasional' poems, it says that time is not a series of discrete and unique occasions, but is large, can be viewed as large, can be apprehended, measured, and entered, that there is time – time at least to read a long poem. There is even in the length of a long poem an announcement of futurity – in the commitment of the poet to enter a continuing structure ... in the exemplary motion of line following line, page following page, section opening into section.

Time is indeed a major theme of *The Martyrology*: time that stretches back into the myths of origin, both the public mythology of Gilgamesh and the private mythology of Nichol's saints; present time that determines the nature of Nichol's personal memories of his family, his childhood, his friends; and time that leads "into whatever future the poem holds for me" (Book 5, chain 1). The expansiveness of this conception is figured by the extent of the book, its very bulk (three hefty volumes now) in the reader's hands. Right from the start, the reader knows that she must adjust her own responses, the pacing and rhythms of her expectations, to the length set out before her. Davey speaks of the "commitment" the long poem demands from the writer, and a similar demand is made of the reader too: to enter into the poem's length, to let the experience of reading become as

open-ended, as heedless of closure, as the poem itself is – "taking the time to tell you everything" (Book 4).

That ambition, the urge to tell, or to try to tell, "everything," is another significant sign of the poem's length. As it expands in time, it necessarily expands in space: "it seems the more i know the longer this poem becomes" (Book 3, v). The long poem has been, traditionally, a kind of cultural depository, an attempt to encompass (sometimes by means as blatant as the list, or the catalogue) the sum total of a poet's knowledge and experience. For the 20th century, the preeminent model for this kind of poem has been *The Cantos*, which stand as a vast ruined monument to the splendour of Pound's ambition – to write a poem which would comprehend the entire world. The Imagist aesthetic, though it began with the perfect miniature of "In a Station of the Metro," necessarily became a poetics of expansiveness, which had to take all knowledge as its province. "No ideas but in things," Williams proclaimed as the opening of *Paterson* – and things are infinite. Rilke said that "The poet must know everything," and this became a favourite quotation for Hugh MacDiarmid, whose *In Memoriam James Joyce* is another of these vast, compulsive, list-making poems, "taking the time to tell you everything."

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*. The poet attempting to write a long poem, a poem of epic dimensions, traditionally used a mythological and/or historical narrative for this purpose. The entirely personal or subjective world of the poet's own emotions and perceptions is not enough in itself to sustain a long poem: hence the need, even in as "open" a poem as *The Martyrology*, for the framework of the saints' stories. Traditionally accepted views of history and religion provided order and cohesion for the poem by setting it within the order and cohesion of society: thus, the classic epics of Homer, Virgil, and Dante were based upon mythological themes which already formed the foundations of the cultures within which the poems were to take their place. Milton was perhaps the last poet in English literature who could use a traditional mythology in such a confident manner. Wordsworth tried to build an entirely subjective epic of his own inner development; other writers, like Blake, have been forced to invent their own mythologies. There is, of course, a considerable strain on the poet's resources if she has to invent her own structure at the same time as

she is using it; and the history of such attempts is more a record of glorious failures than one of great accomplishments. Blake's universe remains a largely impenetrable forest in which the critics wander; later in his life, Pound was forced to admit of *The Cantos* that he could not "make it cohere."

Faced with the fragmented culture of the 20th century, writers have become increasingly eclectic in their methods of building a mythological base for the long poem. Fragmentation and eclecticism are the very bases of Eliot's collage approach in *The Waste Land;* Pound attempted to organise *The Cantos* around two mythological motifs (Odysseus and metamorphosis) while using a select group of historical periods as reference points; Williams and Olson attempted to ground their poems in the geography and history of specific locations. Common to all is the search for a mythology, an impersonal organising principle within which personal themes and references can be deployed: this is the role played in *The Martyrology* by the legends of the saints (extended, in Book 5, to the "geomancy of the streets" in the Toronto Annex).

One response to the problem of structure is to claim that *the long poem,* as a single cohesive structure, has in fact disappeared, and has been replaced by a significantly different genre, the poetic *sequence.* Such is the case made by M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall in their book *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry.* They define the sequence as

> a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole. It usually includes narrative and dramatic elements, and ratiocinative ones as well, but its structure is finally lyrical. Intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open, emotionally volatile, the sequence meets the needs of modern sensibility even when the poet aspires to tragic or epic scope.[6]

This might well be accepted as a good description of *The Martyrology* – but implicit in Rosenthal and Gall's account is some notion that the "organic whole" must be rounded out by closure. They are most at home with the medium-length sequences of Yeats or Eliot; their discussion of Olson deliberately confines itself to the first volume of *The Maximus Poems;* they find the coherence they seek in single volumes of Pound (*A Draft of* XVI Cantos; The Pisan Cantos) rather than in the work as a whole. The poetic sequence, as they define it, is indeed the grand achievement of modernism; but *the long*

poem, free even of the restraints of "lyrical structure," reasserts itself in the open-endedness of postmodernism.

The Martyrology may then be seen to contain within itself various stages in the history of the long poem. It begins with a grounding in mythological narrative – but one which it has to invent, and display, for itself. Once the stories of the saints have been established in Book 1, the poem is free to move in Book 2 towards an elaborate paralleling of its mythology with the poet's personal concerns: "this poem becomes the diary of a journey / personal it evolved impersonally" (Book 2, "Sons & Divinations"). The idea of the journey (Brian Henderson calls it a "pilgrimage")[7] then becomes a continuing motif in the poem; like the idea of metamorphosis in Pound's *Cantos,* it is specific enough for its recurrence to act as a unifying factor, and yet general enough to allow for multiple variations. The image of the constantly repeated journey, an incessant crossing and re-crossing of Canada, becomes an emblem for the increasing expansiveness and open-endedness of the poem as a whole. Book 3 corresponds perhaps most closely to the definition of the "poetic sequence" given above; it is the poem's most "modernist" phase, making extensive references to world mythologies, while being at the same time preoccupied with the psychology of the father-son relationship. Book 4 shifts decisively into postmodernist flux, fragmenting the language and pursuing the "fluid definition" of "minimal movements." The destabilisation of the text is taken to even greater lengths in Book 5, in which the poem turns back on itself and deconstructs its own earlier versions. After this convulsion, it appears that Book 6 will return to more stable forms of discourse, but by this time the notion that any single stage of *The Martyrology* could be a final one has been effectively dispelled.

The first words of all in *The Martyrology,* before the genealogy of the saints, before the extract "from *The Chronicle of Knarn,*" before the main title page, the first words of all belong to Gertrude, St. Ein, who is thus invoked, in the style of the traditional epic, as the poem's presiding Muse:

> Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches.

This is the last line of "If I Told Him: a Completed Portrait of Picasso," written in 1923 as a kind of "re-reading" of Stein's earlier (1909) portrait. In that context, it declares Picasso's stature as a man of history (comparing him to Napoleon), but, despite the ironical

assertion of its being a "completed" portrait, it declares also the necessary incompleteness of any definition of Picasso's shifting, mercurial genius. All that we can say about the lessons of history is that they exist; we cannot too closely define what they are. Any attempt at definition is limited by the constantly changing nature of history, and of our perception of it: in Book 5, chain 3, Nichol sees his own name (names, nicknames) "adrift between the signifier & the signified / sliding thru the years / myself as definition changing." So the only possible definitions will themselves be indeterminate ("History teaches") or fluid, as is envisaged in Book 4:

i want the absolute precision
of fluid definition
the saints learned
long ago

After this quotation from Stein, we come (in the 1977 edition) to the genealogies of the saints.[8] The figures of the saints in *The Martyrology* may be approached in several ways: as word-games, as mythological characters, and as language. At the first level, they are merely whimsical puns, played by Nichol and his friends, whereby every word in the English language which begins with the letters st is taken to be the name of a saint. Thus, the word "stand" produces St. And, "storm" produces St. Orm, etc. The comic possibilities are exhaustively explored in the 1972 "Afterword" (not included in the 1977 edition), in which David Aylward/St. Alwart discovers more and more elaborate combinations: St. Eve d'Ore, the lady of the golden touch; St. Ale and his wife St. Alemate; etc. This game is still open for contributions: George Bowering celebrated St. As Is; if one were to mail a saint a bibliography of Derrida, could one be said to post St. Ructur a list?

The names of most of the saints in *The Martyrology* were found through this kind of game. It should be observed, however, that one of the main characters, St. Reat, is *not* connected with "street." His name emerged in the course of *Scraptures: Fourth Sequence*[9] as part of a progression that went from "a tree" to "a treat" to "as treat" to "has treat" to "HA!!!!!!! St. Reat." Even more than the others, St. Reat was discovered lurking in the corners of language.

