

"which way you p. . .":  
the Site and Sequence of Events in bpNichol's The Martyrology

by

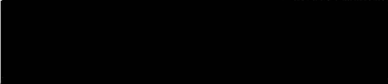
Roger Nathan Davis  
B.A., University of British Columbia, 1994

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of English


We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Stephen Scobie, Supervisor (Department of English)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Jamie Dopp, Departmental Member (Department of English)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Barbara Harris, Outside Member (Department of Linguistics)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. J. Douglas Porteous, External Examiner (Department of Geography)

  
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University of Victoria

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Supervisor: Dr. Stephen Scobie

## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine bpNichol's long poem, The Martyrology, focussing specifically on Book 5 and gIFTS: The Martyrology Book(s) 7& (or Books 7/8). I suggest that these two texts exemplify the radically fragmentary style which Nichol adopts in Book 3 during the "*CODA: Mid-Initial Sequence*."

As a critical groundwork, I employ the writings of The Toronto Research Group (TRG), comprised of Nichol and Steve McCaffery, which foray into a variety of textual realms including translation, narrative, language and context and which McCaffery collected in Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine: The Collected Research Reports of the Toronto Research Group 1973-1982. Underlying my approach to Nichol is the deconstructive theory of Jacques Derrida in conjunction with critics such as Charles Bernstein, Frank Davey, Geoffrey Bennington and Stephen Scobie.

In my introduction, I trace some TRG publication history, notably their involvement with the journal Open Letter. I also investigate some possible connections the group had to Derrida and, more specifically, his essays on Edmond Jabès in Writing and Difference.


The second and third chapters are closely related. In the former, I develop some Derridean terminology and outline some key motifs (the ellipse, the ellipsis and the site) which inform my reading of Nichol. In the latter, I draw connections between Derrida's texts and the TRG's own involvement with narrative and textuality.

The fourth and fifth chapters are, respectively, readings of Book 5 and gIFTS. For Book 5, I foreground the "mid-initial" and illustrate Book 5's own difficult, internal network as well as the text's spatial, temporal and narrative relationships to the previous four books. For gIFTS, I continue with the "mid-initial," reading the text

through the lens of Nichol's reference to the Theory of Special Relativity and further developing the spatio-temporal concerns of narrative, paragrams and the economy of writing.

It is impossible to adequately deal with the entirety of The Martyrology in this short thesis. As a result, my readings are very close and specific within a critical context which cannot be isolated from larger theoretical concerns, but this context serves as a loose framework for reading Nichol's texts.

Examiners:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Stephen Scobie, Supervisor (Department of English)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Jamie Dopp, Departmental Member (Department of English)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Barbara Harris, Outside Member (Department of Linguistics)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Douglas Porteous, External Examiner (Department of Geography)



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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"At a certain point you decide to start with what's in front of you" (Miki 1988, 35). This work began elsewhere, and where and when that is I am not exactly sure. It began at the end of Book 7 of bpNichol's The Martyrology, on the back cover, on the outside of the text. It began in The Dinosaur Review. It began again in Tracing the Paths: Reading ≠ Writing The Martyrology.<sup>1</sup> I cannot trace it back to an origin.

Nichol, himself, did not know where or when he began The Martyrology. Nichol comments on the opening lines of Book 1: "I'd stumbled across this poem in a drawer that I could not remember writing . . . I began out of that sense of trying, in that initial moment, of dealing with one's own history of a writing" (quoted by Smaro Kamboureli in Miki 1988, 116). "That initial moment" is not the first moment; it is spawned by a writing that cannot be recalled. "That initial moment," a moment which should be the origin, has a previous and unknown history.

Fortunately, not all of Nichol's compositional and publishing history is as elusive as the opening of Book 1. jw curry provides an excellent bibliography of Nichol's work up to 1987 (Miki 1988, 281-291), and Irene Niechoda, in her "sourcery," traces innumerable references for Books 1 and 2 of The Martyrology. Nichol also worked extensively with Steve McCaffery, co-authoring pieces under the name The Toronto Research Group (TRG).

From approximately 1966 to April 1st, 1969, Frank Davey edited the publication Open Letter, a limited circulation, Victoria-based journal consisting mostly of contributions from poets associated with the journal TISH and their friends and acquaintances. Its publication was sporadic until, as Barbara Godard points out, "Davey moved east to Toronto . . . [and] the Canada Council provided a grant" (1979,

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<sup>1</sup>The quotation which opens this paragraph has appeared in all these places. It is from Nichol's essay "Narrative in Language: The Long Poem."

23-4: 103), enabling the first nationally funded issue to appear, in the winter of 1971-72, as a Coach House Press publication. Shortly after his move to Toronto, Davey asked McCaffery and Nichol to become contributing editors of the journal, and the duo used Open Letter as a forum for publishing their several joint projects (in addition to a number of individual pieces).

The TRG's first two publications appeared in the spring of 1973 in Open Letter: "Manifesto" and "TRG Research Report 1: Translation" (2.4: 75, 78-93). The first statement of the "Manifesto" reads "all theory is transient & after the fact of writing" (McCaffery 1992, 23). McCaffery notes that this statement is key to the TRG, emphasizing that the ". . . reports make no pretence to a professional legitimation or an academic rigour" and the TRG had a "lasting belief in the provisionality of thoughts" (McCaffery 1992, 12, 13).<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the TRG's emphasis is on research and not theory, as research deals more specifically with process and discovery than the "prescriptive criticism" and specializing rigour of theory. Writing of Open Letter, Barbara Godard states that the contributors' aim was "to dislodge objectified modern man, to drive him out of his fictitious well-made world, by celebrating the messiness of existence, by showing that there are no plots with their beginning, middle, and end" (E, 23-4: 98-113). Open Letter would prove a fruitful forum in which the TRG's poetic excursions into translation, formal innovation and non-narrative prose could flourish (albeit with varying degrees of practical application).

In 1992, Steve McCaffery collected all of the TRG's efforts and published them in a single volume: Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine: The Collected Research Reports of the Toronto Research Group 1973-1982. McCaffery cites the TRG's official establishment date as spring 1973 (1992, 9), and later states

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<sup>2</sup>In keeping with the loose form of the reports, the "Manifesto" which appeared in 1973 was actually the TRG's second "Manifesto": they lost the original and note this fact in the original publication.

that "After 1982 our writing and thinking developed in increasingly divergent ways and by the mid-eighties TRG had become an abandoned project" (19). As the editor of the book, McCaffery notes the intention of both himself and Nichol for the finished text: their decision "was to leave the contents of the reports intact and to address them critically by way of footnotes, some collaborative, others individual" (13-14). By approaching the writings in such a manner, they resisted the temptation to "correct" what they retrospectively thought was incomplete or erroneous research and preserved the process of the reports, as process itself was crucial to the nature of the work.

McCaffery writes that "there are inaccuracies and naïveties glaringly intact, but that was precisely what [the TRG] wanted" (1992, 17). The original work could not reasonably avoid flaws, as it was, in many ways, a series of pioneering efforts in a little examined field, and Nichol notes this in conversation: "Steve and I were super-conscious of the fact that the audience for the TRG has got to be one of the most minimal ever spoken to in Canadian literature" (Bayard 1978, 27). McCaffery writes, "Equally important is to realize the scope and context of our readings: Jabès, Derrida, Barthes and Lacan had all been read by 1974 -- significantly precursory to the burgeoning of critical theory and deconstruction in Canadian universities" (1992, 17).<sup>3</sup> They offered their post-structuralist approach to literature and criticism as an alternative to the predominantly New Critical writings of the time. McCaffery cites Nichol's outline of their model: "an articulation of a particular (to this writer) understanding . . . which may offer a way in for others if they choose to take it" (1992, 13).

I, like many others, choose to take their writings as a way in. Of course, I have my own particular understanding of their work, and it is a useful starting point for many possible routes through various texts. In the course of this thesis, I will pick

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<sup>3</sup>For example, Derrida's *Of Grammatology* was not widely available in English until 1976, *Writing and Difference* until 1978.

up on the TRG's citation of Derrida's work in Part 4 of their "Report on Narrative." Here, I will cite the passage from Alan Bass' translation of Derrida's first essay on Edmond Jabès, which the TRG quotes:

The nonquestion of which we are speaking is the penetrated certainty that Being is a Grammar; and that the world is in all its parts a cryptogram to be constituted or reconstituted through poetic inscription or deciphering; that the book is original, that everything *belongs to the book* before being and in order to come into the world; that any thing can be born only by *approaching* the book, can die only by *failing in sight* of the book; and that always the impassible shore of the book is *first*. (Derrida 1978, 76-7).<sup>4</sup>

The TRG also cites 11 quotations from Edmond Jabès. Only one of the twenty-six total statements in the TRG's report is from Derrida, although many of the selections Derrida cites from Jabès are also cited by the TRG.<sup>5</sup> Derrida and Jabès are both greatly concerned with the interrelationships between the book, writing and being, which was also one of the TRG's manifested mandates: "2) writing never eliminates the need for action but action can sometimes eliminate the need for writing" (McCaffery 1992, 23; see also numbers 3 and 4). In Writing and Difference, Derrida has a second essay on Jabès, the essay which closes out the book: "Ellipsis." It is

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<sup>4</sup>The TRG recites this section in Part 4, and their version is an example of their lack of academic rigour. The section appears all in upper case type, that is, type in the sense of manual typewriter, as the TRG worked with a typewriter. They probably used the "Caps Lock" key, as three of the four semi-colons which appear in the original translation by Alan Bass appear as colons (why the last of the four is properly transcribed as a semi-colon is a mystery to me). The use of all upper case obscures the fact that Derrida uses "Being" and "Grammar" in perhaps more philosophical terms than is implied by the TRG. Obviously, they did not have access to italicized type, so those sections appear as regular type. Furthermore, they compounded "any thing" into "ANYTHING." They re-organized the syntax of "the world is in all its parts a cryptogram" to read "THE WORLD IN ALL ITS PARTS IS A CRYPTOGRAM." However, the most substantial mis-quotation is the TRG's use of "FALLING" instead of "failing." The TRG's word, in one sense, reverses the meaning of Derrida's text: "falling" in sight of the book and "failing" in sight of the book are two distinctly different things; one implies mere (haphazard) appearance to the book, the other a failing in relation to the book (and/or its criteria, as it were).

<sup>5</sup>For example, quotation 14 also appears on page 68 in Writing and Difference, quotation 15 on page 69 and quotation 19 on page 77.

primarily upon these two essays that I will base my theoretical approach to both the TRG and Nichol himself.

In his two essays, Derrida investigates the limits of the book and how such limits function intertextually. Where does a book begin and where does it end? How does a book open and how does it close? What is the difference between a book and a text? He looks at the relationship of the text to its outside world, be it a world of texts, a world of readers or both. In his readings and writings, he problematizes the position or "site" of the text by decentering its origin and disseminating its meanings. By approaching the text in such a way, he destabilizes any fixed meaning of a text and encourages the reader to approach the book from a multiplicity of perspectives, thereby opening it to a labyrinth of hermeneutic potentialities.

The TRG also called themselves "The Kids of the Book-Machine"; that is, they were interested in two aspects of the book: "1) The physical experience of print as word and ink and the book itself as a physical object. 2) The psychological and psychosemantic experience of operating verbal signs" (McCaffery 1992, 59). The mechanistic thematic is importantly and literally tied to the definition of deconstruction. Derrida cites one of deconstruction's meanings in "Letter to a Japanese Friend": "[to] deconstruct a machine to transport it elsewhere" (1988, 2). The TRG approaches the book from a range of positions: from the apparently banal act of picking it up to an attempt at defining narrative in a fashion adequate to the theoretical and political underpinnings of writing and reading. They pick up the machine, break it down into as many constituent parts as possible and work with those parts, thereby reconstituting the book in a different manner and locating it elsewhere. Their research on narrative also includes a discussion of the roots and histories of words and how they influence textual experience. I will contextualize their investigation of roots, narrative unity, narrative direction and textual positioning

in Derridean terms, incorporating Derrida's uses of "the non-place" and the "ellipsis" (Derrida 1978, 69, 294).

