

Animating Bodies: The Sound Poems of bpNichol

Available at <http://web.uvic.ca/~lemerson/index.htm>

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ABSTRACT


As an antidote to the conspicuous absence of a criticism which speaks fully to the philosophical underpinnings of bpNichol's sound poems, I approach Nichol's work with sound in a hypertextual format (<http://web.uvic.ca/~lemerson/index.htm>) which is written largely in relation to Stanley Cavell's philosophical studies on language. Cavell explores the relation between language, world and philosophical skepticism in terms of Wittgenstein's notion of language games to make the claim that the skeptical impulse underlying philosophy's understanding of the nature of language and the world is one that deprives both of life. A primary line of thought in this thesis is that Cavell's call for us to begin returning words to their home language game is an act of healing and redemption in the face of skepticism, and thus can be aligned with bpNichol's belief in the therapeutic, life-giving aspect of language. Finally, this thesis has been written with a hypertext writing system in order to better take on Nichol's love of process, play and openness and in order to work against myself and my own tendencies towards a linear argument.




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INTRODUCTION

While critics generally recognize that bpNichol has posed vast challenges to our understanding of Canadian poetry, there continues to be a conspicuous absence of a criticism which speaks fully to the philosophical basis and implications of Nichol's important contributions to sound poetry. Ironically, the very things that are central to Nichol's sound poems--an emphasis on live performance, non-referentiality, and their strictly aural, not textual, nature--practically guarantee that critical interest in them either would be hard fought or simply wane after Nichol's death. There is also the fact that the book form and relative accessibility (in terms of availability and content) of Nichol's (life) long poem, *The Martyrology*, has also inadvertently paved the way for its own canonicity and the subsequent neglect of Nichol's other work. However, as I repeatedly point out in this thesis, Nichol's work in sound frequently influenced and informed his work in other genres (including the long poem), and this absence of a body of appropriate criticism points all the more towards the ever-present possibility of Nichol's legacy as an adventurer into all realms, genres and mediums of language being whittled down to a number of limited, sometimes decontextualized, aspects.

In *ABC of reading TRG*, Peter Jaeger comments on how George Bowering and Michael Ondaatje, the editors of the bpNichol reader published by McClelland & Stewart, *An H in the Heart*, decontextualize many of Nichol's works which--in content, form and especially format--were originally intended as a challenge to the conformity and conventionality inherent to "consumer culture" (Jaeger 54) and so often exemplified by mainstream publishing (consider, for example, that McClelland & Stewart call themselves "The Canadian Publishers"). Not only was Nichol resistant towards the idea

of being published by a house such as M&S (“they [M&S] think they’re going the distance if they give you a choice of two typefaces! They’ve really busted their hump for you as author--‘Hey, this stuff’s not going to sell anyway!’” (quoted in Jaeger 54)), but he was also wary of how books bear with them the potential to become objects of commodification.

From the beginning of his career, Nichol linked his stress on process and on textual play with social revolution and personal revelation. But because the “bpNichol reader” recontextualizes Nichol’s writing within a “hefty collection in the mainstream” (for mainstream, read market-economy) the text tends to normalize and domesticate the incomplete process of that social revolution . . . (Jaeger 57)

On the other side of the argument, and to their credit, Bowering and Ondaatje make it clear in their introduction to *An H in the Heart* that “bpNichol was always trying to escape the book . . . When he made books, he made books that tried to get out of books . . . And what do we do? We try to edit a selected Nichol. Worse than that, we try to do it in a book. Worse even than that, we try to do it in a book that is not two thousand pages long.” (xi)

But while Bowering and Ondaatje *could* have put together a selection of Nichol material that did not blatantly contradict Nichol, the fact remains that with access to Nichol’s work being limited only to this reader and the *Martyrology*, the rest of his work (a good portion of which appeared in limited edition pamphlets, chapbooks, flip books, postcards, records, cassette tapes) can be and is on the verge of being forgotten. Moreover, the fact also remains that this ‘reader,’ despite its controversial nature, or

even because of its inadequacy, does remind us of the “labyrinth” that is Nichol’s “quarter-century of invention” and does encourage “readers to put on their work clothes and negotiate the mazes they will find in heroic first-edition bookstores” (xiii-xiv). After all, *An H in the Heart* is what first got me started on this path of writing about his sound poetry, and of thinking that it is not only the availability of the work itself that helps to maintain an accurate and whole representation of Nichol, but it is also our writing about him, thinking about him that keeps alive the variety, joy, and sheer virtuosity of Nichol’s writing.