But the level of the word-game is the most superficial of the levels at which the saints exist. They form a whole mythology out of Nichol's childhood: the kind of story that any imaginative child

might invent. Book 5 chain 9 recalls their early existence, and their later recovery:

scrapturous visions
saints emerge
    tho i saw these same faces
early in my first phrase's speaking
(age 6) summer mornings i'd escape
before my family'd wake
H section Wildwood Park
singing my heart
straight up at that Winnipeg prairie sky
  at you Lord
  at the saints i knew lived there
leaving my head til 16
one day
looked up at that cloud range
a kind of joy took me
perception you were all still there
if only i could once again sing to you

The cosmology of the saints emerges only indirectly in *The Martyrology,* since Nichol has to write *as if* he were referring to stories already familiar to his readers. Homer did not have to explain who Zeus was; in the same way, Nichol has to (pretend to) assume a knowledge of St. Orm. The genealogy, which is not a part of the poem proper, goes a long way towards unravelling the stories, and more can be gathered from the drafts of *The Plunkett Papers* in the Nichol Collection at SFU. (Plunkett is the name of a small village in Saskatchewan, where Nichol's mother's family came from.) Here, for instance, we read of how the god called "cloud hidden" (who is, as his name suggests, a very dim and elusive presence in *The Martyrology)* created and then destroyed a whole series of worlds. The people of the 4th world escaped from the destruction and "populated the stars," leaving behind them as a record *The Chronicle of Knarn.* The 5th world, which is presumably our own, will not be destroyed, but has been abandoned by cloud hidden to rot by itself. This story underlies the passage in Book 5, chain 5, on the levels of clouds which Nichol's plane descends through:

towards the fifth plain
saints descended to

i call home
i know the wheels will finally grab hold
will not pass thru to a rumoured sixth or seventh
cloud worlds known to a few

Similarly, the story in Book 3, VI about

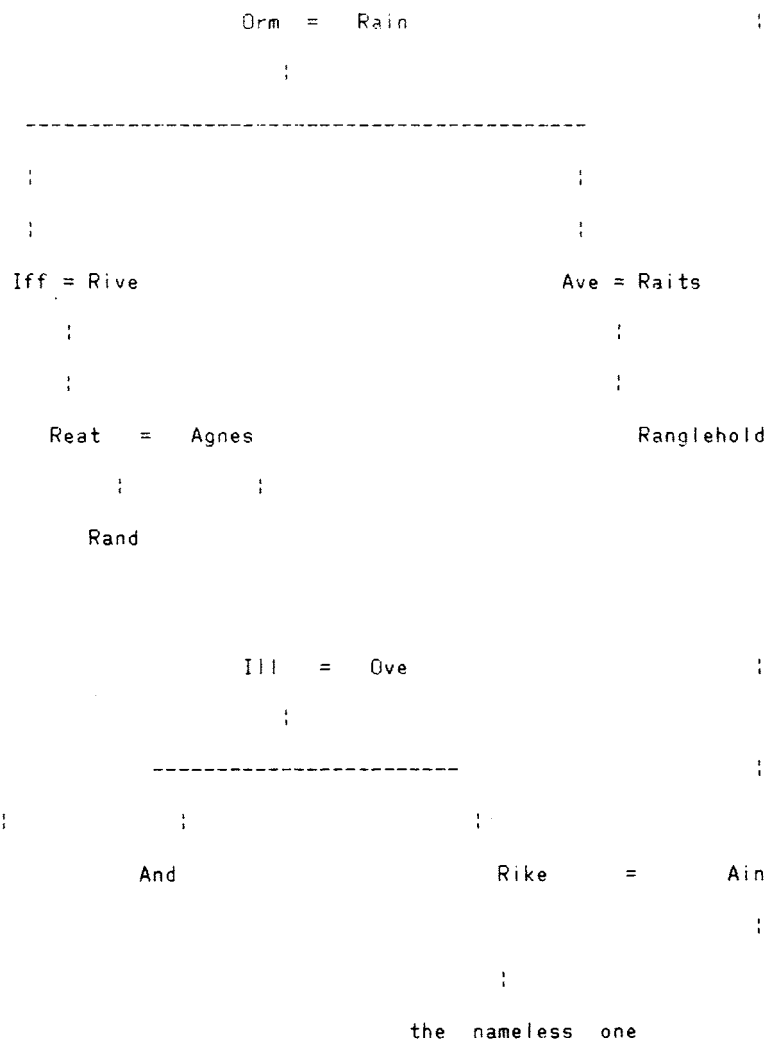
the saint who tried
vainly slashing his throat
discovering what immortality meant
his image grew fainter & fainter
mark of the unsuccessful suicide

is given a full explanation in *The Plunkett Papers,* which tell us that the saints are unable to commit suicide, no matter how hard they try; they just become transparent, or go to "the in between":

now i'd just like to mention that plunkett was a favourite hangout for those saints who hadnt quite reached the in between you used to see them nights youd be sitting at the window & find yourself looking thru a saint at the moon

Plunkett (which is also, in these unpublished poems, the site of a duel between St. And and Billy the Kid) is itself named after "the Blessed Oliver Plunkett Bishop and Martyr who died July 11, 1681," and so contributes, indirectly, the very name of the poem.

While these excerpts from the unpublished manuscripts may help to fill in the details of the cosmology, there is certainly enough in *The Martyrology* itself to establish the essential myths. After its brief appearance in the prefatory "from *The Chronicle of Knarn,*" Knarn itself, the 4th world, sinks into the background, and does not re-emerge until Book 3, VIII, where it will be associated with another lost world of mythology, Dilmun in *The Epic of Gilgamesh.* More immediately, we are told, the saints descended to earth from "Cloudtown," where Barrie Nichol (age 6) had first envisioned them. Cloudtown was their home immediately before they made the difficult and dangerous journeys to earth which are described in the "Clouds" section of Book 2; it is envisaged as an ideal city existing above the clouds we can see from earth (and now that we are able, in the 20th century, to fly above these clouds, we can see that Cloudtown is indeed empty). Its most important characteristic is described in Book 4:


Orm = Rain
Iff = Rive
Ave = Raits
Reat = Agnes
Ranglehold
Rand
III = Ove
And
Rike = Ain
the nameless one

the buildings rearranging themselves daily
the city no enemy ever took
because the streets shift even as you walk them
doorways change
familiar only to the saints who lived there
recognized dwelling signs no stranger'd ever see
they went crazy on this earth
only language retaining the multiplicity they were used to

This affinity between the saints and the multiplicity of language (especially in the deconstructed forms it assumes in Books 4 and 5) points ahead, to the further interpretation of the saints as language itself.

Before considering that further level, however, we should complete the introduction of the saints as mythological characters with their own genealogies and histories. "of those saints we know the listing follows" [*opposite*, p. 114].

By this time the "word-games" have obviously assumed a seriousness of myth-making which takes them far beyond jokes. These genealogies set up the elemental dramas which will resonate throughout the poem, especially that of the two brothers, And and Rike, and that of Nichol's continuing obsession, father and son, as it is played through the three generations of Iff, Reat, and Rand. Once these stories have been told, or suggested, they can be reinvoked, in the classical manner of mythological allusion, by the mere mention of a name: for instance, in Book 3, VIII, when Nichol is discussing the drama of fathers and sons as he reads it in the names of the days of the week, he is able to set it within a whole extra layer of emotional and narrative context by a single reference to St. Reat.

"so many times the flesh aches with loneliness" (Book 1, "Scenes from the Lives of the Saints"). The saints are, most characteristically, alone. Exiled from Cloudtown, their ideal lost community, they are cut off also from each other. St. And (the saint of connections, the saint who must stand alone) is a despairing clown in a fading circus, no longer capable of even the basic gestures of human communication: "you say goodbye or you say hello. you say both / not knowing the difference" (Book 1, "The Martyrology of St. And"). Reat's father, Iff (the saint of possibilities, or, colloquially, the corpse) dies on the descent from Cloudtown, and Reat/Nichol addresses him: "how shall i call you father who have left me here / lonely on this

bright blue world" (Book 2, "Clouds"). Reat in turn strands his own son, St. Rand, abandoning him before he is even born, setting forth like Odysseus on a ten-year quest "for the origins of all breath" (Book 1, "Saint Reat and the Four Winds of the World"). Father and son reach out to each other throughout the poem, in a dozen guises and names, from Reat and Rand to the days of the week in the Roman and Anglo-Saxon calendars; and in that overwhelming chant of pain and isolation which closes Book 2 Nichol aligns his own experience with theirs.

Yet redemption is always possible; isolation can be transcended. The "Auguries" section of Book 2 tells the story of St. And's journey in search of his lost brother, Rike – a story which Nichol counterpoints to fragmented recollections of the relationship between his friends Dave and Barb. But whereas Dave and Barb end up apart, married to other people, And and Rike reunite:

that moment saint and
that moment you stumbled thru a cloud into the world saint rike discovered
.....
he was there with his lady
so soft & so pretty
she was strong and she loved him
you started to cry

And then survives as an image of a future possibility:

i guard you always in my dreams i waken
you ride a horse by your brother saint rike
thru that far world you might return from

Similarly, Reat does eventually return to his wife and his son, as is described in the highly emotional passage which closes Book 1 (and which may then be set in ironic juxtaposition to the abandonment of the father at the end of Book 2). The lines, spoken by Rand, or by Nichol, are the son's gesture of forgiveness towards the father, forgiveness not only for the ten years of wandering but for the very state of being a father, or a saint:

saint reat this is all nothing

do you understand?

there are no myths we have not created
ripped whole from our lived long days

no legends that could not be lies

you were simply a man
suffered the pain of silence in your head

let your sounds lead you out of that dead time

were made a saint
for lack of any other way of praising you

(Book 1, "Saint Reat and the Four Winds of the World")

The saints may be seen, then, as a word-game, or as genuine mythological characters with their own histories and cosmology. On a third level, they may also be seen as language itself. "For the poet," writes David St. Alwart in the "Afterword" to Book II, "every word in the language is a saint who continually intervenes between him and the world of sense." Nichol's relationship *towards* the saints is therefore analogous to his relationship towards language: it is one of invocation, of prayer, and sometimes of desperation. The legends of the saints are largely legends of failure: the loss of Cloudtown, the descent to earth, their various isolations from each other, their lonely and futile deaths. The most anguished statement of the theme is given in the dream of the death of the saints at the end of Book 2, which leads into the tremendous chant of pain and separation:

oh god you are dead you are dead dead dead
christ you are dead you are dead dead dead
what can i do who shall i be i can't see you any more
no direction sign or longing
.....
no chain of words to bind you to me
how can i live who cannot be without you
.....
oh you are gone & i am left
lonely father

The Martyrology is haunted by this fear of the death of the saints, of the failure of language. Right from the start, the singer of *The*

Chronicle of Knarn has to admit that "the language i write is no longer spoken." For the saints themselves, "speech is a tiresome thing" (Book 1, "The Martyrology of Saint And"). In "Saint Reat and the Four Winds of the World," Nichol appeals to his saints, "how shall i reach you with all speech gone?" In "Clouds" (Book 2), the doubt occurs again: "as if there were no adequate words to fit the mind's / conceptions." The failure of language takes on political dimensions in "Sons & Divinations": "trapped as we are in signs / our language multiplies above the cities / the letters meaningless words / we have less & less to say to one another." In the intense grief of a friend's death, Nichol dismisses his own saints, his own words: "you saints these poems are prayers / i don't give a fuck for your history" (Book 2, "Friends as Footnotes"). Later he sees himself as "sick of everything i've written / fascinated by my own distaste / keep placing one letter in front of another / pacing my disillusionment" (Book 3, II).