In my analysis of Nichol's own texts, I will employ this theoretical framework based upon Derrida and the TRG to illuminate how Book 5 and gIFTS of The Martyrology challenge traditional notions of reading and writing, both in relation to other texts and The Martyrology's own history of production. Of particular interest in Book 5 will be how the site of the text is anything but stable. Nichol constantly offers the reader directional choices within the narrative sequence, thereby opening up the text to a variety of readings and reading experiences. Obviously, the variety of narratives makes it extremely difficult to locate any centre of the text. In a discussion of the elliptical nature of the book, I will explore some difficulties of the written mark and how it can never be fully present in the text. The problem of presence extends to the difficulties encountered by the reader upon opening the text because the beginning of the text is quite arbitrary.

In gIFTS, or Books 7/8, I will explore the spatio-temporal nature of Nichol's writing and how it relates to deconstruction. One of the first images in gIFTS is a light cone, an image Nichol borrows from Stephen Hawking. At the centre of the cone is the letter "P", which stands for "present". The light cone is closely tied to the theory of special relativity, which is in turn connected to the passing and perception of time and space. Many aspects of special relativity translate nicely into Nichol's deconstructive poetics, especially in terms of presence, point of view and position. I will supplement the discussion with a look at Derrida's The Post Card, which is a text that deals with the temporality of writing and communication as well as the implications of writing as an "open letter."

From open letters to closed books and back to open letters, I approach Nichol as an extremely playful and original poet. I choose to focus on the formal, linguistic and deconstructive elements of his poetry rather than the more humanistic thematics,

sound poetry or cartoons and drawings, although these latter things cannot be ignored and will work themselves in at various points. Throughout the whole, I will bear in mind Nichol's statement that "language . . . seems so clearly an arbitrary construct whose rules we're still in the process of deducing" (Miki 1988, 82), and I will assemble some disparate parts which function throughout the machinery of Nichol's poetics.

## CHAPTER TWO: SITING THE TEXT

In "A Throw of the Dice," the fourth part of the Toronto Research Group's report on narrative, Steve McCaffery makes a note on the origin of the piece and how it appears in Rational Geomancy: it "is presented in its skeletal form. The twenty-six statements in upper case type were intended to have provoked commentary beneath them by the TRG" (1992, 196). Unfortunately, only the second and third statements ever elicited commentary, both quotations being from Stephane Mallarmé's "Quant au Livre." Other sources for the quotations include Christopher Smart's Jubilate Agno, Franz Kafka's The Penal Colony, an unpublished notebook of McCaffery, as well as Jacques Derrida and Edmond Jabès. The Derrida essay under consideration is "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book" from Writing and Difference, which specifically deals with Jabès' The Book of Questions. In this essay, Derrida constructs and subsequently deconstructs a metaphor for speech and writing using various binaries: the city and the desert, the poet (or rabbi) and the word of God, death and life, the institutional and the natural. As with much of Derrida's writing, his analysis of Jabès is focussed on the process or act of writing, language and many of the underlying problems inherent in discourse and communication.

It is probably not accidental that this section of the TRG's report is titled "A Throw of the Dice." Derrida makes reference to dice in relation to deconstruction in Glas (3), Margins of Philosophy (21), and as Stephen Scobie has noted: "Derrida sometimes describes this process [of deconstructing binaries] with the word 'solicit,' used in its root meaning of shaking things up, like dice in a cup" (1989, 25).<sup>6</sup> The ultimate etymology of "solicit" lies in the Greek for 'whole' and 'moved,' in other words, to completely move at a foundational level. It is also interesting to note that

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<sup>6</sup>One is also reminded of Part 5 "Reading and Writing: The Toronto Research Game" (McCaffery 1992, 197-210), where dice are used to determine various approaches to reading and writing.

there are twenty-six statements in the TRG piece, the same number as the letters in the alphabet. The statements were initially collected as a means to solicit commentary from the TRG; just as letters of the alphabet generate words, these statements are the foundations for other writings. One quotation from McCaffery's notebook "The Black of Read Surfaces" reads, "IN WRITING WHERE SPEECH IS AT THE SAME TIME BOTH LOST AND PROMISED WE MAY ACTIVATE A MACHINE WHOSE PARTS COMPOSE THE FURTHER COMPOSITION OF MACHINES" (McCaffery 1992, 193).<sup>7</sup> The TRG is shaking up various quotations, recontextualizing them and using them as the workings of a further commentary, thereby demonstrating the limitless generating fertility of text and the book. The fecundity of speech and writing is constantly cultivated by Derrida. He writes: "what Jabès teaches us is that roots speak, that words want to grow, and that poetic discourse *takes root* in a wound" (1978, 64). Considering this imagery in conjunction with Scobie's "root meaning" of solicit, the "root" is grounded in etymology, while it is simultaneously supplanted by Derridean, linguistic playfulness. Derrida problematizes the roots of language, exposing the paradoxical duality of writing: "[the] poet, in the very experience of his freedom, finds himself both bound to language and delivered from it by a speech whose master, nonetheless, he himself is" (1978, 65).

Much of Derrida's essay is concerned with the site of the text, where it is rooted, where it is grounded. The problem of the site is very similar to the paradoxical position of the poet and language. The site is indeterminable and undefinable: "Writing is itself written, but also ruined, made into an abyss, in its own representation" (65). That is, writing has a history, an underlying ideology; it has roots, and, to draw out one of Derrida's puns, part of its history lies in runes. The runes are in ruins. And writing opens the abyss, which thereby problematizes the site

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<sup>7</sup>This statement of component parts of the speech/writing machine is reminiscent of Derrida's definition of deconstruction mentioned in the introduction.

of the text. The mere sight of the text simultaneously presents and destroys the site of the text. "Absence attempts to produce itself in the book and is lost in being pronounced. . . To gain access to it is to lose it; to show it is to hide it; to acknowledge it is to lie" (Derrida 1978, 69). The Old English root of "rune" is "secret" (McCaffery 1992, 105); it conceals; it lies, and lies openly, on the page for all to see (and not to see).

For Derrida, both the rabbi and the poet are wanderers; they both lack a site. They exist in the space between sites; for example, they are between the city and the desert. In conversation with Nichol, McCaffery quotes Michel de Certeau: "To walk is to lack a site" (Miki 1988, 88). As wanderers, the poet and the rabbi do not have a fixed site. Derrida writes, "When a Jew or a poet proclaims the Site, he is not declaring war. For this site, this land, calling to us from beyond memory, is always elsewhere" (1978, 66). The site is not the transcendental "Site"; it is not present but absent; it is not fixed but shifting. The poet does not rely upon the Word as origin, as centre. "Poetic autonomy, comparable to none other, presupposes broken Tables" (67). By fragmenting the Tables, by breaking the Word, by disseminating the centre, Derrida releases discourse from its presupposed origins and opens it to hermeneutics. Susan Handelman comments on Derrida's opening of these spaces: "between the fragments of the tablets he has destroyed, his texts grow up like 'weeds,' 'outlaws,' imitating the ruses and absences and infinite detours of a hiding God. Derrida flourishes in the absent spaces *between* the tablets, *between* the Jew and Greek, Rabbi and poet" (1982, 176). The Word, the Law, the Tables and Writing are all absent or hidden, present only in a trace.

The space, the site, the abyss opened by writing is precisely where and how Derrida deconstructs the texts he examines. Here, the opening is between two different signs. He states, "the caesura makes meaning emerge. It does not do so alone, of course; but without interruption -- between letters, words, sentences, books -

- no signification could be awakened" (1978, 71). The poetic hermeneutic, the poetic writing (s)paces the Text. It encourages the abyss to open. As Alan Bass notes, "The 'poetical' interpretation of interpretation does not seek truth or origin, but affirms the play of interpretation" (Derrida 1978, 311). The poet re-(s)paces the text, altering its form, function, meaning, position, place, etc. She shakes up the textual units and disseminates them in new patterns of interpretation. After the whole has been shaken, reduced to ruins, the scattered runes can be collected and reassembled under a poetic hermeneutic. It is important that Derrida's caesura is broadly defined: it is not simply a pause in a poetic line or between words, but also between letters, sentences, books. It is any interruption between textual units, and the poet can solicit the text on any level. All writing, for Derrida, is fragmented (1978, 71), and it is this fragmentation by which textual units stand in difference to one another, where substitution and *différance* come into play.

Derrida writes, "It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called 'present' element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element" (1982, 13). The signifier is not equal to the total 'presence' of the signified; a space exists between the two terms. Runes are signifiers which are related to, but different from, some signified, just as ruins are signifiers which point to some previous, signified architecture.<sup>8</sup> The sight of the text, then, has two important elements, both intervals, both relating to presence: a spatial interval which positions the site of one term in difference to another term, thereby undermining any fixed origin or site; and a temporal interval which inscribes both the previous and future relations of one term to others. Saussure writes of the difference

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<sup>8</sup>It is not only the relation of the signified to signifier that is under examination here. Saussure posited language as a complex system of differences; that is, terms are only defined in difference to one another, so the relation between signifiers is just as problematic as the relation between the signifier and signified.

between signs: "Always and everywhere one finds this same complex equilibrium of terms holding one another in mutual juxtaposition" (1983, 120). Derrida states that this interval, or abyss, that divides presence "might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space. . ." (1982, 13).

The caesura (s)paces the text both temporally and spatially. The poet paces between the ruins and runes of the broken Tables. She is "in the non-place, between city and desert, for in either the root is equally rejected or sterilized" (Derrida 1978, 69). Jabès comments on the ambulatory nature of writing: "Man of writing, you must not stop on the road. Words forbid it" (1983, 17). The poet is forever wandering on the path of discourse, simultaneously rooted to previous and future writing but never fully present or fixed in meaning. To paraphrase de Certeau, the wandering poet lacks a site in both space and time.

By digging at the root, Derrida pulls up language and relocates it elsewhere; he re-sites the text. However, it is not only re-siting which is important to deconstruction but also re-citing. Derrida engenders the reproducibility of the text, both in fertility and iterability, in an attempt to demonstrate how the repetition of text usurps the authority and origin of the Word. Derrida writes, "Pure repetition, were it to change neither thing nor sign, carries with it an unlimited power of perversion and subversion" (1978, 296). The very iterability of a textual unit undermines the origin, centre, or initial condition. As mentioned previously, the abyss opened between two different signs. In this case, the abyss opens between two instances of the same mark. In Limited Inc, he writes, "the structure of iteration . . . implies *both identity and difference*. Iteration in its 'purest' form -- and it is always impure -- contains *in itself* the discrepancy of a difference that constitutes it as iteration" (53). Derrida states that repetition is a necessary condition for a sign to become a sign: "As soon as a sign emerges, it begins by repeating itself. Without this, it would not be a sign, would not be what it is, that is to say, the non-self-identity which regularly refers to the same"

(1978, 297). In order for a sign to be recognized, there must be at least two instances of the mark; otherwise, the simple, singular instance would be unique and refer to nothing but itself. The sign is the division and supplementation of the simple (Derrida 1978, 299). In this way, the origin is double, is split in its sameness. The site of the text, therefore, begins with a (re)citation. The newly emerging sign, if it is to be used as such, must then be re-cited and re-sited, as a triple, for the double origin must be referred back to by a triple of the sign if any signification is to occur.

Derrida presents this version of the double origin in "Ellipsis," the essay which closes (and simultaneously re-opens) Writing and Difference. To paraphrase Derrida, this essay closes the book but opens the text. Grammatically, an ellipsis is an omission in the text, often used to avoid repetition. It is an appropriate deconstructive gesture, as it is present in the form of an absence, or more specifically a trace. Its invisible (non)presence on the page implies that the reader is able to "fill in" the gap or negotiate the abyss. For purposes of brevity or concision, the assumption is that the omitted piece need not be recited. For Derrida, obviously, this assumption embodies many of the discursive problems he tries to demonstrate: in a way, it implies a kind of telos in the hermeneutic process, an underwritten meaning which many readers can understand or share. Also, it sidesteps the "unlimited power of perversion and subversion" which accompanies repetition. The ellipsis ignores the ambiguities which so often result from its usage.<sup>9</sup>

"Ellipsis" is the eleventh chapter, a number whose appearance is a repetition of the One, the singular, the originary. The ellipsis relies upon repetition while simultaneously prohibiting the repetition to be actualized. By placing the chapter last in the sequence, Derrida omits the ending in the ending. The subject is, again, Jabès,

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<sup>9</sup>For examples and analysis, see Fiengo and May's Indices and Identity: "Max saw his mother, and Oscar did, too" (129). Strictly speaking, the reader is unsure if Oscar saw his own mother or Max's mother. Also, the use of "his" may refer anaphorically to either Max or Oscar.

so the chapter is a re-citing and re-siting of previous material. The chapter ends the book by returning to somewhere in its middle. Derrida writes, "If closure is not end, we protest or deconstruct in vain" (294). The closure of which Derrida speaks is the (simple) end of the text. The opening which follows the text is where deconstruction occurs; that is, the text as a unit is positioned within a variety of contexts and considered in relation to other concepts. Derrida writes of "the return to the book" (295), stating that in the return itself the book is altered. The book, in its repetition, is re-sited and re-cited in relation to itself; it underwrites and deconstructs itself. The book is its own ellipsis; that is, "what disappears in [repetition] is the self-identity of the origin" (296). The return, the repetition creates an ellipsis, while simultaneously splitting and doubling the origin; hence the figure of the ellipse.