Throughout the writing of this thesis I have tried to keep it in the forefront of my mind that my duty to Nichol and to future readers lies not just in the writing and the thinking, but in my willingness to stand inside his words, syllables, songs, shrieks, howls, and chants and simply listen; that the act of listening would prevent me from deadening his language with an unsympathetic discourse that comes out of too much critical distance; and further, that listening would also ensure that my critical energies went towards an awareness of the material production of this thesis. As such, it seemed to me that the innovation, nonlinearity and associative nature of a hypertext writing platform was the ideal medium to take on what Jaeger calls Nichol’s love of process and play, to enable me to listen to the always exploratory nature of Nichol’s writing/thinking, his emphasis on openness (to others, other writers, other genres, to language, ideas, opening the mind and opening boundaries) while working against myself and my own tendencies towards a linear argument. There is also the fact that Nichol was interested in the possibilities offered by computers from the early days of the personal computer in the 1980s. In “Some Notes on an Approach to Teaching Computers” from 1985 Nichol

writes at length of the possibilities of openness that computer programming offers:

“Open programming is where you have no end product in mind but are proceeding step by step just to see where each little step takes you.” He was also interested in creating interactive fiction, and in fact ended up creating “First Screening,” a kinetic computer poem with limited interactive capabilities. Finally, there is the chain structure of *The Martyrology* Book 5 which mimics hypertext links by using numbered chains that can be read in any direction, any order. Frank Davey writes that, “Its presentation in twelve numbered ‘chains’ that offer a reader various ‘reading paths’ announces a recognition of the text as constructed . . . and as constructed by the ‘eye’-reader as much as by the ‘i’-narrator.” (“Exegesis” 48).

Moreover, one of the many premises of this thesis is that the themes of being lost and found are two basic touchstones of Nichol’s sound poems, and that, as Thoreau asserts in *Walden*, we cannot be found until we are lost and realize the necessity of being lost--“Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world . . . do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (24); as such, it seemed only appropriate that there be as many ways to get lost in this thesis as there are ways to find, and an infinite number of ways to map out relations between text nodes. However, obviously, there are also drawbacks to creating a maze for a thesis, one that is based on connection and openness, that is written outside of the book form and for an institution whose standards of excellence are the very things I am trying to work against: focussed arguments built on if/then/therefore logic that clearly aims towards closure and sound conclusions. I have found that hypertext is particularly problematic when the subject matter itself--philosophy, for example--is inherently logical, linear and

based on careful reasoning; not only does the tempo of a playful generation of ideas and free-moving thought suddenly slow down to a crawl, but so too are the eyes forced to slow down and close in on the computer screen to concentrate, focus. In other words, it may be that philosophical thinking, as we have come to know it, is not suited to this new medium which is fast making its presence known in almost every aspect of life.

As such, it may be that some passages are easier to read than others, or--simply because this thesis could, in theory, endlessly go on to make more connections, draw in more ideas and writers--it may be that I have not explored a particular direction fully or perhaps not at all, or that I have explored one direction too much, taking it to its "logical" extreme, or that the trajectory of certain explorations still follow too straight a line of thought. I do hope, though, that this writing about, around, and beyond Nichol stays true to both the always various and explorative spirit of Nichol's writing and thinking, and to my original excitement over his work and the abundant material that I could relate to his sound poetry. In turn, I encourage readers to play with this text, to stay with and stray from the paths I have set out, to rest for awhile in the connections, circularity, contradictions, both the dissonant and consonant sounds.

Please visit the web-site for this thesis at <http://web.uvic.ca/~lemerson/index.htm>

- CAVELLIAN SKEPTICISM page 32
- SOUND POETRY page 98
- TIME-LINING page 108

1875 TO 1928

The poets of 1875 and up to the turn of the century that first began to involve themselves in the discipline of sound, a poetry of sound, are more numerous than one would think. The example that immediately comes to mind is Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," and in addition Steve McCaffery cites Christian Morgenstern, August Stramm, Petrus Borel, Molière, and Rabelais as individuals who made "pioneering attempts" into the "phonematic aspect of language" (McCaffery et al, *Sound Poetry* 6). However, I would argue that poems like "Jabberwocky" are probably more of an example of nonsense verse than sound poetry. Although the infamous opening lines--"Twas brillig and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe"--are ones whose rhythm and lilt demand to be tapped out, if not spoken aloud, and so the poem is at least a relative of sound poetry, its adherence to conventional rules of syntactic order and word-formation place it more with sound poetry's 'extended family'. But I also want to be clear about this example because it serves to foreground the fact that performance is inherently a part of sound poetry, not simply an emphasis on aural, orality, or a micro-analysis of phonemes and morphemes, but the physical relaying of sounds to listeners--in other words listeners are not the audience "Jabberwocky" was primarily intended for; and if it is not a poem for listeners, then the poem is simply a musical or rhythmic piece that is transmitted via the page (or the screen).

- EARLY ISMS page 39
- PERFORMANCE page 83
- TECHNOLOGY page 106

A NOUN IS A VERB TO BE

Charles Bernstein writes, “Unsounded poetry remains inert marks on the page, waiting to be called into use by saying, or hearing the words aloud” (Introduction, *Close Listening* 7). If we think of Nichol’s sound poems in terms of him calling words into use, bringing words back to life by returning them to their home language-game by way of the different aspects of their sounds, we can account for even his earliest sound poems on the *Borders* record (released in 1967)--poems such as “Early Morning: June 23,” “Not What the Siren Sang But What the Frag Ment,” “Cycle 22 ” and “Cycle 17 ”--many of which Nichol later self-deprecatingly described as being simplistic.