Here Nichol's psychological concern with the Oedipal drama of fathers and sons, which we have seen given its most vivid expression in the fiction of *Journal,* and which pervades the whole of *The Martyrology* but especially Book 3, fuses with the apprehension of St. And's vision, reported in *Monotones,* of "the imminent end of all speech." The chant at the end of Book 2 arises out of a desolation caused equally by the death of the saints, the failure of language, and the abandonment by the father. The father is, psychologically, the *source* – of life, and of meaning. Derrida identifies the paternal generative myth of origin by running "logocentrism" into "phallogocentrism." The father's authority lies in his power to give life to language; when that fails, the son is left "lonely" and also meaningless, deprived of "all the words i once believed were saints." In the aftermath of this catastrophe, the poem continues only as an act of willed stubbornness: "a kind of despair takes over / the poem is written in spite of."

But, given the multiplicity of language, this whole myth can also be read in another direction, and *The Martyrology* can be seen as a drama of the continuing redemption of language. Poststructuralism *celebrates* the absence of the "father," that is, of the very notion of a "Transcendental Signified" which would act as origin, source, and sanction for a stable system of signifiers. As I put it in Chapter 1, "The sign is empty; we are all orphaned in language."[10] It is this

absence, this very *lack* of authorial "presence," which makes possible the iterability of *writing*. The missing father becomes the constitutive absence at the heart of the sign, the movement of deferral that activates the word; it is the removal of that censorious authority which releases the free play of dissemination and, in Nichol's case, of *sound*.

Sound is one of the keys to the redemption of language, and especially in Book 3, *The Martyrology* provides some of Nichol's strongest "manifestoes" for sound poetry. "more than meets the eye meets the ear," he insists (Book 3, II), reversing the eye's (the i's) 2000-year hegemony:

the ear the ear it is all there
the mouth fitted to it with such care
there is music in every sound you make ...
the words are shapes the sounds take
it is all there it is all there it is all there

This statement of faith is supported by history – the same passage refers to "ancient gaelic poets [who] lay with stones on their chests / pressed stale air out" so that poetry would spring from "lungs that were pure" – and by contemporary experience – chanting with bill bissett, Nichol enjoys "hours in that community of sound" (Book 3, VI). Sound becomes then the instrument by which language is turned back towards its absent source: "father if i address you in poems it is to dress you beautifully / the body needs such sounds to live in" (Book 3, II).

So *The Martyrology* is also a celebration of the saints as language; if they fell, "surely ... it was into grace" (Book 2, "Clouds"). The extreme dislocations in Books 4 and 5 might be seen as an ultimate disintegration of the efficacy of speech, but they are also a reintegration, a renewal. Book 4 quotes the earlier line, "you are dead saints," but continues:

given back into the drift of print
of speech
  born anew among the letters
a different tension
      different reach
of logic
  of the mind's playing out of

reason
  a rhyme
till God's re sonned
on the tongue

The deconstructive gestures of Books 4 and 5 are thus a "wreck-creation" (Book 4) of language, and a further re-assertion of what happened at the beginning of Book 3, when the saints were recalled from the dream of their death:

you have no name now
only a being so alive
i know you're all still with me
linked as one
energy moving into song

Thus the legends of the saints are also the drama of the poet's relationship to language: all the levels of *The Martyrology* work together, pulling all of Nichol's concerns into the tight, enfolding, collapsing-in-on-itself unity of

every(all at(toge(forever)ther)once)thing

(Book 5, chain 10)

As mythological stories, the legends of the saints ground *The Martyrology* in the kind of narrative base traditionally associated with long poems; psychologically, the legends enact the drama of father and son, division and unity; as emblems of language itself, the saints testify to their own death and also to their own renewal. Within the expanding form of the poem, the saints are also counterpointed against two other levels of narrative: the "established" world mythologies, especially *The Epic of Gilgamesh;*[11] and bpNichol's personal history/geography, the stories of his friends, his family, his travels across Canada. These two levels are concisely evoked in the double dedication of Books 1 and 2: "for lea," the founder of the community of Therafields, "without whose act of friendship / quite literally none of this would have been written,"[12] and "for palongawhoya," the Micronesian god who "made the whole world an instrument of sound."

The first mention of Gilgamesh in *The Martyrology* is in fact closely associated with Palongawhoya:

i learn the stranger laws the serpent teaches
energy coil within the mind
sleeping still or buried
as they did in Dilmun bury snakes in baskets under stone
traces of the knowledge now confused in symbols
flux & pull of cosmos
o palongawhoya
your name is many as you are the one

(Book 2, "Sons & Divinations")

The connection is that they are both myths of origin; the distinction is that Palongawhoya is an apotheosis of *sound* as that which set the vibratory axis of the world in motion, while Gilgamesh is an apotheosis of *writing*. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is not only the world's oldest surviving poem, it is the world's oldest surviving *written* poem. "We have good evidence," writes N.K. Sandars, "that most of the Gilgamesh poems were already written down in the first centuries of the second millennium B.C., and that they probably existed in much the same form many centuries earlier"; the poems "antedate Homeric epic by at least one and a half thousand years."[13] Dilmun is "The Samarian paradise ... sometimes described as 'the place where the sun rises' and 'the Land of the Living'"; it is the home of Utnapishtim, the "wise king and priest" who, like Noah, "survives the flood, with his family and with 'the seed of all living creatures,'"[14] and who is now immortal. The epic tells of how Gilgamesh, after the death of his beloved friend Enkidu, sets out on a voyage / quest / pilgrimage in search of Utnapishtim in Dilmun, in much the same manner as St. And searches for his brother St. Rike. Nichol in fact situates the "path" to Dilmun as leading "thru the desert where saint iff lay when he died" (Book 3, v). Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood; returning home, Gilgamesh inscribes the account of his journey on stone tablets.

Nichol associates Dilmun with Cloudtown and with Knarn, as images of the lost paradise. Travelling "north of the Arctic Circle,"[15] Nichol says he is

remembering Dilmun
the empty squares & courtyards
crumbled palisades & steeples
where Utnapishtim lived out his years

& i am wishing i could speak to him
discover how long immortality is
was his city like cloud town

(Book 4)

This leads directly into the passage I quoted earlier, about the shifting streets of Cloudtown, the "multiplicity" which its inhabitants found on earth only in language. Paradoxically, the linguistic "multiplicity" of Cloudtown/Dilmun is also a unity, the paradisaically lost unity of the original "source" language: in Book 3, VIII, Utnapishtim is identified as

third millenium b c ...
pre-diluvian pre-babel king
gilgamesh suffers disunities of language of time
he knows he'll die
    utnapishtim's immortality
includes linguistic unity

While recognising and using the mythic nature of the Gilgamesh tales, Nichol is also at pains to insist upon their historical origins. Whereas Sandars, in a cautious scholarly way, hedges around the question of the hero's historicity, Nichol declares forthrightly

Dilmun existed as a centre of trade
first reference to it the Ur tablets
.....
gilgamesh *was* human
5th king of the second post-diluvian dynasty
Uruk third millennium B.C.

(Book 3, V)

Ultimately, however, the distinction is not vital: "myth being everything / history becomes unreal" (Book 3, V), and the legends of Gilgamesh can be assimilated into the original mythic structure of *The Martyrology,* the saints:

utnapishtim or noah
they are both the same saint orm
built boats

(Book 3, VI)

Note here the grammatical indeterminacy of the words "saint orm," which could be a complement of "are" (both Utnapishtim and Noah are the same Saint Orm), or a vocative (the statement about Utnapishtim and Noah is addressed *to* Saint Orm), or the subject of the verb "built." The categories slide into each other in the open form of the syntax, just as the myths slide into each other in the open form of the narrative.

utnapishtim tenth pre-diluvian king of Babylon
granted immortality dwells in Dilmun where gilgamesh finds him
at 'the mouth of the rivers' where the sky is blue
that sea you swam in after knarn
when this world first existed

(Book 3, VI)

One of the great dramatic and poetic climaxes of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the hero's lament for the death of his friend Enkidu, "who was one with the animals & was seduced / out of his innocence into the world of men" (Book 3, VIII):

O my young brother Enkidu, my dearest friend,
What is this sleep which holds you now?
You are lost in the dark and cannot hear me.
.....
Because of my brother I am afraid of death,
because of my brother I stray through the wilderness and cannot rest.[16]

Nichol's lament for his friend Terry, at the beginning of "Friends as Footnotes," the final section of Book 2, carries a similar structural importance. It is one of the key reference points for the narratives of Nichol's personal friends and family which form a continuous strand of present-day, non-mythological "history" alongside the stories of Utnapishtim or St. Orm, Palongawhoya or St. Reat. One function of these stories is simply to fix the poem in the mundane reality of daily living, and thus to insist that it is not a cerebral, empty exercise in mythopoeia. The idea of *community*, adumbrated in the stories, finds its reality in the circumstances of Nichol's own life. At the same time, the poem preserves a kind of tactful distance from these characters; like those of the saints, their stories are told more by allusion than by direct explication, and relatively few personal details are

given out. We are never told anything about Terry except her death. Unless the reader is immediately acquainted with bpNichol's circle of friends, the names in *The Martyrology* will remain just names. It is not necessary for the reader to be able to follow the complex narrative of the relationship between Dave and Pat and Barb and Wayne and Denny; it is sufficient to register its emotional impact as one of those tangled tales of crossed and muddled love affairs for which every reader could, doubtless, produce an equivalent from her own experience. Towards the end of Book 2, Nichol turns to the ostensibly dead St. And, the saint of connectives, the saint who sought out his lost brother, and appeals

listen please saint and
i know you're dead but could i bother you one more time
one prayer for dave one prayer for me
one prayer for pat one prayer for andy
saint and
  could you set us free

(Book 2, "Friends as Footnotes")

Despite, or even because of, the lack of "confessional" detail, such passages convey a sense of emotional honesty, of absolute openness, even of vulnerability. Nichol's whole being is exposed on the page, not in the superficial sense of wallowing in the confessional details of love affairs and private neuroses, but in the more fundamental sense that the quality of his being (St. Ein's "bottom nature") is manifest in the movements of his language, the rhythms of his voice, the inflection of his speech. Because this written voice is so open, it is no longer isolated: the "other" is contacted, and embraced, at every line.