In geometry, the ellipse has two foci. It differs from a circle in that it does not have a specific centre from which everything is defined. It is a suitable metaphor for use in deconstruction as its perimeter encompasses and circulates around a doubled, split or disseminated centre.<sup>10</sup> The two foci are spaced apart from one another, and their different sites allow the figure to be constructed. It is their relation in difference which is of importance. The ellipse is grounded in the "non-self-identity" of the doubled origin, while it presents a complete, unified figure.

The analogy between the ellipse and the text is apparent: the ellipse closes itself around a dual centre just as the text must close itself off in spite of a disseminated meaning. The roots of the text and of meaning are not fixed, and the ground of discourse opens up. There are various terms used to describe the opening: wound, abyss, caesura, etc. They are the in-between spaces and the non-places of the

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<sup>10</sup>Derrida also uses the image elsewhere in his writings. For example, he titles a sub-section of "White Mythology" "The Ellipsis of the Sun." In the title, Derrida is playing with the Greek root "sun," which means "together." Paraphrased, the titled would read "The Omission in Togetherness," as well as referring to celestial movement (which is also problematic, considering the difficulties in tracing the sun's movement).

text. It is on the grounds of the opening that problems with traditional writing are interrogated by the TRG. What remains to be considered is how Derrida's analysis of Jabès in specific and his theory of writing in general are related to the TRG's concerns with narrative. The following section will specifically deal with how narrative functions both spatially and linearly, and what, if any, alternatives to narrative discourse are possible or conceivable.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE TRG AND NARRATIVE

I introduced the section on Derrida with a citation from McCaffery. In a reciprocal gesture, I introduce this section on the TRG with a return to both Derrida and Jabès. In Book IV of The Book of Questions, Jabès writes "*The other* is the savage sense of the sun" (43). In "Ellipsis," Derrida writes, "The other is in the same" (296). Given the traditional notion of the sun as the Unified Light, the centre and the origin (with the aforementioned Greek root "sun" meaning "together"), totality or wholeness is contrasted with the duality of origin as outlined by Derrida in his ideas of repetition, return and iterability. These two quotations immediately reinstate the tension between the fragmentary and the unified: how the apparent (traditional) totality of writing and language can be deconstructed to reveal the duality and spacing inherent in every mark and how the mark is othered from itself by its very iterability.

Much of the TRG's work was concerned with narrative, and it is in that field of language I wish to work. However, as the TRG indicates, "the page [or the field of language] is not a neutral field. it is the dwelling place of unreleased energies which the signs carved upon it can tap" (McCaffery 1992, 107). This quotation is from a section of a report which deals with the roots of words, specifically text-related words which all seem to share organic, landscape, chthonic origins. The TRG also looks at the "runes" of language, finding them rooted in secrets and mystification. As an example, they "translate" Stein's sentence "he who runs may read" into three etymological possibilities:

- 1) "he who mystifies may advise"
- 2) "he who mystifies may interpret"
- 3) "he who mystifies may mystify"

(McCaffery 1992, 105)

Behind these three sentences lurks Handelman's suggestive characterization of Derrida's texts as "imitating the ruses and absences and infinite detours" of the hidden

Word. However, for Derrida, writing is not transcendental: it is split off, broken away from the Word. The TRG writes "how the rune as omen stick was the branch 'cut off' to be the surface from which the sign was 'cut out.' the runic alphabet was derived from a process of folding (hence breaking) branches (lines)" (McCaffery 1992, 107). In this process, the sign is created by an incision, a removal, a created absence upon the surface of inscription. The stick, as the field of language on which the sign is cut, is bent back, returned to itself, forced to break from itself to see itself, thereby splitting itself, doubling itself, ruining itself to allow itself to be marked. The poet runs between runes and cites between sites, breaking lines and creating a narrative which is the line between the definite and the indefinite. The clichéd expression "read between the lines" takes on new connotations: namely, to invoke the poetic hermeneutic in a paradoxical movement where the written word is abandoned or overlooked while simultaneously re-sited and interpreted.

How, though, is narrative constructed or at least defined? The TRG was interested in the structure and mechanics of the book-machine, and an often essential part of the book's mechanics is narrative. They tried to develop (or at least explore the concept of) non-narrative prose (McCaffery 1992, 97-136). But before examining non-narrative, I want to explore narrative as it relates to the TRG and writing in general. Where is narrative sited and how is it spaced? Ultimately, what is its function?

Traditionally, narrative deals with the relation of facts or events, usually chronologically or sequentially, in an almost story-like fashion. Charles Bernstein writes, "narration is simply to make an account, and . . . an account is customarily given so as to picture an event in a causal-sequential manner" (1986, 307). However, he warns that "this is already a privileged assumption about the nature of the 'event' narrated. Such conventions largely predetermine the nature of the reality accounted for by them." He also states that "narrative is not intrinsically tied to causality,

development, chronology, characters, setting" (307), as in conventional prose. Narrative is in no way necessarily sited within the realm of convention. It often appears in that domain, but its constituent textual units can be arranged (or not 'arranged') in any manner whatsoever.

Traditional narrative seems to desire a unification, totalization or coherence of its textual units. However, considering the body of text (made of things like narrative and syntax), Bernstein states "*It's* all connected and if you don't comprehend that it may be because it's not trying to persuade you that it is" (1986, 306). That is, however the units are connected, their very presence on (or for that matter, absence from) the page suggests a connectedness, which may or may not be conventional or apparent. Narrative unity can work precisely to resist its own self-presentation as unification. Narrative can be sited in "the non-place" where the poetic hermeneutic is solicited. The narrative of a (single) text can be interpreted differently by various readers (or the reader and the writer), for, as Nichol states, "every reader comes to a text from a completely different associational base, so what they're bringing to the experience is radically different from what another reader brings" (Miki 1988, 119). Narrative exists between the reader and writer, between "the closure of the book" and "the opening of the text" (Derrida 1978, 294). The function of narrative is subject to and dependent upon Derrida's spatial and temporal definition of "*spacing*," as narrative is constructed by marks (and authors) which are only problematically present.

As mentioned previously, the caesura helps to space the text. Bernstein explores the spacing from a micro- to macro-syntactic perspective:

. . . the endpoints of a given poem or a given author are radiated outward. On the smaller level, the part to whole relation concerns syllable to word, word to line and word to phrase, phrase to line, line to stanza, line to poem, stanza to poem, poem to book, and so on.

Conceptualized so, the territorial integrity of the long poem begins to break down under a shifting focus that suggests a number of places in which the membranous line that is called, say closure or poem's end can be invoked. What is the smallest or largest discrete unit of a text? Where does mine stop and yours start? Every caesura - whether the line break or the last page of the book opens up to a possibility of continuing (rereading the book, going on to another) or a *stopping*. (Davey 1985, 178)

Bernstein questions the limits of the textual unit, not only as it constitutes the "book" but also as it constitutes the "text." Where does the narrative of one text end and another begin? Does the narrative of a single book influence other narratives, weaving, in a sense, a textual fabric? The book is an object, a machine, which perpetuates further text. It is merely an entrance point which leads to a limitless potentiality of exits or further entrances. The book is never finally and completely closed; it always re-opens to intertextuality. The text is continually redefined relationally by any subsequent (or previous) text, textual unit or re-reading; it is never fixed or sited in any one position. In this way, narrative is not merely confined to a single book, but it functions, as a process and on a larger level, between texts. It is not only potentially unconventional or non-totalizable within a text but also problematically demarcated between texts, readers and writers.

The desire for narrative unity may often only be fulfilled after the acceptance of disunity, fragmentation or plurality. This definition of narrative resists narrative conventions and offers alternatives to reading and writing practices. M. Travis Lane, in her essay "Alternatives to Narrative: the Structuring Concept," comments on totalization and narrative in what she calls poems of thought: "We do not think of everything all at once, or, if someone can, they can not prove it to me all at once. Thus the narrative of thought is chronological and linear" (Davey 1985, 146). It is precisely this chronology and linearity from which the TRG is trying to escape. Nichol responds to the problems with Lane's definition:

. . . part of the problem is how you define the term 'narrative.' Usually what we seem to be meaning by it is storytelling. So that you can certainly get away from storytelling. But if by it you mean sequence, sequentiality, well you can certainly organize the surface of your piece in such a way that the sequence is not apparent. Or you can create things, and that was part of why i decided to do a shuffle test [*sic*]. You know, it has a sequence but the sequence is continually changing itself and arbitrary. On the other hand you tend to compositionally write it in such a way that it holds together. (Davey 1985, 155-6)

Nichol does not completely concur with Lane's definition that narrative must be chronological or linear. His comment is very similar to Bernstein's in that it reinforces the possibility of surface narrative disunity, but there is still some sense of underlying connectedness which may or may not manifest itself. The TRG writes, "There is now a shift away from 'plot' (the old reality) and from a centrality in such narratistic ordering, towards a new emphasis on transition (the new reality)" (McCaffery 1992, 101). This comment highlights one of the problems in defining narrative: it cannot be simply defined because it is always shifting and changing its function. The new narrative reality is in the undefined "non-place, between city and desert." It is mystified in its transition and open to interpretation.

The narrative line, then, is not always straight or linear. It can constantly shift its direction. Derrida states that the poetic narrative is created "by inventing, alone, an unfindable and unspecifiable pathway to which no Cartesian *resolution* can impart rectilinearity and issuance" (1978, 69). The poet breaks the linearity of the traditional narrative. Her narrative is not bounded by straight lines; rather, it is unbounded in its fragmentation and intertextuality. In a sense, the narrative is defined elliptically; that is, it circulates around the doubled centre, constantly altering its relative position to the foci. Narrative *surrounds* the fragmented centre as a fluctuating function of the text: it is not rooted to any particular point in the text but rooted to them all.

Derrida emphasizes the word "resolution," as it is a word with two contrary meanings. "Resolve" can mean both "to determine firmly" and "to change or alter." The Cartesian sense of which Derrida speaks is mostly along the lines of determination. For example, in consideration of the unity of myth, he quotes Claude Lévi-Strauss, a quotation which relates well to the mystification of narrative:

. . . it cannot be broken down into as many parts as may be necessary for finding the solution. There is no real end to methodological analysis, no hidden unity to be grasped once the breaking-down process has been completed. Themes can be split up *ad infinitum*. (1978, 287)

Words, too, "can be split up," broken down and constantly interrogated. Since there is no end point to the investigation of text, attempts to pursue or explore a specific end create a paradox of apparent futility. To resolve the text is merely to re-solve it, re-site it and re-cite it. Each new solution is merely another interpretation, an alteration of a previous reading.

The distinction between the thematic narrative of storytelling, which "can be split up *ad infinitum*," and the transitional narrative which relies specifically on such splitting is a useful one. It allows the text to shift its site without becoming lost in the abyss of spacing or non-fixity. The transitional narrative resists and ultimately accepts the failure of thematic unification or totalization. Derrida writes,

If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field - that is, language and a finite language - excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. (1978, 289)

The transitional narrative recognizes its position within the finite discourse; it realizes that its site is tentative and supplementary. On one interpretation, the supplementary nature of the substituted origin is dependent upon language and *différance*.