All of these poems are, on the page, permutational at a very basic level, but when heard strictly aurally are de-constructive, re-constructive pieces driven by a rhyming and rhythmic associative drift. While the cleverness of the poems is manifest on the page (where the text is available), and in this way its depth can sometimes be flattened into surface-level game-playing, the result of being heard by ear is that we are made to change our literally absentminded attitude--in poetry as much as in our everyday lives--towards ordinary words such as ‘unusually,’ ‘wavering,’ ‘leaf,’ ‘autumn,’ ‘sky’ to a whole-body awareness of the meanings of these words that reside and are derived from the ways in which we use them, the ways in which we live, singly and communally, in language. This emphasis on ordinary language as a means to awaken us to our everyday lives is inextricably entwined in both Cavell’s (and Wittgenstein’s) writings on language and Nichol’s poetics--the two echoing each other so much so that it could easily be Cavell as much as Nichol authoring the essay, “Narrative in Language”:

Ordinary language is the hardest to write. Ordinary life is the hardest to

live . . . The extra has to do with singling it out. So that what is extraordinary in language is how what is ordinary is ordinarily transparent or invisible to us . . . You're always waiting for the ordinary to shift and reveal yet another face. And to glimpse the face of the ordinary is, in fact, to be given something. (Nichol 35-36)

This is an attitude towards language and the world that, although beginning in sound, emphasizes listening rather than advocates a kind of colonial ownership of either language or world (I am the world and the world is me). "You have to first take the noun free of adjectives, and just feel the noun, to reclaim it" ("Interview" 343) Nichol says in an interview from 1974, and this has been his obsession, this attempt "to take the noun and to kind of bring it back to its base . . . and precisely to let it regain its own resonances" (332).

You see it, and you acknowledge that you are not it. It is it, you are you. You can be totally sympatico with it, but it is not you. You do not even give it its existence. Your seeing it gives you, in a sense, your existence. ("Interview" 341)

This is also an attitude towards language and the world that sees both as being in infinite relation; having neither beginning nor end, centre nor margins, the all-embracing condition of relatedness that forms the basis of our everyday language means separateness as much as connection.

For me "Cycle 22" from *Borders* makes these points particularly clear--all the more so because Nichol claims it was his first (albeit not conscious) sound poem. Nothing has been more essential to human civilization than the drum and the wheel, the

words “drum” and “wheel.” And so “Cycle #22” serves to honour the grand simplicity of both these things and these monosyllabic nouns, the extent to which the words resonate in our culture, our mouths and in our bodies as the poem beats and rolls from “drum anda wheel” to “eela ndad ruman,” to “adru mand awhee” and back to “drum anda wheel;” and further, as the poem passes through heel, dadr (heard as ‘dada’), and land, it also serves as a reminder of the impossibility of separating ourselves from our words as they are actually used in our lives. To speak words is to speak of our lives; to be involved in the world is to be involved in language and vice-versa. This is the redemptiveness of the voice of correctness that brings us home from the exile we drive ourselves to.

- GRID ART page 50
- JEALOUSY & DEATH page 56

AN ENDING IN BEGINNING

Nichol's characterization of the saints--particularly the trio of St. And, St. Ranglehold and St. Reat--and the many thematic concerns that appear in *The Martyrology* are largely paralleled in his work in sound. The most obvious example of such parallelism is "Scraptures: fourth sequence" in which Nichol discovers Saint Reat ("HA!!!! // St. Reat // AH!!!!") which then gives birth to the sound poem, "Scraptures: fifth sequence." There is also the sound poem "Pome Poem" which echoes the reference to Palongawhoya in Nichol's attempt at (and invitation for listeners to take on) an embodied language; "The Alphabet Game" is another sound poem in which Nichol self-consciously sings us back, letter by letter, to the origins of our language and to the outer limits of sense ("A is for Apple, B is for Bill, C is for Carrot, D is for Dill, E is for Ever and F is for Friend . . . L is for Love, M is for Maybe, N is for Navy Bill Galey the el phabet gamey . . . the el pha bet gave me . . ."). And in "Love Song for Gertrude Stein" there is the intersection of the qualities of St. Reat with Cavell's invocation for us to be at home in the present, and with Stein's use of repetition as a means to achieve presentness which Nichol weaves into the ending of Book 2--"stein did say / the hardest thing is making the present continuous / living day to day."