Thus, though the prayer to St. And quoted above is in one sense an expression of loneliness (only two pages away from the chant "i am lonely father"), in the evolving diary format of the poem it is immediately followed by the assertion, sparked (appropriately enough) by a meeting with Phyllis Webb, that "we are all linked / all of us who use the language now tied." Webb, evoked here in the midst of her long struggle with silence, "The Kropotkin Poems," is nonetheless a member of that "community of sound" Nichol shares with bill bissett (Book 3, VI) and with Raoul Duguay (Book 3, VIII). The poet's task of redeeming the language through sound is thus seen as one of

the bases for the larger human community. Nichol describes sound as "the holy act / linking as it does the whole body" (Book 3, v), and so sees "all of us who occupy this body linked as one / an ear for an i want to talk to you" (Book 3, II). The community of this "whole body" (of friends, of family, of writers) answers to the isolation and loneliness of the saints: "no 'i' stands alone," Nichol insists, "its base is 'we'" (Book 3, III), and "we is a human community" (Book 3, v). This has been a central assertion of the poem right from the start: on the page which follows the genealogy before even the title page of Book 1, Nichol had written

one thing makes sense
one thing only
to live with people
day by day
  that struggle
to carry you forward
      it is the only way

As the poem progresses, Nichol's accounts of this community, especially of his own family, become more explicit, more directly "confessional" – though even here we should remember that there is no such thing as "pure" autobiography, that *all* writing, by the very act of being writing, transforms the "I" into an Other. Book 5, chain 3, gives a fuller account than the poem has previously provided of the history of Nichol's childhood; it does so, appropriately, through the medium of a journal record of a train trip across Canada. Journeying (and the returns) is a constant feature of *The Martyrology,* which is full of descriptions of drives through the Ontario countryside, and of train or aeroplane trips across Canada. These trips are always as much through time as through space, exploring history and memory – including the memory of the poem itself, for as Nichol revisits places he has already described he realises that "i drive the martyrology daily / retracing lines i have already written" (Book 5, chain 3). As this image suggests, the "lines" of the journeying (train tracks, lines on a map) are also the written lines of the poem itself. The length of the voyages becomes an image for the length of the poem, and the fact that there is no final destination (Nichol is always moving back and forth between the sites of various readings, or between his own home in Toronto and his parents' home in Victoria) reinforces the open-ended duration of the poem. This structure also

corresponds to the horizontal extensions of metonymy, as against the vertical compilations of metaphor.

The journeying is grounded in the history of the poet's childhood experience:

criss-crossed the west with my family
1944 to 63
dad working the CN
moved again & again
Vancouver Winnipeg Port Arthur
Winnipeg Vancouver

(Book 5, chain 3)

So the trip that begins "rolling out of Toronto / westbound transcontinental" in October 1976 becomes in Book 5, chain 3, a trip back through the history of the family: Winnipeg is the "Empire Hotel we stayed in / second time we moved here / 1957 / mother crying," and for Nichol it is "only the memory of teenage loves & losses." Saskatoon is where "my sister Donna died / six weeks old" – and the memory of that early death echoes through this whole section of the poem, just as it echoes through the names of the younger children, Don and Deanna: "Donna echoed twice / her death / sounds in our family's daily speech / our history." So again the idea of death is associated with speech, and with its possible redemption:

sometimes i wonder if Donna's speaking thru me
idly its true
the thot crosses my mind
.....
as if she were there
at play in the cloudy fields
i only know i try to follow thru
truths an attention to language yields

The same themes recur in even more intense and explicit forms in those sections of Book 6 which have so far been published. The cross-Canada train journey is re-run in "Continental Trance," which stresses again the "linear narrative of random sequential thots," that is, the way in which the poem itself is "strung out" along an ever-expanding line, literally, "a train of thot."[17]

The theme of the dead child also recurs, tragically, in "The Book

of Hours," which contains the almost unbearably painful narrative, told without distance or artifice, of the death of bp and Ellie's first child.

briefly
the heart does break
.....
i never know him
never name him
bury him under the greening tree in the shadow of the old stone wall

falls away from us

into the earth at birth

unborn again[18]

In these published sections of Book 6, much (though not all) of the discourse has returned to a fairly straightforward and accessible manner. But what was most notable in Books 4 and 5 (despite the presence of some autobiographical sections) were the increasingly drastic dislocations of the very surface of the writing. These books of *The Martyrology* are forbiddingly difficult and almost defiantly quirky. Based as they are on puns and word-games, they seem to invite the dismissive response that this is all whimsy, self-indulgent silliness, and pointless mystification. However, I believe that the case can be argued that Books 4 and 5 represent a genuine extension of the possibilities of writing, and that they admit into the poem a radical sense of linguistic free play and dissemination which is central to a poststructuralist theory of language. Indeed, *The Martyrology* Books 4 and 5 are among the most striking and successful examples anywhere in the world of the kind of writing which such critics as Barthes and Kristeva seem to be calling for. In meeting the challenge and the conditions of the times, Nichol is of course continuing his own "apprenticeship" to language (paying his "lung wage"), and the poem's project of redeeming it.

The change is signalled, physically, by the very appearance of the book. The beautiful purpled texture of the pages fades to pure white; by Book 4 the framing lines of the first three books have disappeared, leaving the poem open to the edges of the page. The decisive change in style occurs with the "CODA: Mid-Initial Sequence" which closes Book 3. Not just words but individual letters begin to be used as units

of composition. "I began," Nichol said, "to see the word as a sentence that said things about single letters.... So that what happens in Book 4 is that in a way you're constantly brought back to the surfaces of the poem. You're driven down into language, you're driven even further into the other side of something."[19]

At its simplest, the method allows words and letters to generate their own imagery:

bushes

dawn

the r rises
brushes drawn
the whole scene

(Book 3, CODA: Mid-Initial Sequence).

The rising 'r' transforms the natural scene into a painted one; the change takes place at the level of individual letters – a level which may seem merely arbitrary (there is no etymological connection between "bush" and "brush" or "dawn" and "drawn") or whimsical, but which is in fact neither. What is happening here is that language itself, the constituent parts with which we usually feel familiar and secure, has become subject to the process of fluid definition. "we work / the changes / always / to reveal / lest the actual re-veil itself" (Book 4). In one virtuoso passage, Nichol moves from "he/i/she" to "he/is/he," wondering "why is the s the feminizer?" He himself admits the problem – "such minimal movements to seek truth in" – and quotes Steve McCaffery's prediction, "you'll be accused of shallowness," only to wonder in turn whether "shallowness" is "hallowness feminized."

The method yields results which are startling (and, I find, exhilarating) in their audacious combination of frivolity and profundity. What is one to make, for instance, of the sequence in which Nichol claims that the letters we use to measure time (B.C., A.D.) are alphabetically significant?

a.d. a.d.
history's spoken in
the first four letters

all e to z
outside the head's
measure of our kind

man's time

Furthermore, as the interior pair (B.C.) preceded the exterior (A.D.), so the next eras will have to be F.G. followed by E.H. And, in the course of an elegant tribute to the poet H.D., Nichol points out that E.H. is HE reversed (just as the genetic connective DNA reverses the grammatical connective, and saint's name, AND) ... etc. Is this mere word games? Is language ever accidental?

Such results may indeed appear to be little more than games – and the spirit of playfulness is in fact one of the most charming qualities of Books 4 and 5 – but the games are deeply grounded in the ongoing concerns of the poem. Thus, when Nichol takes the word "impartial" and splits it into "imp art i always wanted to attain / a dance among the little ones" (Book 4), he is not only defining (quite delightfully) his attitude towards words and letters, he is also stressing the connection between this treatment of language and the thematic and structural implications of "fluid definition." The poem is becoming "impartial" in the sense defined by Nichol's pun, a dance among the letters, and also in at least two other senses. Firstly, as the poem proceeds, its scope is opening up to include an ever wider range of subject-matter. Christ walked on water, Nichol asserts, "to teach ... the stupidity / or rigid category" (Book 4). Fluid definition ("History teaches") escapes such rigidity without losing precision – or rather, by substituting a new kind of precision:

I want the absolute precision
of fluid definition
the saints learned
long ago
.....
the precision of openness
is not a vagueness
it is an accumulation
cumulous

(Book 4)

"always you are conscious the world is not encompassed," Nichol had written; what remains are "only the words you trust to take you

thru" (Book 2, "Friends as Footnotes"). Several times he uses the image of following the line down the centre of a road, in fog or in snow, not knowing where it is leading him: that is the function that language serves in the process of fluid definition. "i only know i try to follow thru / truths an attention to language yields" (Book 5, chain 3). The pun between "accumulation" and "cumulous" (the adjective from the noun "cumulus") points to the identity between this role of language and the "impartial" accumulation, of facts, of images, of lines, involved in the poem's "taking the time to tell you everything." Accumulation affords multiplicity of viewpoint, which, as we have seen, was the nature of the saints' experience in Cloudtown. It is in Book 4 that we are told that the saints "went crazy on this earth / only language retaining the multiplicity they were used to." So the "cumulous" nature of Cloudtown is the same as the "accumulative" nature of fluid definition: both lead into the "impartiality" of the poem's "imp-art-i-ality."