Regardless of the size of the textual unit (letter, word, line, poem, book), the play of *différance* is always already at work in the text. Derrida demonstrates such shifting substitution in his own exposition by repeating the phrase "that is to say," a phrase which attempts to restate a thought in different terms. It is a phrase that re-sites and partially re-cites, a phrase that re-positions the exposition. The prefixes of these two latter terms point to one of the problems of discourse in general: ex-position, in the hermeneutic sense, suggests a place or position outside of the work, that is to say, some objective critical standpoint from which the text can be explained.<sup>11</sup> This traditional definition of exposition is refuted in Derrida's oft-quoted statement "*There is nothing outside of the text*" (1976, 158). There is no ex-position; the text cannot be boxed up, closed off or totalized. Discourse and narrative are always sited somewhere, even though that site is supplementary, shifting and elsewhere, a substitution for an inherent lack resulting from the impossibility of a transcendental Site.

The TRG develops a similar viewpoint while explaining their title Rational Geomancy:

We mean by Rational Geomancy the acceptance of a multiplicity of means and ways to reorganize those energy patterns we perceive in literature. There can be no one absolute interpretation (i.e. system of alignment) for the geomantic view of literature sees interpretation

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<sup>11</sup>This thesis, itself, is caught in this very problem. I must necessarily approach Nichol from some external angle and risk further obfuscation of his work. In Book 4, Nichol plays with the same prefix and concept of explanation: "the desire becomes stronger to stretch out, explain myself, which / makes the plain ex, no longer clear" (np). That is to say, to engage in expository discourse only further obscures meaning, rather than offering elucidation.

as any system of alignment, any organization and/or reorganization of those energy patterns. (153)

Realizing "energy pattern" to be an extremely fuzzy term, they define it as "an umbrella concept inclusive of the discrete areas of meaning, movement, message and method of code" which result from but are not limited to "semantic and phonic recognition, denotation, connotation, intertextual associations etc." (153). There is a whole series of terms which influence, affect, effect and constitute writing and, by extension, narrative.

Stanley Cavell, in his essay "What Did Derrida Want of Austin?", states that Derrida and Austin "are philosophers of what may be called limitation, both interested in the morality and politics of speech (out of something like a shared sense that concepts, without the most scrupulous attention, impose, and are imposed, upon us)" (1995, 48). Concepts mentioned by the TRG, such as connotation and intertextuality, are the possible sites at which ideologies can enter and influence text and narrative. The TRG is certainly testing the limitations and definition of narrative in an attempt to somehow get beyond or outside of narrative. As Bernstein noted earlier, narrative conventions predetermine certain assumptions about the event described. This is one example of how a concept (here, of narrative) can be a limitation: it precludes many possibilities, ideas which, for example, the TRG tries to develop. This is not to say that definitions should be avoided, but the limitation, limits and margins of their domain must be interrogated to gain a better comprehension of how and why they are demarcated as they appear. Narrative, like grammar, began as a way to facilitate communication: it was a set of conventions, a structure which allowed ideas to be transmitted in an understandable manner. However, such conventions ultimately limit and dictate what can be stated and how it can be stated. The connotations and ideological structure begin to limit rather than facilitate discourse. Susan Griffin comments on this mechanism of ideology:

Begun as a way to restore one's sense of reality, now it attempts to discipline real people, to remake natural beings after its own image. All that it fails to explain it records as its enemy. Begun as a theory of liberation, it is threatened by new theories of liberation; it builds a prison for the mind. (1981, 280)

Applied to language and narrative, this approach to structure illuminates Derrida's investment in exploring the limits and margins of discourse, just as the TRG investigated narrative and non-narrative boundaries. Nichol often spoke of opening the textual possibilities of "as many exits and entrances as are possible" (1967, np). He wanted the text to remain open even if the book was closed: the limiting forces of various ideologies should be minimized to allow the reader the freedom to explore the text.

But the problem of the exposition still remains. If the TRG desires to move outside/beyond sequential narrative, and more radically beyond/outside any narrative, where or how would they write? To escape narrative would be to escape movement, to escape words, something Jabès says is forbidden. The TRG states, "[narrative] has become what it has always been: language in movement" (McCaffery 1992, 135). Narrative occurs on the metaphorical textual road, between sites and between cites. In "Tympan," Derrida writes, "if [philosophy] has always intended to hear itself speak, in the same language, of itself and of something else, can one, strictly speaking, determine a nonphilosophical place, a place of exteriority or alterity from which one might still treat *of philosophy*?" (1982, xii). The same could be said of narrative: how could one write or speak non-narratively; how could one write or speak of narrative non-narratively? Is there an ex-position for exposition? How could one move beyond movement? The form of narrative is always shifting and changing to permit existence of itself. The TRG concedes to the paradox of the non-narrative: "we're struggling to get out of narrative by getting further in it. . . what

we're doing is narrating narrative. it's meta-narration but we haven't hit on non-narrative prose" (McCaffery 1992, 151).

Narrative seems inescapable, as its definition appears flexible enough to allow non-narrative elements to be appropriated into its own discourse. The paradox seems irresolvable, as Nichol reflects on his work with McCaffery on non-narrative prose: "we started to write it all down and examine what we'd said, and it didn't hold a lot of water" (Davey 1985, 155). Nichol's statement is quite dismissive, but the problems with narrative seem to permeate so much discourse on writing that they cannot be ignored. The question of narrative alternatives still remains unanswered. In an attempt to further the narrative discussion, Frank Davey, early in "The Language of the Canadian Long Poem," states "In distrust of such assumptions [that narrative structure is directly related to reality] writers have attempted to replace narrative as the long poem's dominant sign" (1983, 184). However, his definition of narrative seems to imply sequentiality, and, when he writes "The very structures writers have used to replace sequential narrative - collage, symphonic form, geography, play, recurrent image - become, if successful, other kinds of narrative, sources of motion, energy, and surprise" (185), the resulting distinction is not a difference of forms but a difference of kind within one form. That is, the adjective "sequential" can be replaced or altered, but the noun "narrative," on Davey's view, remains an essential part of the long poem. He offers alternatives within but not outside of narrative, thereby reinforcing the dominance of narrative. He does recognize many underlying narrative assumptions, and the narrative alternatives he does suggest, "motion, energy, and surprise," are very similar to the TRG's narrative of transition.

In an attempt to define their view of narrative, the TRG writes,

perhaps then what we're struggling towards is a technique of oral [and, by extension, written] deceleration, the way in fact, you can look at a cubist painting as a slowing down of the total gestalt in order

to pick up and highlight the elements necessary at all times but often lost in the rapidity of production and perception. (McCaffery 1992, 147-8).

The "slowing down" is really a more rigorous and comprehensive reading of materials, an examination of the particulars of language production that are usually taken for granted or passed over. It is a self-conscious awareness of the textual unit and its surrounding "membranous line" and how each unit interacts with other parts of the text. Narrative conventions are an integral component of the re-examined narrative pieces. This view of narrative shakes up predetermined assumptions about communication which are always present, while it deconstructs and reconstructs narrative form. Such a reading practice breaks open the text, exposing the minute particulars in a variety of perspectives. What is usually elliptically passed over must be re-examined by the reader; what is omitted is re-sighted and re-worked. The alternative to narrative that the TRG offers is just a re-reading of narrative which is more firmly rooted in the process of reading rather than a largely thematic understanding. They do not try to get outside or beyond narrative limits as much as they attempt to redefine and draw attention to narrative conventions within their own domain and discourse. Ultimately, what they desire to perpetuate "is a process of questioning which, by its very self-consciousness, initiates a process of questioning in *you*" (McCaffery 1992, 151-2). They want the reader to engage the text with as many opportunities to enter, exit and re-open the narrative as possible. These questions of narrative and text can easily be levelled at The Martyrology itself as a means to discovering the richness of Nichol's poetics and exploring how Nichol engages the reader at a structural and formal level, soliciting her to reposition herself in relation to the text and its effects.

## CHAPTER FOUR: APPROACHING THE (C)ENTRE

At the time of this writing, *The Martyrology* exists as a nine book series. In the numerical sequence, Book 5 is sited at the centre of this chain.<sup>12</sup> Nichol writes, "Book V was structured on the idea of the chain -- chain of that, chain of images, chain of events" (5, np), and the body of the text is divided into twelve major chains.<sup>13</sup> Many of the chains contain what look like footnote numbers, which actually refer the reader to other chains. The reader, then, has the option to swing from chain to chain, following alternative narrative directions. In this way, the reader takes on an active role in the production of the text, as each reader can experience the text differently. The chains are not necessarily sequential: they refer back to ordinally previous chains; they create loops with one another; they skip other chains. They comprise a complex network of narrative possibilities which really has no definite beginning, end, or centre.

Not only is Book 5 a complex tying and untying of itself, but it is also "an untying of the first four books" (5, np). As Scobie has pointed out, Book 5, in chains 4, 7, and 11, reworks sections of previous books:

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." . . . Folded in upon itself, "invaginated," the poem reveals its own interior: the letters which have always lurked, precariously, inside

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<sup>12</sup>In the physical printing, Book 5's position varies, as the re-issues of Books 1 & 2 and Books 3 & 4 are collected in single volumes. Books 5 through 9 are each individual volumes, with the exception of Books 7 & 8 which are a single text.

<sup>13</sup>Here, there is a discrepancy in the book numbering, between Arabic and Roman numerals. For a history of the numbering of the books, see *Tracing the Paths*, page 10. This use of the numeral "V" is probably just a slip in Nichol's referencing. The full title-page in Book 5 uses the Arabic character.

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. (1984, 132, 133-4)

The example of the "w or d" was outlined by Nichol in the "conversation" printed in

Out-Posts:

That is to say, the word "word" for instance becomes "w" "or" "d". That's a balanced structure. "w" is four letters from one end [of the alphabet], "d" is four letters from the other end. But it's reversed and there's that "or" -- an element of choice -- so that in *Book IV* what begins to happen is those sort of structures where the word is read as a sentence. (Bayard 1978, 39)

In a sense, the normal progression or direction of the alphabet is disjunctive; that is, the "word" can be broken down, re-read, re-worked, whether as an anagram, palindrome, charade, paragram, etc. (or any of the other numerous, possible devices).<sup>14</sup> This approach to writing and language is precisely why Nichol includes Jean Cocteau's statement as one epigraph for Book 5: "The greatest literary masterpiece is no more than an alphabet in disorder" (np). Words, like their constituent letters, are no longer strictly bound by narrative or grammatical structures and conventions. In Nichol's deconstructive poetics, the text is opened to as many possibilities as he could conceive. Figuratively and *figure*-atively, the centre of the word is disjunct, dual, split.

In Chain 3, Nichol writes,

evolution & me  
flashing a darwinning smile  
preference as the p reference  
includes that mid-initial ground  
bridges first & last  
entrances & exits

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<sup>14</sup>For a more complete discussion of these devices, see McCaffery's essay "*The Martyrology as Paragram*," *North of Intention*, 1986.

Book 5 returns to and reworks both itself and the previous four books. It bridges the space between the first published volume of The Martyrology and itself, the spaces within itself, the divisions and di-visions of its own narrative chains, the movement from Book 4 to 6, as well as other possible connections. It is important that Nichol includes the "mid-initial ground," which is a reference to a section of Book 3. The "*Mid-Initial Sequence*" is a marked structural and thematic hinge in the evolution of The Martyrology. As Roy Miki states in the introduction to Tracing the Paths, "the 'Mid-Initial Sequence' is a transitional text connecting Book 3 to Book 4, but more significantly, it is a text of the transitional as a state of mind where the words, released from their bondage to reference, are dismembered in the field of action of the page" (1988, 25). Miki's description of the sequence's processes exemplifies the transitional narrative that the TRG examined in Rational Geomancy. This section plays upon Nichol's "preference as the p reference": he participates in the lettristic dissemination of "p reference" which is a device characteristic of The Martyrology after the "Mid-Initial Sequence." The sequence was originally entitled "P Sequence" (for manuscript reproductions see Miki 1988, 92), and it functioned as a signpost directing the reader to recognize the evolution or transition of the text as a constructed composition. Nichol writes, "the late P / destroyed / leaving only b / & n" (4, np). Furthermore, "p," the initial letter of preference (of the word and for the title of the composition), is bpNichol's "middle initial," a term which implies a kind of ordinal paradox (how can something be both middle and initial?).

The complete title of the sequence is "*CODA: Mid-Initial Sequence*." Similar to its musical connotation, "coda" has a literary meaning: it is a concluding part of a literary work that rounds off the main work but is independent of it. The coda is part of the work because it rounds off the work, while at the same time it is independent of the work. It is both of the work and outside it. It is essential and central, but it is at the end, the margin. Furthermore, it is the first, or initial, word in the title.