Specifically, in her essay "Composition as Explanation," Stein brings in the notion of a continuous present by asserting that the only difference between a beginning, middle and ending is the way in which each is composed (from one generation to the next)--in other words it would seem that the present is continuous in that it repeats itself. However, in the lecture "Portraits and Repetition" Stein also claims that a lack of discernible difference does not imply repetition but rather insistence: "expressing any

thing there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence . . . and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis" (*Lectures* 167); and further, ". . . insistence in its emphasis can never be repeating, because insistence is always alive and if it is alive it is never saying anything in the same way because emphasis can never be the same not even when it is most the same . . ." (171). Nichol then takes up these issues of presentness, insistence, and an animated language in "Love Song for Gertrude Stein" which is the first piece on *bpNichol*. Nichol begins by saying, "I'm going to approach this tape the way I would any poetry reading, and for me . . . the thing that gets me the fastest way into the poems, into the feeling, into my own breathing and body is to begin with some of my sound poems. So . . . I'm going to begin with 'A Love Poem for Gertrude Stein.' The poem consists of lines or phrases--such as "a beginning in beginning it," "begin in," "backgammon back came," "an ending in ending it," "I'm thinking of ending it," "I'm thinking it," "an ending"--which Nichol relentlessly repeats, chants, mixes and substitutes one with another such that 'ending' and beginning' are nearly indistinguishable, nearly without their signifying function (I say 'nearly' because Nichol ends the poem with "an ending").

But for me, "Love Song for Gertrude Stein" is important not so much because of the ways in which it is clearly influenced by Stein, and related to Cavell and Palongawhoya, but rather for Nichol's introductory assertion that sound poetry embodies presentness and a live language and world, and for the related implication that sound (poetry) is prior to unsounded poetry and even to poetry that is simply sounded; this is also evidenced by the fact that *bpNichol* begins and ends with sound poems, their

function apparently being to take Nichol deep into his readings and then ease him out.

ANIMATING ANIMISM

Both the epigraph from Gertrude Stein that opens Book 1, as well as the dedication which precedes the actual text of *The Martyrology*, foreshadow the spiritual and thematic turn that begins to show in Book 2, even more so in Book 3, as if to reassure the reader right from the start that they are not merely being led into a journey/journal of despair and difficulty. The Steinian epigraph reads, “Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches.” This, of course, places Nichol’s aspiration to ‘acknowledge’ the noun, language, in a Steinian light—as Stephen Scobie puts it in his book-length study, *bpNichol: What History Teaches*, Nichol persistently tries to take on Stein’s attitude towards language which treats the noun as “a physical *object*, which could be ‘caressed,’ though that caressing could only take place *in* language, with another word” (Scobie 10). And as Stein herself writes, “When I said. A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose. And then later made that into a ring I made poetry and what did I do I caressed completely caressed and addressed a noun.” (*Lectures* 231) Or, combining both Stein and Wittgenstein, the epigraph could be read as on the one hand saying that it is not any sort of (mystical) external body of knowledge that is instructive but rather the language itself in which our histories, our storehouses of knowledge, are told; and on the other hand, to caress the noun is to caress the world, truth, our histories because language cannot exist independently of the world and our histories. Regardless, either interpretation can easily be made to fit Nichol’s sound poetry insofar as they represent his attempt to heal the dualistic split, to return from exile to presentness.

This pairing of history and/as language, and the subsequent necessity for presentness, for an acknowledgment of the present which springs from an understanding

of the inseparability of these two, is briefly explored in an essay by the TRG (the Toronto Research Group, comprised of bpNichol and Steve McCaffery, who sought to collaboratively undertake language research between roughly 1973 and 1982). In part two of “The Search for Non-Narrative Prose” in their “Manifesto as Interlude,” the TRG begin with an excerpt from Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, “In order to know one must always go back” (McCaffery et al, *Rational* 99), and then (corroborating and departing from my foregoing interpretation of Steinian history) they declare:

But the *back* we are referring to is not a chronologically distinct past but an unacknowledged present being lived through. Stein distinguished two types of history. The personally external history of a chronologically ordered environment and its occurrences, and a personal, internal history carried within each individual . . . Faced with a narrative no longer capable of expressing that outside reality, we are forced on to a path to the one indubitable reality: to that human process which produces what is said; to that dwelling inside the house of language; to a narrative of internal process. (100)

And this is followed by another excerpt from Stein: “The business of Art . . . is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete and actual present” (100). Thus, Nichol’s concern is with finding oneself in the present as present, as an animated being conscious of the surrounding animated world.