And secondly: the opposite of the impartial is the partial, "the part / sin of / partiality" (Book 4). To separate a part from the whole is to isolate the individual from the community. The redemption of language, whether through the medium of sound or by the open precision of the poem's evolving form, leads out of the loneliness the flesh aches with and back to the ideal of community. "we is a human community," set within history: the city, be it Dilmun or Toronto, is a place to exist as a citizen, as opposed to the "non/man who / believes ONLY in his own self interest" (Book 3, VI). For Nichol, the type of the citizen is in fact the poet, "scop & gleoman / integral to a community spoke its tradition" (Book 3, VIII). By the end of Book 4, Nichol is turning more and more to the local, "commitment to a place & time / the active present of the writing"; in Book 5, he turns to explore the mythology implicit in the names of the Toronto streets on which he lives (transforming them, as William Carlos Williams transformed the city of Paterson into the body of a man). Integral to a community, he speaks a tradition, which is rooted in history: in the ravens of Inuvik, "their wings black against the sky," he sees again the ravens of Dilmun.

The first deconstructive gesture of Book 5, then, is to extend this "reading" of letters as words, of new words concealed within familiar words, to the streetnames of Toronto, specifically of The Annex, "that circle of streets enclosed me" ever since Nichol first came to the city (Book 5, chain 3). (Even the name, the Annex, carries echoes of

one of Derrida's key terms, language as "supplement.") The prefatory material to Book 5 begins with a lyrical extension of "blue" to "bluer" to "bloor." The two epigraphs quote William Caxton on "dyversite & chaunge in langage" and Jean Cocteau pointing out that "The greatest literary masterpiece is no more than an alphabet in disorder." Chain 1 establishes a new cast of mythological characters to be added to the saints: looking at the sequence of street names Walmer Spadina Madison, Nichol deciphers "Wal Mer's pa Dina Madi'[s] son," and identifies the character so described as none other than St. Orm, the oldest of the saints. The streetname Brunswick yields, of course, "Brun's wick," the omniscient phallus which "ken'd al[l]." Later, Brun, a giant who sleeps in Thunder Bay, is identified in turn with Bran (who is both one of the ravens of Dilmun and the time god Cronus), Bron ("the castrate Fisher King"), and Brendan, the Irish explorer and saint. "i found a map lead me," Nichol says, "thru Toronto's streets / into another reality."

All this invention depends on a word-play even more dense and intricate than in Book 4. A typical passage is the following (from chain 1):

narcissus as it was so long a go
e go
and maybe even i go
o go s poe goed
edgarrishly
all'a narcissistically
so u go
but u wonder y go
as hugo ball did
when e died e rose to heaven
& his friends said 'did. he is done.
d one & only hugo ball's bell billowed boldly BULLONG
BELONG
BE LONG TO SING MY SONG
TO YOU LORD'
flying out of
"TIME OUT"
the referee cries
"VOWELS"
so disconsonantly

Let me attempt to follow, pedantically, the progression of this passage (knowing perfectly well that to "ex-plain" something is, as Nichol noted in Book 4, to make it no longer clear). The splitting of "ago" into "a go" starts a sequence of vowels (of which the second, "ego," is most obviously relevant to Narcissus) which, when it reaches "o go," is deflected into the Okanagan monster Ogopogo and Edgar (garish) Allan (a la) Poe (the n of Allan generating "narcissistically" all over again). When "u" is finally arrived at, it becomes of course "you," and the semi-vowel "y" similarly becomes "why." The "u go" is re-interpreted as Hugo, who in Nichol can have no other surname but Ball. The h dropped from "u go" is also dropped from "he," so that "when [h]e died [h]e rose to heaven": but when the e rises from "died" it leaves "did," and "hugo ball did" so "he is done." "done" then becomes "d one" *(the* one) and only, and the a in "ball" generates another sequence of vowels, "ball's bell billowed boldly BULLONG." The onomatopoeic "BULLONG" – an invented word which might well belong in a Hugo Ball sound poem – immediately becomes "BELONG," which is split by desire into "BE LONG." The song Ball longs to sing begins "flying out of," which recalls the title of Ball's published diary, *Flight Out Of Time,* but the song is interpreted/interrupted by the referee's cry of "TIME OUT." The passage closes with a final play between "VOWELS" and "disconsonantly" (disconsolately). This kind of explication slows down and renders tedious what is in the poem a very fast flashing of wit across the surface of the lines. In a phrase like "taken as a compli / meant for me," the line break is used to compress the pun into the instant's split perception when the reader sees both the anticipated completion of "compliment" and the start of the new phrase. The speed is maintained in a vocal reading or performance of the poem, for no matter how convoluted the word-play becomes it is still a text which Nichol can, and does, read aloud. (Chain 3 includes the visually annotated text for a sound poem.)

The second deconstructive gesture of Book 5 is its "readings" or "translations" of earlier sections of the poem. *The Martyrology* turns in on itself, as it were, like a serpent devouring its own tail, or like Derrida's concept of "invagination." There are three major "translations" in Book 5. Chain 7 is a reading of Book 1 in the form of a drama, in which characters come on stage and mime the action, or repeat fragments from the text of Book 1. Chain 11 is a drastic reduction of Book 2: it begins at "Clouds" (actually the second

section of Book 2) and prints the first word of every paragraph; it then repeats the frequency and distribution of the final letter of that word. The result is a very pure, constructivist visual poetry, in which individual letters are scattered across the page (perhaps like clouds, though the expressionist impulse is minimal) in patterns which appear to be entirely abstract or random. Chain 11 then closes with the opening words of each paragraph of the final three sections of Book 2 arranged in columns on the page; read either vertically or horizontally, they will produce evocative but fractured lyrics, never quite making sense but never abandoning it altogether.

The most spectacular of the "translations" occurs in chain 4, which helpfully begins by providing the original text, a long passage discarded from a draft of Book 2. This passage is "rearranged" in two ways: first, Nichol reads off the first word in every line, then the second, then the third, and so on until the text is exhausted. Thus the lines

Roy & me
route 3 to Peggy's Cove
GOODWOOD dark clouds in a blue sky
gulls boats instances of sequence thinking

would appear first as "Roy route GOODWOOD gulls," second as "& 3 [blank] [blank]," third as "me to dark boats," etc. But a second level of rearrangement enters, as the words are split into arbitrary, defamiliarising divisions. So "Roy route GOODWOOD gulls" actually appears as

Roy rou
tego odwo odgul
ls

The effect of these "translations," especially chains 4 and 11, is to fulfill the conditions of what Roland Barthes defined as "the pleasure of the text: value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier."[20] Radically freed from the organising logic of any signified, the letters of *The Martyrology* play across the pages of the text in games which defy the reader to take them as anything but what they are: the "imp art i always wanted to attain / a dance among the little ones." Folded in upon itself, "invaginated," the poem reveals its own interior: the letters which have always lurked, precariously, inside the words. Even the word "word" itself is no longer a stable entity: it is now a choice, w or d. Book 5 contains the ultimate transgressions of

language, as the poem deconstructs itself, its own history, and its own basic materials.

This process extends also, of course, to the author. The third deconstructive gesture of Book 5 is to be found in its very structure of "chains." As Nichol explains it in a "Note" at the end of the book:

> Book v was structured on the idea of the chain – chain of thot, chain of images, chain of events – so that in the writing when a branching of thot occurred i would try to follow all the chains that opened up. Hence, in the text, what may appear like footnote numbers actually represent reading choices. As a reader you can continue thru the chain of ideas you're already following, or you can choose, at different points, to diverge.... This means, of course, that no two readers will necessarily have the same experience of Book v, tho they will walk away with a similar sum.

Thus Nichol abandons the privileged position of the author as the ultimate source and determinant of the text's meaning. The basic control over the order in which the text will be read is ceded to the reader, who is thus invited in to the centre of the process of "writing" the book.[21] Some of the chains begin at obviously appropriate places: the radical translation of Book 2 in chain 11 branches out of the line "tongue twisting back on itself" in chain 6. Other "footnotes" direct the reader back into the poem – chains 5 and 7 both include pathways *back into* chain 1, suggesting that the reading of Book 5 could become a closed circle endlessly repeating itself. The most obvious "conclusion" to the book comes at the end of chain 8, not chain 12. The effect (a very odd one in a long, continuing poem) is to spatialise the text: to *stop* its progression, and to lay this Book out like a map, or like a maze, in which the reader must find her own way.

*

As *The Martyrology* is an open-ended poem which has not yet arrived at a conclusion (and most probably never will), so this chapter, and this book, should also remain open-ended. There will be no closure, no high-sounding critical summation. This is only appropriate. For all his prodigious output, bpNichol is still a young man: only in this ominous year of 1984 will he reach the dignified age of 40, at which, so they say, life begins. It will be interesting to see what bpNichol does once he really gets started.

Notes

CHAPTER ONE: Exits and Entrances

1 This "Statement" was published on the box-cover of *bp (JOURNEYING & the returns)* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967). It is quoted in full on pp. 15-16.