Paraphrased, then, the title reads, "END: *Middle-Initial Sequence*." It is a reversal or problematization of the temporal narrative progression, as well as a simultaneous connection of the past, present and future. The very appearance of "*Sequence*" in the title ironically questions the narrative progression and assumptions the section deconstructs. The structural implications of this title/section are exemplified by Derrida in his essay "II. The Parergon" in *The Truth in Painting* (37-82). In relation to Nichol's texts (specifically Book 6), Scobie discusses Derrida's use of Kant's term "parergon" (1989, 83-97). Without getting too involved with this specific term, I will quote a short section from "II. The Parergon":

I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a work. And above all I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper, and that Kant calls *parergon*, for example the frame. Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin. Where does it end. What is its internal limit. Its external limit. And its surface between the two limits. I do not know whether the passage in the third *Critique* where the *parergon* is defined is itself a *parergon*. Before deciding what is parergonal in a text which poses the question of the parergon, one has to know what a *parergon* is--at least, if there is any such thing. (Derrida 1987a, 63)

If one cannot determine what a parergon is, how can one discuss it? And, if it is taken to be that which is both outside and beside the work, how can one directly treat the parergon without lending it a kind of primacy which is contradictory to its very existence and subtlety as parergon? The coda is a kind of parergon: it rounds out or closes Book 3, while it simultaneously opens the text by deconstructing it. The TRG examined frames in their treatment of the comic strip medium, drawing an analogy between grammar and the form of comic frames: "unlike words, frames interact in more complex syntactical forms: superimposition, interlocking and transmuting frames" (McCaffery 1992, 129). The frames, which were originally used to separate

distinct units of the comic narrative, now are more productive and active parts of the discourse. As Bernstein noted, "the territorial integrity of the long poem begins to break down" when one interrogates the problems of reference, narrative limits and unity.

Nichol plays with the contradictions inherent in such textual, lettristic, and personal self-referentiality. By "[including] that mid-initial ground" and other references, he sites the text "in the non-place," the problematic spaces between Books 1 and 5. By including treatment of Book 3 within my discussion of Book 5, I re-introduce into Book 5 sections of Book 3 to which Nichol only elliptically refers. My own reading of Book 5 alters the limits and structure of the text. I begin by framing Book 5 by Book 3, more specifically by the coda, by the parergon. In Chain 2, Nichol writes,

reworking one book  
or rebooking work one  
or one work re book . . .

Here, the surface of the words and the word units shift and intermingle from line to line in paragrammatic play. The letters/units, like the chains in Book 5 or the books of The Martyrology, are independent of each other, but they also evolve with each other. They participate in the construction of the text, resurfacing at *différent* times and places, affirming the infinite play of substitutions. Book 5 as "one work" refers to and includes other books. Intertextuality is at work here, but Nichol also reworks the structure of previous texts, thereby altering and questioning the formal structure and evolution of the entire work. He writes that we are "prisoners of our frameworks really" (Chain 3), as if to say that, as writers and readers of words, grammar, texts, form, etc., we are confined to work within the frames of the structures which we have constructed and constantly try to redefine. Nichol, of course, works to restructure or reposition the frameworks. In doing so, he demonstrates that the frame works: it

functions as an active or productive part of the text. It does not merely demarcate the limits of the work, but it extends, expands and furthers the text. In a sense, the frame is a kind of bridge to the desired exposition and ex-position of the text, yet it is a space of transition which cannot be firmly sited nor easily crossed.

By deconstructing narrative, focussing on the narrative of transition and on individual letters themselves, Nichol allows the "letter [to be] the separation and limit in which meaning is liberated from its imprisonment in aphoristic solitude" (Derrida 1978, 71). Letters are no longer only taken as the constituents of words, as simple, definable units; they begin to mean in and of themselves (like Nichol's obsession with the letter H) in relation to their context. *Différance* subverts signification by breaking open the space around each letter. As with Bernstein's treatment of textual units, Nichol demonstrates the infinite possibilities within narrative structure by subverting, reworking and re-siting textual units that range from the letter to the whole of The Martyrology to all texts ever written and conceivably to those unwritten. The foci of the elliptical meanings of a text can be reduced or expanded to include any size of a variety of textual units.

Given the vast and complex interconnectedness of The Martyrology, how does the reader approach such a work? As she approaches the centre of the chain, how does she read Book 5, a book whose limits are its covers, but a text whose limits are unbounded? If the reader opens Book 5 as she would a standard text, the first sight the reader sees is a site, a city map, specifically a street map (or St. Map) of Toronto. Even more specifically, the area of Toronto represented by the map is called "The Annex," which is yet another term similar to coda and parergon. Nichol immediately places the text in a specific site, a site which is reinforced on the next page by his play with "blue / bluer / bloor" (np). Ann Munton has noted that the "name of the main dissective East/West street, Bloor Street West, is significantly truncated, so that it appears on the map as St. West" (Miki 1988, 221). Not only is Nichol incorporating

the city into his mythology of saints, but he is also elliptically deferring the name of the major artery of the city, a strategy of deferral that he also applies to textual reading patterns. The deferral forces the reader to question which city is actually indicated by the map; that is, by truncating the most characteristic name on the page, he makes the city less recognizable, less negotiable, and the reader must locate herself by or navigate herself through the lesser side streets by different "chains of thot." Also, the St. Map (interestingly an anagram of stamp) is a reference back to Book 1 and the genealogy of the saints. Just as the genealogy was a partial guide to Book 1, the map in Book 5 is indicative of how the book is itself a map as well as a re-mapping of other books. Furthermore, Nichol's use of "St. West" unsettles the reader, as Toronto is generally of an eastern Canadian geography, and he subtly traces a path from east to west across the central expanse of the prairies.

The subsequent appearance of the proper name "bloor" on the following page (with the characteristic, initial lower case letter) creates both a spatial and temporal deferral of naming and location: what would have complemented or supplemented the map on the opening page has been deferred and sited elsewhere. It is partially by this method that Nichol has constructed the chains of reading which constitute Book 5: the reader is free to walk the streets of the text, exploring the less travelled (or alternately travelled) avenues of thought, and Nichol tries to minimize what could be called authorial direction. There is no main narrative street through Book 5. The reader can leap (Derrida's word) from chain to chain, letter to letter in a manner of reading that recognizes the openings within the text. In this non-linear reading, the text itself is of prime importance because traditional narrative unity (i.e., plot or theme) is a less significant end of the work.<sup>15</sup> The focus is on the denotative values of the letters (as opposed to their connotative values). As Derrida notes, "Absence is the permission

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<sup>15</sup>For the TRG's own "discussion" on this sense of narrative end, see Rational Geomancy pgs. 82-85.

given to letters to spell themselves out and to signify, but it is also, in language's twisting of itself, *what* letters say: they say freedom and a granted emptiness, that which is formed by being enclosed in letters' net" (1978, 72). Such a "twisting" of language creates a text with "the absence of prescribed routes, the solitary arising of an unseen root, beyond the reach of the sun" (72). This linguistic twist is reminiscent of Scobie's image of the circular, self-devouring serpent, an image which consumes itself in its very act of creation.

Book 5, for all its references and links to previous books, is "beyond the reach of the sun," beyond the reach of "together" or perfect unity. The links, if they are an attempt at unity, merely result in an explosion of the limits of Book 5 itself. Chain 10 is perhaps the best example of such textual explosion:

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

By placing "forever" at the centre of the structure, he positions a temporally open-ended concept at the enclosed centre. He creates an irresolvable tension between the eternal and the momentary. By bracketing and fragmenting "toge...ther", "every...thing" and "all at...once", he structurally resists the semantic, totalizing meaning while simultaneously suggesting its presence in such a short, balanced, concise line. The text's "territorial integrity" is opened to the infinite possibility of fragmentation, *différance* and intertextuality.

The territory of the text is a key motif in Book 5. Both end papers have city maps printed on them: the latter page being a close-up (a blow-up) of a single city block from the earlier map, notably the site of the Coach House Press.<sup>16</sup> In conversation with Nichol, McCaffery states, "I see the development, movement and growth of *The Martyrology* as bearing an analogy to city growth and urban spread.

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<sup>16</sup>The map on the latter end paper was added in the second edition of Book 5 published in January, 1994. It did not appear in the first edition published in autumn 1982. Perhaps part of the reason for its inclusion was to represent the soon-to-be "bpNichol Lane." The lane behind the Coach House Press was dedicated to Nichol on April 30, 1994.

You present a polygraphic arrangement of a space that's remarkably similar to the arrangement of a complex city" (Miki 1988, 88). Many analogies could be constructed from such areas as urban planning, geography, architecture and systems theory.<sup>17</sup> The "urban spread" is very much like Derrida's treatment of the parergon: where does the inner city stop and where does suburbia begin? Where are the city limits?<sup>18</sup> By placing the city map on the very first page, Nichol bypasses the urban spread and positions the reader at the centre. However, this map of the centre is at the margin of the text. The first page, the approach to the text is the (c)entre.

I approach this division of the (c)entre with the cross-linguistic pun on the French preposition "entre" meaning "into," "between" and "together," the French conjugation of the verb "entrer," to enter, and the letter "c" as the third letter (of both the alphabet and Nichol), three being "the first figure of repetition" (Derrida 1978, 299), thereby siting Nichol as (c)entering the text with repetition, division and the tension created by the three prepositional meanings. Together, the two maps frame the text and contain the text-proper between them, and the reader must pass through these marginal centres to get into the text. They are two foci around which the various chains of meaning circulate throughout the reading(s) of Book 5.

The entrance to the text is shaken up: the reader expects herself to be at the margins or outskirts of the text, but she is immediately placed at the centre of a city. The approach has been attempted, but where is she positioned after entering the text?

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<sup>17</sup>I am indebted to J. Douglas Porteous for his suggestions and insight into these potential areas of investigation. His text Environment & Behavior along with Christopher Alexander's A Pattern Language are useful entrances into this topic. Given the scope of this thesis, I, unfortunately, do not have room to adequately deal with the complexities and nuances that such a reading would entail.

<sup>18</sup>This idea of city growth raises an interesting question relating to the parergon: when, if ever, does the parergon become part of the main work? For example, the Annex in Toronto was at one time considered a suburb (a parergon) of the city proper; however, as the city spread, the Annex became more and more a part of the main downtown core. The city, like narrative (and Derrida's definition of philosophy in "Tympan"), extends its limits and boundaries to appropriate and include things which are exterior to it. The city limits are always changing.

"Here or there we have discerned writing," Derrida writes at the opening of "Ellipsis." His choice of the word "discern" is by no means arbitrary: it indicates a clear perception, but the etymology of the word loosely means "to separate apart." In this way, writing is separated from itself, split, ellipsed. The discernment is disjunct and indefinable. Is the centre "here" or "there," or both? The reader of Book 5 becomes well aware of this problem, as her position "there" in the text is anything but fixed or defined. The "w or d" may very well be an ellipsis of "w(riting) or d(ifference)"; that is, writing is either the Word or the appropriated, shifting words of the poet. It is either here or there but neither here nor there: words are not fixed. Jean-Luc Nancy writes, "In the 'here or there', it is the suspension, the hesitation, the beating of the *or* which really counts: this *or* which never says *where* writing is or when or wherefore. 'Here or there' is without definite place. . ." (1992, 47). Again, writing is unfixed, verging on "the non-place." As was just discussed, Book 5 opens this problematic space, neither here nor there, and this conundrum is inherent in all writing: it can never be definitely sited or cited; it is never fully present in itself. In Chain 9, Nichol writes,

asleep (later) i dreamt  
 me & all my friends these past 12 years  
 headed out to eat at THE REALITY  
 found it closed & boarded  
 upset because REALITY was not where they supposed it to be  
 i couldn't understand them  
 told them this was always happening  
 'REALITY is always closing down  
 opens up again  
 somewhere else'  
 woke up smiling & laughing  
 sensing some solution

As soon as one tries to locate or fix "REALITY" it closes down and is boarded, yet it always "opens up again." As soon as it is here, it is there; "here" is always into/ together with/ between "t(there)." Nichol further complicates this passage by placing

it in the dream consciousness, another problematic medium. "THE REALITY" (is) in the dream; the signified (is) in the signifier; the opening (is) in the closing; the entrance (is) the exit. The binaries are, of course, problematic, and Nichol works to deconstruct them. However, when any kind of definite resolution is drawn, "THE REALITY" is boarded up; that is, its borders are drawn (both marking and closing), and it must re-open "somewhere else," there, some elsewhere.