Similarly, the dedication for Book 1 first reads:

for lea

without whose friendship
quite literally none of this would happen

The 'lea' here refers to Lea Hindley-Smith, founder of Therafields and Nichol's own therapist who, he claims, "literally stopped me from killing myself" (quoted in Niechoda 67). There is relatively little documentation of the philosophy behind Therafields and of Nichol's role (later as a therapist) in the organization; however, a collectively-written article from 1973 by Hindley-Smith, Kutz, McKenna and Nichol in *The Canadian Forum* is one of the more in-depth accounts which describes the basic structure of Therafields:

Therafields is an experiment of about 600 people in Toronto. Each of us begins with individual therapy that is psychoanalytically based. After a time one enters as well one of the weekly meeting groups of which there are currently seven. About half of those in therapy have proceeded to a more intensive live-in form of therapy in what we call house groups. (12)

Freud, William Reich, Arthur Janov and R.D. Laing (among others) are then named as Therafields' "preferred writers," and psychodrama, process-oriented thinking, and community are cited as forming the heart of their therapeutic work. These same aspects of Therafields form the basis of *The Martyrology* and of Nichol's work with sound--both of which, as I have said, also aim to be therapeutic. While there is some disagreement as to whether Therafields informed the Four Horsemen's sound poetry performances, which often resembled psychodramas or enactments of therapy (Jaeger 103-104), I think that despite Steve McCaffery's claim that there were no "discussions that linked sound poetry and energy . . . to the bioenergetics, psychodramas, and abreative methods practiced at Therafields . . ." ("Interview" 89), Frank Davey is right in saying that "the

performances were not therapy *per se*, even though a remarkable formal similarity exists” (quoted in Jaeger 104). That is to say that while at least Nichol saw sound as being therapeutic, sound poetry is not a systematic therapy; as such, sound poetry--especially in light of what I have argued from the perspective of Stanley Cavell--can easily be aligned with such therapies as Arthur Janov’s primal scream therapy.

- INSTRUMENTS OF SOUND page 54
- LOST AS FOUND page 66
- NARRATING DOUBT page 70
- PRIMAL SCREAM THERAPY page 88
- RIGHT SOUND page 89

ANIMISM OR ANIMATING?

If one listens to other early sound poems, the distinction between a positive use of animism (what Nichol and Cavell call acknowledgement of the thing or the noun) and a negative use of animism (in that the skeptic approaches the world as an animate other and therefore sees their relationship with the world as exclusive and complete) becomes less clear; this is so especially since it seems as if there is a gradual move from the former to the latter over the space of only a few years, and it is a move that sets the tone for Nichol's sound poems for the next decade. The two most interesting examples of this difficulty in distinguishing between, one could say, Nichol's use of animism and his use of language as an animating force, both come from *bpNichol*, the second compilation of sound poems released after *borders* in 1972.

"Son of Sonnet: a sound sequence fr david w harris" is largely a fast-paced, high-volume piece consisting of both pure sound-bites and syllables from existing words. For example, moving from repetitions of (and variations on) "ounk," "brrrrrrrt," "ting a ting," "kissta pleen," "funk pa," "no," and "wuwuwantz," the only recognizably English words or sounds that emerge are "tree," "trip," "funk," "no" and "woo"; even these sounds are subjected to such vocal distortions that, without seeing the poem on the page, they are not recognizable as words per se. In fact, it is interesting to see that in a manuscript version of the poem Nichol does his best to omit as many signifying sounds and words as possible, scratching out at the bottom of the first page, "oh baby . . . don't you / worry 'bout / meeeeeeeee." However, while one could argue that, like "Scrapures: Fifth Sequence," this too is a poem of alienation, one that attempts to speak to the world as an animate other, the fact is that the extent to which such symptoms of

skepticism are placed side by side with, or even, within language serves to outline the limits of sound and sense and bring us close to hearing a withdrawal from words and world without ever entirely turning away. Further, insofar as “Son of Sonnet” bears some connection to language, a literary tradition (if only in the title, it is connected to the sonnet form and to a sonnet sequence), and insofar as many of its constituent sounds are syllables of language which are obviously voiced through an unmediated human voice and body, the effect is very nearly that of healing, of an attempt to bring us back to life: to be shown the limits of language not only shows the limits of the world, but shows us--by example--what it means to be human, to use language, speak, and know the world. As such, with “Son of Sonnet” Nichol begins to move away from a struggle with the powerful pull of the skeptical impulse, away from being enmeshed in a (st)ranglehold on language, and towards a writing of relatedness, embodiment, and healing.

- TRANSFORMATIONS page 117
- INSTRUMENTS OF SOUND page 54

BALL IN NICHOL

One is bound (rightly so) to position Nichol in the lineage of Dada's central literary practitioner, Hugo Ball--the most frequently cited so-called father of sound poetry to whom Nichol was undoubtedly indebted. I cannot write comprehensively, even accurately about Dada since it not only embraced contradiction, but also rose up in places as geographically diverse as they were politically diverse. Nonetheless a thread shared by most Dadaists was a search for the new in reaction to the extraordinary devastation brought about by the "Great War" and its machine-age technology--new ways of thinking, feeling and knowing that ran contrary to the dominant belief in reason, logic and causality which seemed inevitably to lead to war. As such, not unlike its anti-art stance which actually reinforced and produced art, Dada (Zurich Dada in particular) used art as a way to destroy "humanity" as it had come to be known but it did so in order to get back to an originary, pure human. "We were forced to look for something which would re-establish our humanity" (58), Richter writes, "we wanted to stay human!" It comes as no surprise that, in many ways, the figure of Hugo Ball embodies the contradictory thrust of Dada that exists somewhere between hope and hopelessness; and nowhere is this attitude more evident than in Ball's manifesto which he reputedly read at the opening night of the Cabaret Voltaire as an introduction to his 'phonetic poem,' "O Gadji Beri Bimba:"