2 The Stein quotation (see the title page) occurs on the very first page of *The Martyrology*, before the title page, the dedication, or the prefatory excerpt from The Chronicle of Knarn. The five books of *The Martyrology* have all been published by the Coach House Press in Toronto: see Chapter Five, note 1

3 Two chapters of the Stein book were in fact published, in *Open Letter*, Second Series, 2 (Summer, 1972), 41-48, and in *White Pelican*, 3:4 (Autumn, 1973), 15-23. The essay on *Ida*, from which the quotation in this sentence is taken, is "When The Time Came," *Line*, 1 (Spring, 1983), 46-61.

4 From *Friends*, a projected book of typewriter concrete, dating from the mid-1960s, which was to have been published by Talonbooks in 1970, but which never appeared. The typescript forms part of the Nichol Collection in Special Collections of the Library of Simon Fraser University. All quotations from documents in this collection appear by permission of bpNichol and of Simon Fraser University. Subsequent citations will be to "Nichol Collection, SFU."

5 Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," in *Writings and Lectures 1909-1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (Penguin, 1971), p. 138.

6 Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 11-12.

7 Maurice Denis, "Definition du Néo-Traditionnisme" (1890); in *Théories*.(Paris: Hermann, 1964).

8 The nature and the validity of the analogy between Stein's writing and cubism is open to much debate, and I hope to deal with the question in detail myself in a later book. See Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (Yale Univerisity Press, 1978), and Marianne DeKoven, "Gertrude Stein and Modern Painting: Beyond Literary cubism," *Contemporary Literature*, XXII, 1 (1981), 81-95.

9 See Chapter Three. A more detailed discussion of abstraction and sound poetry can be found in my article, "Gadji Beri Bimba: the problem of abstraction in poetry," *Canadian Literature*, 97 (Summer, 1983), 75-92.

10 Gertrude Stein, "Pictures," *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 76-77.

11 Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage, 1960), p. 212.

12 Gertrude Stein, "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso," *Writings and Lectures,* p. 233.
13 Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," *Writings and Lectures,* pp. 21-30.
14 Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), p. xiii.
15 Or *some* of these ideas, at least: DeKoven has a rather eclectic attitude. In one brief aside (p. xvi), she blithely dismisses the whole concept of différance," thereby defusing most of Derrida; later she writes, "The ascendancy, in logocentrism, of speech over writing, and of identity or self-presence over absence, are not important to the development of experimental writing as an alternative language" (p. 19). But there are few things that are *more* important. Despite these omissions, DeKoven's is an interesting and useful book on Stein, though she often seems to stop short of taking her arguments to their most radical conclusions.
16 DeKoven, *A Different Language,* p. xiv.
17 From an unpublished lecture and interview, with Douglas Barbour and Stephen Scobie: Edmonton, March 23rd, 1979. Subsequent quotations from this interview will be cited as "Edmonton, 1979."
18 Edmonton, 1979.
19 Edmonton, 1979.
20 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 98. This line is quoted and endorsed by Phyllis Webb in her "Foreword" to *Wilson's Bowl.*
21 bpNichol, "late night summer poem," *The Other Side of the Room* (Toronto: Weed/Flower Press, 1971), p. 51.
22 Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to Pierre Garnier, September 17th, 1963. This is one of the most widely reprinted manifestoes of concrete poetry; among many other places, it appears in Mary Ellen Solt, ed., *Concrete Poetry: a World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 84.
23 Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Abrams, 1966), p. 9.
24 Quoted in John Berger, *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), p. 11.
25 Berger, p. 32.
26 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text,* trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 10.
27 A few random examples: the murdered mother (and totally unmentioned father) in Watson's *The Double Hook;* the drowned father in Atwood's *Surfacing;* the missing or substitute parents in Laurence's *The Diviners* and Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?;* another drowned father in Kroetsch's *Badlands;* a suicide father in Findley's *Famous Last Words;* even, in Bowering's *Burning Water,* Vancouver's identification of Cook and Quadra, both dead, as his parents.
28 *The Martyrology,* Book 2, "Clouds."
29 *The Martyrology,* Book 2, "Auguries."
30 Edmonton, 1979.
31 Edmonton, 1979.
32 Edmonton, 1979.
33 Edmonton, 1979.
34 "TRG Research Report 1: Translation," *Open Letter,* Second Series, 4 (Spring, 1973), 81.

35 From "The Plunkett Papers," unpublished typescript, Nichol Collection, SFU.
36 I wish to thank bpNichol for providing me with a copy of this script. Both the script and a recording of the CBC production are included in the Nichol Collection, SFU.
37 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 3.
38 bpNichol, *Nautilations*, unpublished typescript, Nichol Collection, SFU.
39 The terms "float" (signifier) and "slide" (signified) are widely used in deconstructionist criticism, but are most closely associated with Jacques Lacan, whose psychological theories (based on the premise that the Unconscious is structured as a language) would be of particular interest to Nichol.
40 "TRG Report 2: Narrative (part 5)," *Open Letter*, Second Series, 9 (Fall, 1974), 76.
41 *The Martyrology*, Book 5, Chain 3.
42 See DeKoven, *A Different Language*, passim, but especially pp. 16-22: "Experimental writing is erotic in its excess: the unassimilable excess of meaning, or of repetition, or of sound play, or of surprise" (p. 16); see also Marjorie Perloff, "Poetry as Word-System: the Art of Gertrude Stein," *American Poetry Review*, 8 (1979), 33-43: "The gap between signifier and signified is repeatedly emphasized [in Stein], a gap that leaves room for continuous verbal play" (40); and see Elizabeth Fifer, "Is Flesh Advisable? The Interior Theater of Gertrude Stein," *Signs*, 4 (Spring, 1979), 472-483.
43 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, pp. 14, 9-10, 65.
44 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 138.
45 See for instance Eugen Gomringer's description of the concrete poem as "an object containing thought but made concrete through play-activity," and as "a play-area ... an invitation." In "From Line to Constellation" (1954), reprinted in Solt, p. 67.
46 *The Martyrology*, Book 4.
47 Eagleton, p. 138. Eagleton's footnote directs the reader to Roland Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text: Roland Barthes*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148.
48 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 62.
49 *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975).
50 Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, p. 196.
51 Wendy Steiner, *The Colours of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 181. Steiner is here recapitulating part of her earlier argument in *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance*, p. 152. The double entendre on "climax" may not be intentional, but it is certainly relevant to Stein's erotic writing.
52 Nichol Collection, SFU.
53 Edmonton, 1979.
54 *The Martyrology*, Book 5, Chain 4.
55 bpNichol, *Monotones* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1971). *Monotones* (dated 1967-70) is part of the large body of MS material out of which *The Martyrology* materialised and *The Plunkett Papers* didn't. The epigraph to the published book is an excerpt from *The Writings of Saint And:* "That night as I lay by the sea I dreamt I was carried away to a dark cavern & there my tongue cut out. I awoke greatly disturbed & became so preoccupied with this vision I could speak of nothing else – as tho I foresaw the imminent end of all speech."
56 bpNichol, *Translating Translating Apollinaire: A Preliminary Report* (Milwaukee: Membrane Press, 1979).
57 In "translating" works by Nicole Brossard, Fred Wah has used "creature" for

"écriture." The pun nicely indicates the quasi-autonomous existence of writing.

58 Interestingly, Steve McCaffery argues against the use of tape technology in sound poetry on the very grounds that tape is "the inscription of units of meaning within a framed space of retrievability and repeatability," i.e., "none other than writing." McCaffery sees sound poetry as a way to "transcend ... the logocentricity of writing" (a phrase which, surely knowingly, stands Derrida's categories on their head!) "and to achieve a totally phonocentric art." See "Discussion ... Genesis ... Continuity: Some Reflections on the Current Work of the Four Horsemen," in *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*, ed. Steve McCaffery and bpNichol (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1978), pp. 32-36.

59 Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), pp. 29-30.

60 DeKoven, *A Different Language*, p. 20.

61 There is a text in *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer*, originally published by Bob Cobbing in England in 1969; the first Canadian edition is Toronto: Weed Flower Press, 1973. The printed text is, of course, a poor substitute for Nichol's truly "pre-Oedipal" performance!

62 The word "infantile" was in fact applied, though probably not in this sense, to a performance by Re:Sounding, in a review by Robert Palmer, *The New York Times*, Sunday April 13th, 1980.

63 The French phrase is "l'écriture à haute voix," and Barthes is careful to say that this "n'est pas du tout la parole."

64 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, pp. 66-67.

65 See, for instance, *Briefly* (Island Writing Series, 1982) and *Continental Trance* (Oolichan Books, 1983). The unpublished section "In the Plunkett Hotel" also returns to autobiographical elements. On the other hand, radical linguistic play continues in some of "The Book of Hours" and in "In Choate Road."

66 *The Martyrology*, Book 3, v.

67 Nichol has frequently made the joke about "pb" Shelley; "qd" Leavis is perhaps more esoteric; and I can think of no reference for "dq."

68 The irony is somewhat muffled by the fact that the title is nowhere mentioned in the box, so the reader would not be aware of it. Nichol recalled the title during a seminar at Simon Fraser University in July 1983.

69 bpNichol, *As Elected: Selected Writing* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980), pp. 107-108.

CHAPTER TWO: Visual Poetry

1 His early collection of typewriter concrete, *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer*, was first published by Bob Cobbing in England (London: Writer's Forum, 1969), and not published in Canada until four years later (Toronto: Weed/Flower Press, 1973).

2 These three anthologies contain only one Canadian poem: Nichol's Blues" (Solt, p. 216). Even in 1968, this was drastic under-representation.

3 Some passages in this chapter have been adapted from an earlier essay on concrete poetry in Canada which appeared (in French translation only) in *Ellipse*, 17 (1975), 180-188.