Writing of "Ellipsis," Nancy states, "The first words of the text produce a *mise en abîme* both of the book it closes and of this text itself" (1992, 46). The same could be said of the maps in Book 5, with the difference that the maps not only open but also close (round off) the book.<sup>19</sup> The maps, as *parerga*, as *codas*, both open and close the book. The "*mise en abîme*" created by the shift from "here" to "there" functions like the linguistic substitutions of *différance*. The maps of Book 5 site the book in Toronto, especially since the map refers to the "origin" of the book (as object), that is to say, the Coach House Press. However, the text circulates in much wider geography: its distribution is not limited to the maps.

The "REALITY" passage quoted above is immediately followed by another type of *mise en abîme*: a passage of 73 lines, the order of the first 36 lines reversed and re-versed to create the last 36 lines (which close out chain 9), and the hinge is the 37th line which reads "(he has something to say)." It is a kind of line by line palindrome which begins and ends with "come to the beginning at last." Nichol is, again, challenging the spatial and temporal linearity of narrative and exploring the possibilities of the physicality of the page. The passage is a remembrance of the past 12 years; it is a reciting and a re-siting of previous experience. By placing the pivotal line in brackets (a gesture which traditionally reduces the importance or prominence

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<sup>19</sup>A good example of a *mise en abîme* in the first map in Book 5 is the appearance of "Avenue Rd." Is it an avenue or a road? This path, if followed, runs into University Ave. ("Universe City" to borrow a pun from Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger*), which is also Route 11A (again a triple repetition of the primary figure).

of the text), Nichol undermines the pertinence of what "he" has to say, that is, his remembrance. That "(he has something to say)" is unimportant: it is "a command of language" that what he actually says (i.e., that he does speak) is of more importance than what he desires or wants to say. Speech, writing and communication are not uncorrupted modes; hermeneutics is always at work. This type of writing, as Scobie notes, "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" (1984, 90). Nichol's friends' hunger for "REALITY" is an insatiable appetite. If reality is about to be found or defined, it consumes or devours itself. It must always be mediated by some relative position or discourse (i.e., language); there is no ex-position of reality, and reality cannot be fully represented in writing.

This section, therefore, returns to and alters itself, just as the second end map is a variation of the first. Sections such as these are instances of the text quoting itself; that is, the text recites itself, thereby re-siting, altering and subverting itself. The constituent pieces are the same, but they have been solicited (shaken up) for different ends. Textual self-citing creates a linguistic self-reflexivity which opens up the "*mise en abîme*." Speaking of Book 1, Smaro Kamboureli says that Nichol begins The Martyrology in "*medias res in medias res*. Nichol's beginnings are tentative and arbitrary" (Miki 1988, 97). The terms traditionally used begin to rely upon themselves for definition and re-definition, creating a *mise en abîme* of terminology, which emphasizes the imprecision of language. The "middle of the middle" has shifted to become the problematized beginning; the centre of the centre has become the elliptical, doubled opening of the text, the (c)entre. Linda Hutcheon writes of the contradictions in such treatment of terms:

The decentering of our categories of thought always  
relies on the centers it contests for its very definition

(and often its verbal form). The adjectives may vary: hybrid, heterogeneous, discontinuous, antitotalizing, uncertain. So may the metaphors: the image of the labyrinth without center or periphery might replace the conventionally ordered notion we usually have of a library. . . . But the power of these new expressions is always paradoxically derived from that which they challenge. (1988, 59)

The categories of thought are always shifting because the textual map is always incomplete, just as a city map offers no layout of buildings along the streets or the interiors of those buildings. Behind every representation, every line, every mark lies a further network of chains of thought. Faced with the infinite regression inherent in language and categorization, the writer must at some point, at any point, begin to write. And precisely at the moment of writing, the writer withdraws her presence and relinquishes control over the labyrinth of the text.

The starting point of writing, then, is "tentative and arbitrary" and is always already in the labyrinth itself. The disjunctive centre of the "word" immediately creates a branching within the text. As Nichol notes, "when a branching of that occurred i would try to follow all the chains that opened up" (5, np). Nichol is saying that thoughts often split and diverge in different directions, and it is, therefore, impossible to map them out linearly. The tension lies in the difficulty of describing a branching of thought in a linear narrative, a narrative constituted by necessarily disjunctive and split words. To begin with a word is to begin with a split.

At the beginning of Chain 1, Nichol again begins tentatively:

a road  
a rod

a walk along

a long day  
a dying night

an art

a log

a journal that is right  
here

ere i begin<sup>2</sup> [Nichol's "note"]

The opening site is ambiguously "a road," indicated as neither city nor country. Within the context of the first map, it would be reasonable (but not necessary) to assume the road was in the city. "a road" is the lack of site which McCaffery quoted from de Certeau: Nichol is walking upon the narrative road and constructing whatever chains he encounters. The second line is almost an exact repetition of the first, yet Nichol omits the alphabetically primary letter: "a." He abandons the initial, the beginning, tearing the centre from the word, and creates "a rod." With the obvious resonance with the TRG's work with the "omen stick" and breaking branches mentioned in the previous chapter, "a rod" suggests straightness or unwavering narrative direction, which is at odds with the structure of the text itself. The arbitrariness of the text is further reinforced by the first eight lines starting with indefinite articles. The indefinite article is the first letter, the beginning. The road, as the beginning and non-beginning of Book 5, is a threshold between one site and another, a space between one word and the next. The roads frame the text while simultaneously facilitating movement within the text.

The tenth line of Chain 1 offers a leap to Chain 2, "ere i begin"; that is, before Chain 1 has really begun, Nichol offers the reader the option to leave the opening chain and move further into the centre of the text. The start of Chain 2 invokes images of arches, connections and "bridges tween / four to five" (Chain 2). He then speaks of "the precision of openness" and later states,

begin again then

the road

begin again

the log's an art

begin again  
begin again  
begin again

The "precision of openness" is precisely its imprecision: the exits from the text are varied and, to an extent, random. A reader passing through the phrasing, to paraphrase Nichol, is free to move around in and outside of the text. The desire to re-begin emphasizes the current state of the reader; that is, the leap from Chain 1 was from "here / ere i begin" and the reader is now referred back to the beginning (by re-siting in reciting), but the site of "here" has shifted.<sup>20</sup> The text has begun, yet it has not begun or has begun again. The reader, from the very beginning (if the text does begin), is faced with a "centre of a principle uncertainty" (Chain 2). The text begins to cycle around itself, creating a labyrinth, allowing the reader to enter but not to (c)entre.

Chain 1 begins "here" but immediately shifts to there; the re-beginning of Chain 2 recites "road," "log" and "art," but in two cases Nichol substitutes the definite article for the indefinite article. The text "here" in Chain 2 refers to the text there in Chain 1, and an indefinite road becomes the problematic, definite road. Nichol is not only undermining the site of the text, but he is also punning on his use of language. Chain 2 opens with "arch a is m." Nichol uses at least two archaic words in the opening lines of Chain 1 (prior to the leap to Chain 2): "art," an archaic conjugation of "to be" and "ere" meaning before. "art," of course, is also indicative of artistic production, but its relationship to "to be" suggests a connection between art and existence; that is, the means and matter of art and production are inherent in existence

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<sup>20</sup>Here, Nichol engages in the same lettristic omission as with "road" and "rod." He removes the "h" from "here" to create "ere," emphasizing the fact that "h" is the letter "ere i." Given the problematic entry to the book, he does not allow "h" and "i" to meet, just as the opening does not readily or easily greet the reader.

itself. Such an interpretation of the "art" of The M(art)yrology would be supported by the constant references to the work as a journal, diary or life-long poem. However, Nichol's use of the archaic refers back to a previous time, thereby problematizing the existence or presence of the "here" and now. The text is the "arch," the transitional space between one time and another, one site and another, presence and memory. "ere" puns with "air" and "err." The breath as spirit and existence is evoked alongside the oral (presence of) tradition of the long poem: "air" breathes life into the poem. But the "err" is to begin, hence Nichol's desire to "begin again / begin again / begin again." Nichol began Book 1 with these "errors": "so many bad beginnings" and "the breath lies." As Kamboureli notes,

The synecdoche of breath brings together Nichol's major concerns in *The Martyrology*: speech, logos, spirit, pneuma. Yet breath, Nichol warns us, is capable of lying. He rejects the pneumatological nature of phonocentrism -- the sign always turned towards God, towards a metaphysical presence -- and proposes instead his grammatological project, a project in which writing cuts breath short. (Miki 1988, 101)

Yet another concern within these passages from Books 1 and 5 is the process of the poem itself; that is, the text as process always already exists. As with the "p reference" in the *Coda*, much of The Martyrology focusses on how the here and now is also the there and then. The text here existed in a previous form; its origin is doubled and elsewhere. The process of writing "cuts breath short"; the translation of speech into writing, of thought into writing, of the audible into the legible, problematizes the interrelationship of one medium to the other.

Nichol, in a particularly lucid passage in Chain 12, explores the problems of medium, site and tense:

i am moving before you get the chance to move  
writing out the book's already written  
present's past tense in the present's

work outdistancing the theory  
 made old as me by time  
 essayed a poem with all the process prose is  
 the play in line a thrust defines  
 forward back

If the reader accepts this passage as the author Nichol addressing the reader (an assumption which need not be accepted), the problem of the creation and direction of the text is at the fore. Time, distance, direction, tense and writing are all key terms which Nichol tries to explore in the process of both writing and reading. The problem of origin and site, coupled with the branching of thought in a linear narrative, is addressed by the TRG:

. . . when Stein writes 'act so that there is no use in a centre' she is inviting us to enter the experience of passing time and to abandon a thematic for a durational 'centre' which, in a phenomenological sense, is a constantly shifting point of which we can gain no overview . . . The durational centre is always relative, moving in accordance with the particular reading experience. (McCaffery 1992, 88)

There are points of view but no points of overview. The reader approaches the transitional narrative from a unique perspective and moves to a new, unique perspective. In a sense, the transitional narrative acts as a hinge between one place and another, with each point in the narrative experience being relative to a previous and future position. The textual experience is always open, always beginning again, as it moves through time, constantly changing itself. It is at this point that I wish to move into Books 7/8, using point of view as a hinge to examine some of the narrative directions Nichol adopts to further explore the spatial and temporal limits of writing.

## CHAPTER FIVE: TO BEGIN AGAIN IN THE MIDDLE

The first page of the text proper in gIFTS<sup>21</sup> bears the title "Middle Initial Event" (figure 1). Nichol, again, as in Book 5, Chain 3, "includes that mid-initial ground" (np). Here, however, the "mid-initial" is neither a sequence nor ground but an "Event", a single-compound occurrence. Nichol's first use of the "mid-initial" was as a "sequence" in Book 3; later, it was as a "ground" in Book 5, Chain 3; in gIFTS, it is an "Event." He oscillates between temporal (sequence, Event) and spatial (ground) applications of the "mid-initial." Here, the "mid-initial" remains "P", and he sites the letter in a drawing he constructs "after diagrams by Stephen Hawking" (np).