We should withdraw into the innermost alchemy of the word, and even surrender the word, in this way conserving for poetry its most sacred domain. We should stop making poems second-hand; we should no longer take over words (not even to speak of sentences) which we did not

invent absolutely anew, for our own use. (quoted in Scobie 217)

If we are to bring Ball's thinking in line with Cavell and, in turn, Nichol, then I want to first draw attention to the twin longings I see Ball writing out of: on the one hand there is the longing to annihilate the human, break the human connection with language and relieve it of its signifying function; and on the other hand there is the longing to sink into language and re-discover it "for our own use." But keeping in mind the Cavellian dictum that "to speak is to say what counts," these apparently contradictory forces in Ball's manifesto should be taken as being emblematic of the always present contrary voices (of temptation and correctness) that each of us struggle with, rather than as meaningless or emotionally over-wrought declarations. In fact, a failure to acknowledge that "the negation of the human is also an essential feature of the human" (Cavell, *In Quest* 88) would mean, once again, an attempt to repudiate or transcend the human. Thus, just as Cavell sees Wittgenstein's struggle with the version of himself who masquerades as the interlocutor in *The Investigations* as "both sides in it, both voices . . . which I have called the voice of temptation and the voice of correctness" (*Reader* 326) so too are both voices present in Ball.

Nichol's work also speaks out of both the voices of temptation and correctness, and never more so than in those sound poems dedicated to Hugo Ball. One could even say that in "DADA LAMA: to the memory of Hugo Ball," the earliest of these released on *Borders* in 1967, the voices are audible. I will first lay-out the structure of the first of the poem's six parts since, in this one section, Nichol sets out the techniques he uses throughout the poem to draw our attention to the different aspects of the sounds of words and their contributions to meaning. Nichol begins the section by alternating between the

words ‘hweeee’ and ‘hyonnnn’ and singing each according to pitches assigned to their constitutive sounds (rather than syllables); for example the long ‘e’ of both ‘hweeee’ and of ‘hyonnnn’ have been given the same pitch. This is similar to parts two and four in which Nichol repetitively sounds out ‘ee’ and ‘ah,’ moving up and down by three tones which, on the page, is signified by a shift from lower-case to upper-case. The section then shifts its emphasis to the syllabic construction of words rather than their pitch with the repetitive rhythmic speaking of ‘tubadididdo’ which is reminiscent of Ball’s “Gadji Beri Bimba”; in fact the influence of Ball is even more evident in the third section in which Nichol playfully generates sounds by aural association--“lindle leave lipf / lat lina tanta / tlalum cheena.” Similarly Ball writes:

Dada Johann Fuchsgang Goethe. Dada Stendhal. Dada Dalai Lama, Buddha, Bible, and Neitzsche. Dada m’dada. Dada mhm dada da. It’s a question of connections, and of loosening them up . . . I don’t want words that other people have invented. All the words are other people’s inventions. I want my own stuff, my own rhythm, and vowels and consonants too . . . (221)

It is as if Nichol was thinking of this very passage as he named the poem, as he wrote it, as he ended the first section by transforming ‘fts’ to ‘fits’ to ‘flits.’ And it is as if, in the sixth and final section, Nichol was also thinking of Ball’s further assertion that “[Dada] will serve to show how articulated language comes into being . . . a line of poetry is a chance to get rid of all the filth that clings to this accursed language . . . I want the word where it ends and begins. Dada is the heart of words” (221). Returning to the long ‘ee’ and the ‘ah,’ moving gradually, sound by sound into ‘freedom’ and finally into ‘free,’

there is the suggestion that through such a playful (but no less systematic) recounting of the sounds of words, of the almost infinitesimally small sounds that suggest other sounds, that mean differently in relation to this sound rather than that, all of which evolve into 'freedom', we have arrived at the heart of words. But also, and perhaps more importantly, we have arrived at recognizable words which suddenly introduce into the poem referentiality as well as the suggestion of an overall determinate meaning.