4 Williams, p. v.

5 Solt, p. 84.

6 bpNichol, "Introduction," *Ganglia Press Index*, grOnk series 8 number 7 (Toronto: Ganglia Press, 1972).
7 Earle Birney, *Rag & Bone Shop* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), unpaginated. The quotation comes from the "acknowledgments" on the final page.
8 Hans Arp, "Concrete Art" (1944), in *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, ed. Marcel Jean (New York: Viking, 1972), pp. 139-140.
9 Letter to the author, July 20th, 1967.
10 This definition leaves open the possibility of the use of syntax within a concrete poem, but in a subsidiary role. For example, Gomringer's "snow is english" (Bann, pp. 43-45) incorporates syntactical phrases, but the poem is *structured by* the visual form; its essential statement is made in the relationship between the unchanging left side of the page and the constantly changing right.
11 Dom Sylvester Houedard, "Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay," *Typographica*, 8 (December, 1963), 49-50.
12 Ian Hamilton Finlay, letter to the author, November 30th, 1968.
13 This quotation is taken from an essay by Finlay in *Image* (1965), as quoted in M.L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets* (New York: Galaxy, 1967), pp. 206-207. The description of the reader's role here anticipates later developments in Reader Response Theory.
14 The longest concrete poem I know is Emmett Williams' *sweethearts* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), which lasts for 140 pages – or 280, if you count the blanks facing each page of the text. Later in this chapter, I will discuss several works by Nichol which use a serial form, from fairly brief sequences like *Aleph Unit* to the book-length "novel," *Extreme Positions*.
15 For a more detailed discussion of these ideas, see my article "Signs of the Times: Concrete Poetry in Retrospect," which will appear in a forthcoming volume of essays on Ian Hamilton Finlay, to be published by Carcanet Press, Manchester.
16 Weaver's distinction appeared in his article on "Concrete Poetry" in *The Lugano Review*, I, 5-6 (1966). It is discussed by Solt, p. 8. Finlay used for a while a related set of terms, also drawn from the visual arts, "suprematist" and "fauve." More simply, bpNichol spoke of a division between "clean" and "dirty" concrete.
17 In *bp* (1967). It is often difficult to "quote" or to footnote concrete poems. I have included several illustrations in this chapter, and have tried to refer, whenever possible, to poems easily available in *As Elected*.
18 Toronto: Ganglia Press, 1966, 1969.
19 Figure 1: "Cycle No. 22," *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer*, unpaginated. Nichol has commented that several of his early sound poems arose from "reading" visual permutations.
20 Ernst Jandl, "Phonic Poetry," *Form*, 3 (December, 1966), 21.
21 Finlay, letter to Garnier: Solt, p. 84.
22 bpNichol, review of *Typewriter Poems*, *Open Letter*, Second Series Number Three (Fall, 1972), 78.
23 *As Elected*, p. 39. This piece has also been used as the text for a sound poem by Re:Sounding.
24 bpNichol, *Still Water* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1970). The Nichol Collection at SFU includes the MS of another projected but unpublished collection, *Friends*.
25 Figure 2: "Easter Pome," *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer*, unpaginated.
26 Figure 3: "Tribute to Vasarely," *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer*, unpaginated

27 Figure 4: "21st Birthday Pome," *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer,* unpaginated.
28 Figure 5: page from *Still Water,* reprinted in *As Elected,* p. 67.
29 bpNichol, *Extreme Positions* (Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1981), jacket-copy (provided by the author). All quotations in this paragraph come from this edition, which is unpaginated. In an interview with Caroline Bayard and Jack David, Nichol gave an even more concise "plot summary": "This guy has two wives and he murders both of them. It's quite linear." See Caroline Bayard and Jack David, *Out-Posts/Avant-Postes* (Erin: Press Porcepic, 1978), p. 22.
30 *Out-posts/Avant-postes,* pp. 38-39.
31 From "Stills," section 2, in *love: a book of remembrances* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), unpaginated.
32 In *love: a book of remembrances,* unpaginated. The quotations are from section 1.
33 Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1971.
34 *Out-Posts/Avant-Postes,* p. 23.
35 Figure 7: "H (an alphhabet)," *As Elected,* p. 34.
36 bpNichol, "An Introduction," *Doors: To Oz & Other Landscapes,* exhibition catalogue, Vivaxis Gallery, Toronto (December, 1979), unpaginated.
37 *Love Affair* (1979), *Unit of Four* (1973), and the original edition of *Aleph Unit* (1973) are all from Seripress, and were produced in collaboration with Barbara Caruso. *Transformational Unit* was privately printed as a Christmas gift in 1983. *Aleph Unit* appears in *As Elected,* pp. 41-48.
38 *Doors: To Oz & Other Landscapes,* unpaginated.
39 *Out-Posts/Avant-Postes,* p. 41.
40 *Out-Posts/Avant-Postes,* p. 27.
41 This quote comes from the "Afterword" to the Seripress edition, which, like the titles for the various stages of the poem, is *not* included in the version reprinted in *As Elected.*
42 See *Andromeda* 3 (September, 1978) and 4 (December, 1978).
43 *Out-Posts/Avant-Postes,* p. 38.
44 Figure 11: "Fictive Funnies," in "TRG Report 2: Narrative (part 5)," *Open Letter,* Second Series, Number Nine (Fall, 1974), 83.
45 Both Seripress, 1979.
46 *Doors: To Oz & Other Landscapes,* unpaginated.
47 See Barbara Caruso, exhibition catalogue, The Gallery, Stratford (May, 1977).
48 Seripress, 1973.
49 Seripress, 1976.
50 Seripress, 1978.

CHAPTER THREE: Sound Poetry

1 Hugo Ball, *Flight Out Of Time: A Dada Diary,* ed. John Elderfield (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), p. 70.
2 See Solt, p. 21.
3 For a general anthology of printed texts or performance "scores" for sound poetry, see *Text-Sound Texts,* ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980). For a specific selection of The Four Horsemen's texts, see *The Prose Tattoo: Selected Performance Scores* (Milwaukee: Membrane Press, 1983).

4 Richard Kostelanetz, "Text-Sound Art: a Survey," *Text-Sound Texts*, p. 14. It should be noted that Kostelanetz prefers the term "text-sound" to "sound poetry."
5 For a fuller discussion of Hugo Ball, of the Russian Futurists, and of the whole theory of sound poetry, see my article "Gadji Beri Bimba: the problem of abstraction in poetry," *Canadian Literature*, 97 (Summer, 1983), 75-92. Several passages in this chapter are repeated or revised from this article.
6 Toronto: Griffin House, 1972.
7 Ball's biographer, Gerhardt Steinke, sees his experiment with sound poetry as "a form of spiritual death in which his ego received a violent shock by trying to seize the magical contents of his unconscious." In later life, Ball became reclusive and religious, writing a book on Byzantine mysticism. See Gerhardt Steinke, *The Life and Work of Hugo Ball* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), p. 178. For Nichol's song, another possible source is Bob Dylan's adaptation of "Joe Hill" as "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine," on *John Wesley Harding* (1968).
8 Ball, p. 71.
9 Harold Osborne, *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth-Century Art*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1979), p. 25.
10 Osborne, pp. 25-26.
11 Osborne, p. 26.
12 It is of course possible to argue, at a more complex philosophical level, that the referentiality of language is an illusion, that there is no ultimate source in which to ground the recession of linguistic "différance," deferral. However, even if we grant these arguments on a theoretical level, we still have to deal, on a pragmatic level, with the concept of language as having referential value, and we still have to act *as if* that were not an illusion.
13 Bruce Andrews, "Writing Social Work & Political Practice," in *Aural Literature Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Precisely, 1981), p. 92.
14 bpNichol, *Ear Rational: Sound Poems 1970-80* (Milwaukee: Membrane Press, 1982).
15 Cf. the passage from Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* quoted at the end of Chapter 1. But see also, later in this chapter, the account of "Stagelost."
16 Ernst Jandl, "oberflächenübersetzung," *sprechblasen* (Berlin: Luchterhand, 1968), p. 51.
17 Celia and Louis Zukofsky, *Catullus* (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1969).
18 *The Poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus*, trans. F.W. Cornish (London, 1913).
19 *As Elected*, pp. 116-117.
20 A major selection from this series appears as *Translating Translating Apollinaire: A Preliminary Report From A Book Of Research* (Milwaukee: Membrane Press, 1979).
21 For other versions of "homolinguistic translation," by other authors, see especially Steve McCaffery, *Intimate Distortions* (Erin: The Porcupine's Quill, 1979), and Douglas Barbour and Stephen Scobie, *The Pirates of Pen's Chance* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1981); this latter volume was edited for the press by bpNichol.
22 bpNichol, "An Int(o)ro(nto)duction," *Translating Translating Apollinaire*, p. [iii].
23 Performance recorded on *Borders*, the record which formed part of *bp* (1967).
24 On *Appendix*, recording issued as part of Sean O'Huigin, *A Simple Introduction to Experimental Poetry* (Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1978).
25 On *Appendix*.