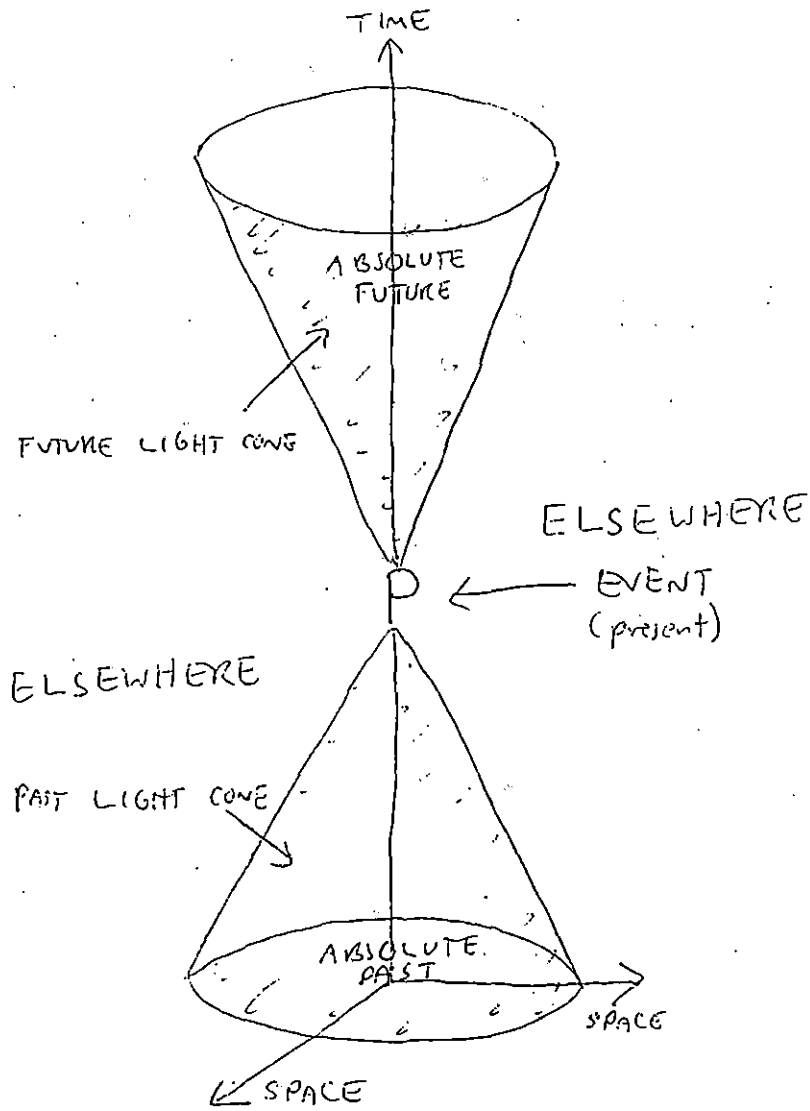
"P" represents the "present", which is the "event" depicted in the drawing. The drawing is of a light cone, which is a concept used in the theory of special relativity to map out the spatio-temporal characteristics of one event in relation to its surroundings and causation. From the point P, there are two light cones: one extending to the past, the other to the future. Point P is the "initial" condition in the "middle" of the drawing, as it were, and the light cones are the past and future potentialities of that initial condition. There are two types of possible paths which P can follow: a timelike path or a spacelike path. Both paths are relative to the speed of light ( $c$ ). An object travelling at less than  $c$  would follow a timelike path and would remain inside the area of the light cone (in the "absolute future"). An object travelling at a speed greater than  $c$  would follow a spacelike path and would travel to a point outside of the light cone (what Nichol labels "elsewhere").<sup>22</sup> Applying this model to

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<sup>21</sup>gIFTS: The Martyrology Book(s) 7& is the complete title of Books 7/8 of The Martyrology. Nichol originally conceptualized Book 8 as interleaved in the pages of Book 7, taking the form of a shuffle text. For a more complete discussion of the history of the form of this text, see Irene Niechoda's afterword in gIFTS. I will simply refer to the text(s) as gIFTS.

<sup>22</sup>An object travelling at exactly  $c$  would follow a null path, that is, a path along the outside limit of the light cone.

Figure 1

**Middle Initial Event**

June 12, 1988  
(after diagrams by Stephen Hawking)

textuality, we see two distinct but related approaches to texts. Conventional notions of linear narrative would follow familiar timelike paths, whereas more radical narrative constructions like shuffle texts would invoke readings along more spacelike dimensions. We are reminded here of Derrida's use of "*spacing*" in "Différance" (1982, 13), a term which develops both the temporal and spatial dimensions of writing.<sup>23</sup>

In the drawing, the "time" line is vertical. A cross section of the light cone, taken perpendicular to the time line, would yield a circular section of possible points or destinations which P could eventually reach (all points on the plane being simultaneous). However, in special relativity, the passing of time is *observer dependent*; that is, what would appear as "normal" time on earth may appear quite different to someone passing earth in a spaceship. For example, a clock on Earth appears to tick normally (i.e., in the common conception of time) to an Earth observer. When this observer looks at a spaceship travelling past Earth, the clocks on the ship appear to be running slow. The converse of this situation is true. To the observer on the spaceship, his ship clock appears to run normally. When he looks at the clock on Earth, the Earth clock appears to be running slow when compared to his ship clock. The result of this example is that each observer views the other's clock as running slow; that is, both clocks are running slow.<sup>24</sup>

Christopher Ray states that

there is no global standard to which we can appeal, no inertial perspective may be singled out as 'the correct' view. Hence neither of the two descriptions [of the

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<sup>23</sup>I do not want to draw a clean-cut distinction between spatial and temporal understandings of narrative. I juxtapose traditional and radical narratives merely to suggest that certain types of text suggest one type of reading over another (keeping in mind a deconstructive, non-hierarchical relationship), yet both readings are possible within a text.

<sup>24</sup>For a fuller discussion of these concepts, see Christopher Ray's Time, Space and Philosophy, pp. 24-68, 151-175.

clocks] may be deemed 'correct' -- rather, they are complementary descriptions of motions within a spacetime. . . (1991, 35)

From this summary of special relativity, many thematic and structural connections can be made to ellipses and hermeneutics. For example, the perpendicular cross section of the light cone shows the plane of simultaneity relative to P. If another observer, in motion relative to P, were to intersect his plane of simultaneity with P's light cone, it would intersect at an oblique angle to the base of P's cone (this would result in the external observer seeing two events as non-simultaneous (consecutive) while P thinks them simultaneous: there would be no "correct" view). The geometric figure of the ellipse is formed by an inclined plane that does not cut the base of the cone: it is a conic section. When two or more different perspectives are considered, there appears a fundamental gap in the hermeneutic process, whether that process is concerned with time or with text.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the TRG writes, "[the] durational centre is always relative, moving in accordance with the particular reading experience" (McCaffery 1992, 88). No two reading experiences are identical; therefore, they have different (metaphorical) movements, velocities and points of view. One reader always views another's experience through her own lens, thereby problematizing any ground for "the correct" view. Of course, there are many "particular" reading experiences, and their centres are "always relative," that is, different but relative to other experiences. On this view of reading, there are multiple centres originating from numerous possible points or events and following different timelike paths. Different readers intersect each other's reading experiences at different angles, which create different ellipses within the text with respect to each reader.

The point of view in special relativity (the position) is much like the TRG's use of context in the following passage:

Arranging knowledge as a context destroys the past/present duality. The reassertion of context, however, brings with it the dismissal, through pointing out the sheer absurdity, of the writer's omniscient role. When both process and context are revealed, we are forced to recognize that the single, isolated person/text is *always* lacunaire. (McCaffery 1992, 132)

The "writer's omniscient role" is in no way the "correct view" to which to appeal. Such an assertion of context often leads to a common and misconceived criticism of deconstruction; that is, with an infinite number of perspectives, one could assign any meaning to any signifier; it is open to infinite free-play.<sup>25</sup> Caroline Bayard discusses this criticism in reference to both the TRG and Derrida. She sees the TRG as emptying the signifier of any semantic meaning or content. The problem, as she sees it in relation to Derrida, is that the signifier is necessarily tied to the signified: "when we erase the opposition between the signifier and signified we destroy one of the terms of this opposition, thereby reducing the other to a purely metaphysical concept" (1989, 62). One cannot have a signifier without a signified, otherwise the term signifier is meaningless. The TRG re-establishes meaning in the sign system by ascribing the reader as meaning-producer and thereby re-investing meaning in the signifier.

By positioning the diagram of the light cone at the beginning of the book, Nichol immediately invokes the problem of perspective and perception in the spatio-temporal ordering of the text. The reader is immediately reminded of Nichol's affinity for shuffle texts (a form he had originally envisioned for Book 8): the shuffle text

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<sup>25</sup>Pauline Butling makes a similar, mistaken criticism of deconstruction, suggesting that deconstruction is merely destructive (open to infinite free-play and subversion). She states that the TRG does "not simply deconstruct conventions. The process must also be generative" (Miki 1988, 238). She footnotes this latter sentence by stating, "Unlike the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers, who are often more deconstructive than constructive, the TRG emphasizes the generative. There is immediate and continuous re-combining in their work" (Miki 1988, 258). Put simply, she seems to confuse deconstruction with destruction, a confusion which is counterproductive to deconstruction, and she relegates "language" poetics to the process of destruction and not creation.

relativizes the spacing, ordering, timing and sequence of the text. The TRG writes, "[the] *sequence* of things read can be as significant as the actual things read. Any path creates valid reader experiences. The notion of any absolute reading is ridiculous" (McCaffery 1992, 156). Such sequencing of the text demonstrates Nichol's self-reflexive, revisionary position with respect to the "Mid-Initial Sequence" in Book 3. The "Sequence" is particularized to an "Event" with an attention to the possible entrances and exits leading to and/or from the "Event" in question, that is, the potential light cones of the "Event."

In his diagram, Nichol, I have assumed, (re)presents the present as P; however, he draws an arrow pointing to P. The arrow functions as a kind of signpost pointing the reader from the "Event" to "P": it is a deictic. A number of possibilities arise from this "p reference".

To begin, reading the word "Event" would seem an event in itself. To read this word is to self-reflexively realize its semantic meaning, needing reference to nothing other than itself. However, if we assume this "Event" is somehow related to P, we find that the "Event" is outside P's light cone; that is, the "event" cannot bear a normal causal relationship to P: it is situated "elsewhere".<sup>26</sup> Underneath the "Event," Nichol writes the word "(present)", yet it is in parentheses. Is this word "present" in fact present, or is it simply a trace remaining somewhat faintly in parentheses? To what does this "(present)" refer: itself, "Event" or "P"? Is its function on the page merely to reinforce or supplement the "Event"; or does it in fact refer to "P" by way of an "Event" (which "(present)" itself seems not to be)?<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, can we ascribe

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<sup>26</sup>Points located outside an event's light cone are not considered physical potentialities of P. In reality (as we commonly understand it) nothing can exceed  $c$ ; therefore, a point outside the cone can only be considered theoretically. See Ray, pages 60-61. On this reading, P could only have a spacelike (non-causal) relation to the "Event".

<sup>27</sup>Also, this reading would seem impossible given the spacelike relationship of "Event" and "(present)" to "P."

"Event" with a kind of eventhood or presence in our reading experience, while prohibiting the same status of "(present)"? In these two instances, the words realize their own meaning by virtue of their being read. Nichol, however, lessens the status of one term by placing it in parentheses. As signifiers, the words do not necessarily refer to signifieds which are different from themselves: they are signifiers which signify themselves. This reading would support Bayard's deconstruction of the signifier-signified relation. The signifier no longer refers to something "elsewhere;" rather, it refers to itself, becoming both signifier and signified as a performative utterance or act. However, an interesting problem arises from such self-reflexivity.

Take, for example, the arrow next to the "Event". Is this arrow a signpost? If so, to what does it refer? That is, does it refer to something else, or does it refer to itself like the above reading of "Event"? Geoffrey Bennington comments on indicators, stating "that no indicator can simultaneously indicate and indicate that indicating is what it's doing . . . it's as though we learned how to use signposts because the first one we saw had a signpost marked 'signpost' pointing at it" (1994, 282). How does the arrow pointing away from "Event" differ from the other arrows in the diagram? For example, one arrow (assumingly) indicates the direction of time; another arrow (assumingly) indicates the unfolding direction of space; etc. On one interpretation, the arrow could simply function as a causal indicator, much like the ones used in symbolic logic, suggesting that "P" is the possible outcome of a conditional "Event," only the standard representation is reversed.<sup>28</sup> Considered as such, the arrow would no longer function as an indicator but as a signifier. If we assume that the arrow functions as a deictic, there is a lag between the "Event" and "P." As Bennington notes, "[the] event has already been missed by the time the

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<sup>28</sup>To reverse the logical construction, the proposition would read "Event -> P" (if "Event" then "P"). However, within the context of the drawing, the spacelike relation again prohibits any logical, causal, conditional connection.

deictic tries to catch it" (1994, 290). By pointing to the event, Nichol necessarily misses (or defers) the presence of the "Event". It would seem that the only way for the "Event" to be tied to "P" by normal causation would be to observe them (refer to them) from an event prior to "P." Within the context of the diagram, the "Event" (or "P" or "(present)" or the arrow) can either self-reflexively refer to itself, or it can refer (although deferred) to something like "P."