Turning back to Cavell, the meaning that suggests itself to me is that everything preceding 'freedom' and 'free' is an expression of the temptation, or rather the actual attempt, to be free of meaningful speech, to further radicalize the distance between ourselves, the language that we use and so our connection with others; and given that such an attempt is one that seeks to turn language into an entity that exists wholly apart from us, that systematically alters it to create something wholly new, it is also an attempt to reduce language to the "merely" conventional. Given this thrust of the poem, it is no wonder that Stephen Scobie has called Nichol's early sound poems "modest, both in their aims and in their achievements . . . [which] amount to little more than expressionist gimmicks . . ." (63); even Nichol himself later dismissively describes his writing of "DADA LAMA" as "wringing [sic] a formal number of semantic or phonemic changes" ("From Sound" 335). But I would argue that the carefully permutated sounds and rhythms of the poem can actually be seen as a telling account of the distance from language and the world that comes about as a result of the very human repudiation of the human, the desire for transcendence, for language and humans to be more than they are. And furthermore, in recounting this the poem actually leads us back to articulateness and the realm of shared language which allows us to know (to the extent that knowing is

possible) others and ourselves, and for us to be understood. This is the very same freedom, the same home offered to us by the voice of correctness.

- ESCAPE FROM THE REFERENT page 41
- SOUND & MEANING page 96

BODY OF LANGUAGE

Although most of Nichol's later sound poems are concerned more with narrative than sound, pieces such as "White Text Sure: Version 1" (1978) and "Generations Generated" (1977) are the strongest examples of listening and acknowledgment, and for me represent the culmination of Nichol's poetics of sound. "White Text Sure," for one, is the most free-form sound poem in his oeuvre of solo pieces, the very openness of which seems also to bring with it an exploration of sound so deeply of the body that it is imperceptibly, sometimes even not at all, in the realm of language. Beginning with variations of breath, the poem combines and alternates between an all-encompassing wind, whistles, snorts, crackles, grunts, sounds of terror and agony, mumbled words, all of which finally returns to breath; and what the listener hears from such a wave of sound is an absolute immediacy between sound and body that, in so fully acknowledging the body in its entire range of basic physiological states, mimics the origins of life and, with only a hint of the presence of language, the intertwining of life with breath and words. In the most fundamental way, this poem is Nichol's most powerful attempt to pull us back into the pulse of life which resides in sound, and, in turn, back into our own sounds which reside in our bodies.

"Generations Generated" is also grounded in the body, but only insofar as it begins in the body with Nichol chanting. This poem primarily centres around an attempt to achieve a state of non-self through the rhythmic and seemingly endless chanting of the names of Egyptian Pharaohs, such as "Usikhaure-meramun / setpenre-Setnakhte / merrere-meramun / Ramesse-hekaon" that have been subjected to the maximum number of possible permutations. Beginning with a barely perceptible chromatic descent, Nichol

goes on to repeat the phrase over and over, his chanting also going through cycles of being increasingly/decreasingly rhythmic, increasingly/decreasingly melodic. After what could be ten minutes of this repetitive cycling not only does Nichol's voice take on the tone of liturgy, sounding as if it were pointed to a heaven, but the listener finds he/she is forced to go beyond boredom, beyond a search for representational meaning and simply settle into the poem, sounds and music itself; I think, too, that what almost always results is a feeling of one-ness with one's body (one cannot resist swaying and humming), one-ness with language (the sound, texture and life of words), as well as reverence.

Such a belief in the inseparability between language and our bodies, between sound, the sounds/breathings of our words and the sounds/breathings of life can be traced back to Nichol's earliest forays into sound poetry; in 1966 Nichol wrote:

. . . you're behind the words. come out with them. be in them. let the sounds come. the meaning will follow . . . a word is a word. a word doesn't matter. put yourself in it. a word matters. language is a testing first, then a gesture, then a pathway to the heart. listen to the heart murmur. if you're there you breathe. breathing is a kind of love. a love of living. a giving. breathe. ("Some Notes," unpaginated)

It can also be traced back to Artaud, who declared that the "language of the theatre . . . turns words into incantations . . . It ultimately breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of the language . . ." (91), and it can especially be traced back to Ball whose description of his reading of "Gadji Beri Bimba" sounds like a description of "Generations Generated":

. . . [I] began slowly and solemnly... The stresses became heavier, the

emphasis was increased as the sound of the consonants became sharper . . .
. The heavy vowel sequences and the plodding rhythm of the elephants
had given me one last crescendo. But how was I to get to the end? Then I
noticed that my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of
priestly lamentation . . . (71)

I would argue, though, that what all three writers are circling around and experimenting with is a nondual relationship with words--one that, through listening to words and sounding words, treats them as bearers of truth, and sees them as much alive as things, events or beings.