26 Performance recorded on *Borders;* text printed in *As Elected,* pp. 50-51.
27 Cf. the text spoken by Rafael Barreto-Rivera in "Monotony," on *CaNADAda.*
28 One version of the text was printed as a pamphlet (Toronto: Ganglia Press, 1969); another, more condensed version is in *As Elected,* p. 57. Nichol can be heard performing this poem in Michael Ondaatje's film *The Sons of Captain Poetry.*
29 Ernest Robson, "The Concept of Phonetic Music," in *Aural Literature Criticism,* p. 113.
30 Ball, p. 71.
31 On *Ear Rational.*
32 Performance recorded on *Ear Rational;* text printed as a pamphlet (Sacramento: The Runcible Spoon, 1968).
33 Performance recorded on *Borders;* multi-tracked CBC studio version of the first movement only recorded on *Ear Rational;* text printed in *As Elected,* pp. 52-56.
34 Recorded on *Borders;* the record's jacket cover supplies a text.
35 On *Ear Rational.*
36 Steve McCaffery, "for a poetry of blood," in *Text-Sound Texts,* p. 275.
37 bpNichol, *Journal* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1978), pp. 17-18. I am a little wary of quoting anything from *Journal* as a statement of Nichol's "beliefs": it is, after all, a novel, and this passage is the utterance of a fictional character in a fairly overwrought situation. Nevertheless, there seems to me to be something of Nichol's essential attitude towards sound in this quotation.
38 It was briefly revived again later in the decade, especially by McCaffery, who is a talented saxophonist.
39 On *Live in the West.*
40 Figure 1: "Son Nada," *The Prose Tattoo,* p. 2. A recorded performance is on *Live in the West.*
41 bpNichol, "Introduction," *The Prose Tattoo,* p. [iii].
42 On *CaNADAda,* and also, in a somewhat weaker performance, on *Live in the West.*
43 Geoffrey Grigson, ed., *Poems of John Clare's Madness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 132-133.
44 *Text-Sound Texts,* p. 275.
45 Jerome Rothenberg, "Poetry and Performance," in *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue,* ed. Steve McCaffery and bpNichol (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1978), p. 53.
46 Performance recorded on *CaNADAda;* text printed in *The Prose Tattoo,* pp. 25-30.
47 On *Live in the West;* quotations are transcribed directly from the recording of this particular performance.
48 Erin: The Porcupine's Quill, 1979.
49 *The Prose Tattoo,* pp. 5-6.

CHAPTER FOUR: Fiction

1 bpNichol, *Craft Dinner: stories & texts 1966-1976* (Toronto: Aya Press, 1978), unpaginated.
2 See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text,* ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148. The essay first appeared in 1968.
3 Douglas Barbour, "Strange Blossoms," *Essays on Canadian Writing,* 16 (Fall-Winter, 1979-80), 141. The "it" in this sentence is rewardingly ambiguous, being capable of referring to both the reader's "awareness" and the "aesthetic object," the text.

4 Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader," *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 25.
5 Wolfgang Iser, "Interaction between Text and Reader," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 106.
6 Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 4.
7 Barbour, "Strange Blossoms," 142-143.
8 Donald Sutherland, *Gertrude Stein: A Biography of her Work* (Yale University Press, 1951; reprinted Greenwood Press: Connecticut, 1971), p. 11.
9 See below, the discussions of the "endings" of *For Jesus Lunatick* and *Andy*.
10 Cf. *The Martyrology:* "as stein saw it the difference between identity & entity / it is so much more soothing to live with memory" (Book 2, "Friends as Footnotes").
11 Both in *Craft Dinner*.
12 *Journal*, p. 80.
13 bpNichol, *Two Novels* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1969). The two sections, "Andy" and "For Jesus Lunatick," each have their own pagination. All quotations will be noted parenthetically in the text.
14 For a fuller account of the affinities between Smart and Nichol, see Brian Henderson, *Radical Poetics* (Ph.D. dissertation, York University, 1982), pp. 364-369.
15 The Nichol Collection at Simon Fraser contains two complete drafts of this unpublished novel, a first draft of 88 pages and a second draft of 108 pages. I am working from a copy of this second draft which was kindly given to me by bpNichol. The quotation here comes from pp. 73-75 of the typescript; the doubled s's are due to the fact that Collender, at this stage in the novel, has two teeth missing, "producing a strange sibilance when he spoke."
16 "Workman" is one of the Nichol family names: *The Martyrology* Book 5 contains several references to "grandma Workman."
17 The original edition of *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* was published by Weed/Flower Press in Toronto as a pamphlet with a delightful cover illustration by Barbara Caruso. All my quotations from "Three Western Tales" are taken from *Craft Dinner*, which is unpaginated, so there will be no acknowledgement in the text. For the Parliamentary dispute, see Jack David's account in his "Introduction" to *As Elected*, pp. 23-24.
18 See Stephen Scobie, "Two Authors in Search of a Character," *Canadian Literature*, 54 (Autumn, 1972), 37-55. Some passages in this chapter are repeated or revised from this article.
19 For a list of such titles, see "Two Authors in Search of a Character," 38. For a book-length study of the literary history, see Stephen Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881-1981* (University of New Mexico Press, 1982).
20 Pat Garrett (ghost-written by Ash Upton), *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid* (1882), pp. 3-4. The original edition of *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* had an orange cover.
21 Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Toronto: Anansi, 1970), pp. 41, 11.
22 These unpublished characters are worried that no one will remember them, and so they will cease to exist, if they don't make it from draft MSS into a printed book. One of

them, Harry Gardenia, puts it this way: "If things continue the way they've been going the best I can hope for is a footnote in someone's essay on Nichol & that's assuming the asshole's writing has some staying power" (typescript, p. 63). Glad to oblige you, Harry.

23 Similarly, in *The Martyrology* Book 4, there is a brief appearance by Blossom Tight, "a minor character from an early draft of a later Captain Poetry poem," who comments/is made to comment bitterly on her manipulation by her author: "noone is forgotten we're just rewritten. he's letting my voice intrude briefly. it's just a chance for a few laughs at his character's expense (employing the devices of fiction in an autobiographical poem)."

24 Barbour, "Strange Blossoms," 143.

25 "The red dress" also appears in *The Martyrology*, Book 2, "Sons and Divinations," in a quotation from a folk song: "poor john's dead & gone / left me here to sing this song // pretty little girl with your red dress on // with your dress // with your red dress // on"

26 bpNichol, *Still* (Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1983). *Still* was the winning entry in the 5th International 3-Day Novel-Writing Contest; its composition can therefore be precisely dated to the Labour Day weekend, 1982.

27 There are various possible analogues or models for this use of the empty house. One might invoke the "Time Passes" section in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, or the lyrical interludes in the same author's *The Waves*. A very interesting analogue (though I do not know whether Nichol is aware of it) is Marguerite Duras' film *Son Nom de Venise dans Calcutta Désert*, which is built upon exactly the same counterpoint between the description of an empty house (the visuals of the film) and the conversation of disembodied, unspecified voices (the off-screen soundtrack).

28 Edmonton, 1979; as quoted above, in Chapter 1.

29 *Out-Posts/Avant-Postes*, pp. 24-25.

CHAPTER FIVE: *The Martyrology*

1 All the collected volumes of *The Martyrology* have been published by the Coach House Press, Toronto. Books 1 and 11 (using Roman numerals) were first published as separate volumes, joined by a paper band, in 1972; in 1977, a revised, single-volume edition appeared (using Arabic numerals). All my quotations from Books 1 and 2 are from the revised edition, except for the first epigraph to this chapter, which I obstinately prefer in its original form. Books 3 and 4 appeared in a single volume in 1976, and Book 5 in 1982; all use Arabic numerals on the title pages, though Nichol occasionally uses Roman numerals still. I have used Arabic throughout. All the volumes of *The Martyrology* are unpaginated, so exact citation is difficult: Books 1 and 2 are divided into named sections, Book 3 into numbered sections, and Book 5 into numbered "chains." Quotations will be noted parenthetically in the text by section name or number. Some passages in this chapter are repeated or revised from two previous articles of mine on *The Martyrology:* "The Words You Trust To Take You Thru," *Precisely*, 1 (November, 1977), 15-21; and "Look Out, The Saints Are Comin' Through," *The Fiddlehead*, 120 (Winter, 1979), 115-122.

2 In *Continental Trance* (Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1983), which will be part of Book 6, Nichol writes: "God my life ends / years before this poem possibly can" (p. 36).

3 See bpNichol, "some words on the martyrology march 12 1979," in *The Long Poem Anthology*, ed. Michael Ondaatje (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979), pp. 335-337.

4 Nichol, "some words on the martyrology," p. 337.

5 Frank Davey, "The Language of the Contemporary Canadian Long Poem," *Surviving the Paraphrase* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1983), p. 183.
6 M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 9. It should be noted that Rosenthal and Gall do not seem to have extended their reading north of the 49th Parallel.
7 Henderson, *Radical Poetics*, p. 339.
8 In the 1972 edition, this poem, along with David Aylward/St. Alwart's "Afterword," was included as a loose leaf between Books I and II – a hazardous enterprise, since it depended on the survival of the paper band holding the two volumes together.
9 bpNichol, *Scraptures: Fourth Sequence* (Niagara Falls: press: today, 1966).
10 See above, p. 00 [in TS, Chapter 1, pg. 17].
11 For another discussion of the importance of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in *The Martyrology*, see Brian Henderson, *Radical Poetics*, pp. 357-363. The English translation used for references in this chapter is that by N.K. Sandars (Penguin, 1960).
12 Nichol means "quite literally" in the sense that he believes he would probably have committed suicide had it not been for his therapy with Lea Hindley-Smith: see above, Chapter 1, p. 00 [TS 19]. In Books 3, 4, and 5, Lea is the sole dedicatee.
13 Sandars, pp. 8, 7.
14 Sandars, pp. 120, 125.
15 Nichol also associates Dilmun with ravens, which are obvious and omnipresent in far Northern communities. Two pages earlier in Book 4 he writes "here the ravens cry / as they did in Dilmun." But he is misremembering his source: the point about Dilmun is that there "the croak of the raven was *not* heard, the bird of death did *not* utter the cry of death" (Sandars, p. 39, my italics).
16 Sandars, pp. 92, 99.
17 *Continental Trance*, pp. *20-21*.
18 bpNichol, "6:35 a.m. to 7:35 a.m.," in *Briefly: the birthdeath cycle from The Book of Hours* (Lantzville: Island Writing Series, 1981).
19 *Out-posts/Avant-postes*, p. 39.
20 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 65.
21 There are, of course, precedents for experimental books which may be read in any order: William Burroughs, for instance, or even Nichol's own *Still Water*, in which the original arrangement of the unnumbered loose cards was not regarded as sacrosanct. Book 5 is more interesting than a totally random order would be, however, since it does set up some definite parameters within which the sequence can be varied.

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