Perhaps it is hasty for me to construct such an either/or binary regarding these terms. Can the words not perform both functions? Throughout gIFTS, as with the chains in Book 5, Nichol constantly explores diverging narrative potentialities. He continues a process which began in Book 6: he splits words and inserts braces, arrows or intersecting lines between one part of a word and another and then offers a variety of possible beginnings or endings. He moves the chain idea to more microscopic proportions, further fragmenting and dislocating narrative continuity. However, even with such radical fragmentation, the reader cannot simultaneously pursue both (or all) possibilities: there is a necessary deferral.

One result of such dislocation is the lacuna which the TRG mentioned; that is, the event of representation, the event of reading and the event itself are always removed from each other. Since there is no "correct" context to which to refer, the reader is presented with the opportunity to prescribe meaning within her own context. Bennington notes that it is impossible to determine whether a statement is posited by a legislator or a charlatan, that is, whether or not an asserted context should be adopted by an individual, as any judgement or assertion of a statement necessarily refers to contexts outside the statement itself. Bennington writes,

[this] moment at which the legislator always might be a charlatan . . . just is the moment of the political, and it is irreducible because it is undecidable. This is why there is no end to politics. . . . the critical appeal to 'politics' as a criterion of judgement *always* functions as

an attempt to reduce just that situation, and therefore to  
reduce politics in the very act of invoking it. (1994, 3)

To assume the role of critic, of legislator, is to subscribe to a number of assumptions. To voice a particular 'reading' of a text is to invoke a certain authority (legitimate or otherwise), a certain hermeneutic, which is similar to the absurd position of the "writer's omniscient role."

In "read, dear", the poem immediately following the "Middle Initial Event", Nichol comments on the arbitrary positions of the reader and writer. In the first "july 6th" section, he writes,

struck/sure  
  
the search for absolutes  
in a world of flux  
  
where are we lead  
when we follow their lead  
  
what i read  
is read, dear  
  
only the pronunciation changes  
not even moving your lips  
  
pucker sucker  
  
it's the kiss of life  
of death  
  
ellipsis  
  
in which a little knowledge grows

A number of issues are raised here. Specifically, I wish to draw attention to the ambiguous tense and grammatical functions of "read" and "lead." Exactly "where are we lead / when we follow their lead"? The second occurrence of "lead" creates an interesting pun. The word "follow" leads the reader to read the final word of the stanza as a word suggesting direction; that is, the reader is led by Nichol to read it this

the lord's "droll." This resistance to the originary Word permeates The Martyrology with perhaps its best manifestation being "dogma i am god" at the end of Book 3.

Nichol seems to name the origin as "o" ("o.k.? o / i know we share that common origin"). It is an extremely rich and contradictory image suggesting nothingness, the open, speaking mouth "you came from," the open, birthing mouth "you came from," or the perfect unity of the ring. Regardless of what this origin may or may not be, one "can never return to" it. In a sense, the genealogical map has been forgotten and cannot be recovered. The "mouth you came from" is an absence but a productive absence. Andrew Payne notes this in conversation with McCaffery: "in Nichol the fact that history, etymology, etc. get recognized as a positive production rather than some kind of return to origin" (McCaffery 1986, 121). In his discussion of "wit," McCaffery comments on the wordplay and polysemy in The Martyrology: "there is a multiple surface to each word and a minimally dual directionality: the one inwards and directed to a settled place of meaning . . . ; the other outwards to an undetermined scene of possible and limitless productions" (1986, 61). While meaning and genealogy can be traced to a certain extent, the process is always altered by non-rational factors.

In the passage quoted above, Nichol also creates a cross-linguistic pun with "trey" and "très." If we translate "très" as "very," the suggestion is one of plenitude verging on excess. In Derridean terms, there is an over-abundance in the general economy of writing; that is, there is an excess of meaning which is potentially unrecoverable. McCaffery writes,

This unavoidable presence of words within words contests the notion of writing as a creativity, proposing instead the notion of an indeterminate, extra-intentional, differential production. The paragram should not be seen necessarily as a latent content or hidden intention, but as sub-productive sliding and slipping of meaning between the forces and intensities distributed through

the text's syntactic economy. Paragrams ensure that there will always be a superfluity of signifiers and a degree of waste and unrecoverability [*sic*] of meaning. (1986, 208-9)<sup>34</sup>

McCaffery seriously problematizes any "line of mastery" (213) in textual analysis, and reinforces the continual exchange between the restrictive and general economies. The post card passage in gIFTS reveals Nichol's sensitivity to the productive potentialities of the issues raised here. He merely says what he can, recognizing the inadequacy of language to convey precise, encapsulated meaning. It is impossible to gain control over paragrammatic occurrences, nor can they be avoided; their very existence relies on indeterminacy and randomness. Like the present "P," paragrams can be recognized, isolated and determined (hence, one could construct light cone diagrams for a singular occurrence), but there is always the possible risk that they will exceed their context (*c*) and spill over into the elsewhere of meaning.

gIFTS contains pieces by Nichol which were composed between 1964 and 1988; it spans twenty-three years of his life and the entirety of his publishing career. The single book has the same historical time as other, combined books in The Martyrology: it is as much a temporal construction as a spatial one. While it is the seventh and eighth book in the series and therefore linearly positioned, the book nevertheless attempts the impossible task of representing the entirety of The Martyrology. It is as much a piece of the whole as it is the whole itself, and the light cone diagram suggests the possibility of this apparent contradiction. Roger Penrose comments on light cone diagrams: "The entire diagram represents the whole history, past, present, and future. A particle, since it persists with time, is represented not by a point but by a line, called the *world-line* of the particle" (1989, 250). gIFTS is merely one particle, but it is a particle composed of numerous other particles. It is a particle,

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<sup>34</sup> See also Derrida's essay "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve" in Writing and Difference (251-277).

a "p" article, represented not only by a "*world-line*," but also by lines, poetic lines, which construct the world of the text in all its crossings, splittings and divergences. The words of David Jones which open the book accurately describe the situation: "What I have written has no plan, or at least is not planned. If it has a shape it is chiefly that it returns to its beginning. It has themes and a theme even if it wanders far. If it has a unity it is that what goes before conditions what comes after and *vice versa*." gIFTS is perhaps a collection of numerous poems that had previously gone astray, poems that had wandered, poems that exceeded the restricted economy, poems that needed to be deferred. In this sense, it is a recovery of things lost, and these things, in turn, will be lost again. The numerous possible and impossible futures and pasts of The Martyrology, whatever those may be, are here as gifts, as presents, and simply remain to be.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapter, I quoted Nichol's line "wit has its play," a line which is followed by numerous palindromes, homophones and puns. Wit certainly does play with words, but it also seems to have something else, something different than play, something more serious.<sup>35</sup> In his essay, "*The Martyrology as Paragram*," McCaffery comments on the history of wit (*witz*), stating how it is much more than just a "play" on words and is "a profoundly social and revolutionary faculty" (1986, 59). He writes, "Wit, as we trace it, will never be far from the theme of liberation through dissolution and through an ordering of knowledge upon the chemical senses rather than on rational science. . . . *witz*, whilst always controllable by reason, is itself uncontrollable as a birth" (60). McCaffery calls wit the "ability to grasp truth unprovably," drawing upon Friedrich Schlegel who calls wit "fragmentary genius" which can and does merely act. What seems to emerge here is the concrete evidence of truth juxtaposed with radical randomness, the expectation with the result, the intention with the outcome.

Paul de Man also comments on *witz* and draws from Schlegel. In "The Concept of Irony," he writes,

Words have a way of saying things which are not at all what you want them to say. . . . There is a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and total arbitrariness. . . which inhabits words on the level of the play of the signifier, which undoes any narrative consistency of lines, and which undoes the reflexive and the dialectical model, both of which are, as you know, the basis of any narration. (1996, 181)

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<sup>35</sup>The reader is urged to consider Derrida's discussion of Austin on seriousness: "Language in such circumstances is in special ways -- intelligibly -- used not *seriously* [I am italicizing here, J.D.], but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use. . ." (1982, 325). And in *Limited Inc*: "Which is what constitutes the drama of this family of theoreticians: the more they seek to produce serious utterances, the less they can be taken seriously" (72). See also, Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* pgs. 115-125.

This passage is reminiscent of the interpretive problem which faces Derrida. He writes, "There are more than enough indications today to suggest we might perceive that these two interpretations of interpretation -- which are absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy -- together share the field which we call, in such a problematic fashion, the social sciences" (1978, 293).

The "Book-Machine" as the TRG calls it, the "text machine" as de Man calls it, performs some act which cannot be determined in any way sufficient to the rational sciences, that is, some act that resists narrative unity or completion. It is this understanding which leads McCaffery to state that "*The Martyrology* will never serve a project of knowledge and will always be close to *witz*. Through wordplay its meanings are pulverized and shattered to serve no cumulative purpose" (1986, 60). Of course, he does not say that The Martyrology is purposeless; rather, the purpose(s) will always be open and open-ended. Nichol states that "the nature of the work [on The Martyrology] has been such that I did not begin with a conclusion" (Miki 1988, 81). He resists what he calls "the historical lie of mastery" (Miki 1988, 80), the enforcement of closure upon a text, an encapsulated meaning or intention, the sense that everything has been figured out.

As mentioned in the introduction, the birth of The Martyrology was rather uncontrollable for Nichol; he had forgotten that he had started it. The original purpose, if there ever was such a thing, was forgotten. de Man states that "the poet, like the philosopher, must *forget* what he knows about his undertaking in order to accede to the discourse to which he is committed" (1996, 117), that to critically assess a writing requires a distance that is necessarily different from the moment of composition, the reflexive moment and the dialectical moment. That is to say, conclusions about a discourse cannot be drawn until they are reached, and even then they cannot be fully evaluated until they have been considered from a different

position from that in which they were conceived. The poem must be cited, re-cited and then re-sited in order to become a discourse, and the power of subversion is always at work in such a process. It is possible to partially evaluate a discourse, but the evaluation will always be just that: partial. Given the degree of undecidability in deconstructive criticism, the responsibility for judgment is placed upon the individual critic and not solely the text, as the individual further defines the partial context in which the text is read. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of a text, the power of *witz* must be allowed to come into play and considered for its non-rational production.

To conclude, therefore, is difficult. To legislate (to use Bennington's term) is to engage the necessary risk of language, of wit, to risk cutting off the further play of *witz*. By asserting a position, the critic risks saying what she does not want to or mean to say. The balance lies in the critic's rationality attempting to cope with the undecidable, attempting to delimit language. The TRG lightly (perhaps seriously) mocks their own conclusions by naming them "Conc(de)lusions" (McCaffery 1992, 291). Aptly, the section of Rational Geomancy devoted to conclusions seems to contain no conclusions. McCaffery writes, "Conclusions still cannot be drawn but now for a radically different reason: the reduction of the community to one" (293). This is, of course, a conclusion, but an open-ended one. McCaffery decides to fill the section with leftover fragments of unfinished research reports, hoping that these will instigate the reader to continue the work herself and not merely to draw conclusions about the TRG's work.

Conclusions can be drawn from The Martyrology, but they remain, ultimately, readings of the poem: ways into, ways out of and ways through the text. The conclusions are merely orderings, structures placed upon the narrative, which govern the outcome of the text. The TRG noted that "There can be no one absolute interpretation (i.e. system of alignment)" (McCaffery 1992, 153), and it is such a

conclusion which leaves the reader as the community of one searching for a personal ordering, which always seems out of grasp. In "ferry me across" in gIFTS, Nichol succinctly comments on the unsettling and ungrounded position of such a reading:

because to speak the true name  
presumes the power to invoke  
not yours, outside the i  
worlds we pass between

uncalm

prehending

What I invoke in this thesis is my interpretation of the poetical interpretation of texts. Within this presumption, I am aware that I am confronted with the representational and interpretive difficulties within the realm of the social sciences. My interpretation, presented here, is also open to interpretation from numerous possible discourses, only a few of which have been suggested within this work, and these other interpretations can only be fully developed by further investigation and research.

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VITA

Surname: Davis

Given Names: Roger Nathan

Place of Birth: North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Educational Institutions Attended:

University of Victoria	1995 to 1997
University of British Columbia	1989 to 1995

Degrees Awarded:

B.A.	University of British Columbia	1994
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"which way you p. . .": the Site and Sequence of Events in bpNichol's The Martyrology

Author

  
Roger Nathan Davis  
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