- LISTENING AS READING page 59
- NONDUALITY (IN CAVELL) page 70

THE CARTESIAN SKEPTIC

But when Cavell (speaking through Wittgenstein) speaks of philosophy and of philosophy's skeptical impulse he is speaking largely of epistemology and its dictate, transcendental logic, as we have come to know it since Descartes made his mark on modern western philosophy. Descartes' *Meditations* is a quintessential example of such concerns, exemplifying his attempt to explain and validate how we know what we know by way of "a process of systematic doubt designed to separate out what is solid and what is unreliable in the system of commonsense beliefs . . ." (Kenny 203). But what such 'Cartesian doubt' degenerates into almost inevitably is a universal, paralysing doubt from which no thing and no person is exempt. An example of such paralysing doubt is the infamous dreaming argument in the first meditation; although the dreaming argument is ostensibly an attempt to establish a philosophical method which rigorously isolates us from our senses so that we may arrive at objective, *a priori* truths, what in fact becomes *a priori* is doubt: we can be certain that our senses cannot be trusted to give us accurate information about ourselves and the world. Descartes uses the example of "sitting by the fire wearing a dressing gown" (Descartes 13) which may *seem* to be undeniable but for the fact that one might be dreaming--in which case neither the fire, the dressing gown, nor whether one is sleeping or awake can be proven; therefore, any judgement at all, any existential claim made by us, is also suspect. To reinforce his argument Descartes then outlines a scenario dominated by a malicious demon "who has employed all his energies in deceiving me. I shall consider the sky, earth, colours, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the deceptive games of my dreams, with which he lays snares for my credulity. I will regard myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, no

senses, but as nevertheless falsely believing that I possess all these things” (15).

Although *Meditations* (miraculously) ends on a note of certainty (both “I” and God exist), the first meditation is worth mentioning here since it so clearly represents the full weight of the madness in such all-encompassing and relentless denial of ourselves, our limitations, and of any sure connection between us, another, and the outside world.

Cavell writes in *Disowning Knowledge*:

The issue posed is no longer, or not alone, as with earlier skepticism, how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world . . . In Descartes’ thinking, the ground, one gathers, still exists, in the assurance of God. But Descartes’ very clarity about the necessity of God’s assurance in establishing a rough adequation or collaboration between our everyday judgements and the world . . . means that if assurance in God will be shaken, the ground of the everyday is hereby shaken. (3)

- LOSING THE PRESENT page 64

CAVELL AND/ON DERRIDA

While McCaffery's criticism of Dada's and Futurism's reliance on voice and "its quality as ontologic presence" obviously stems from an engagement with Derrida and his deconstruction of the logic of identity, origin and essence, it is startling considering that only five years earlier he wrote that "rhythmic sound is not an artifact but a profound instance of the human self. it is our simple rhythmic identity . . . in liberating sound we are discovering these basic forces for ourself . . ." ("for a poetry" 275). In fact, in a footnote in his interview with Nichol in "Improvising Sound" McCaffery makes it clear that the notion of presence is the most fundamental problem facing sound poetry:

But the fundamental misgiving...is that it [sound poetry] has not dealt with this fundamental issue of presence and in that way is the big ideological contamination that's gone on for 2000 years. I say that presence is a contaminant because it's a way that sound poetry connects with philosophical notions, political notions, economic notions, the whole superstructure within western society, western culture, western economics that is based on a sense of presence . . . And whereas in sound poetry we kicked out meaning, we did not kick out the fullness and the plenitude. We kicked out meaning to get a closer kind of immediate presence between sound and energy and the physical body. And I think that restored a very conservative notion of the self . . . There's still the sense of the enunciator and the enunciated. And that's where my reservation around sound poetry is. (15)

This shift in McCaffery's thinking highlights both some ways in which he obviously diverges from Nichol as well as some ways in which Derrida's project diverges from

Cavell's.

While both Derrida and Cavell (and so McCaffery and Nichol) are concerned with dual thinking that has arisen out of metaphysics--a way of thinking that excludes complexity, mediation and difference--Derrida has, very generally speaking, attempted to dismantle the dualism inherent in metaphysics by attacking notions of essentialism, presence, the simple division of speech and writing; Cavell, on the other hand, has attacked dualism through the concepts of the everyday and acknowledgement. Of course I cannot hope to accurately summarize, or even engage with, the thought of both philosophers in this thesis, but I do want to point to the fact that the convergences and divergences between Cavell and Derrida could in fact serve to radically challenge each other, McCaffery and Nichol, and even some basic premises of this thesis. For instance, while Derrida and McCaffery link presence with essence, Cavell and Nichol link presence with a presentness in and to the world that is intended to engender a breakdown in the separation between self and other; it would seem that the thinking of the latter two is the very antithesis of essence, and yet 'presentness' could seem to presuppose a self that exists in a succession of moments (i.e. an essential self existing in dual rather than nondual time). However, and this is where the differences between Derrida and Cavell become most intriguing, the nondualist approach (which I have aligned elsewhere with Cavell) sees presence as the best way to *overcome* dualism.

Writes René Muller:

Presence is the negation or canceling of alienation, of separation from the world, from others who share that world, and, ultimately, from ourselves.

Presence defeats the dualist division of mind-body, self-world, consciousness-unconsciousness, and the other dichotomies created by rationalistic and logical thinking. The self is repossessed, and re-presented to the world, so it can be present in and to it. (29-30)

Admittedly, this still does not adequately address the picture of an essential self that is lurking behind presence. Cavell, however, in a recent essay on Derrida's "Signature Event Context" better relays, and practically speaks for Nichol, as to how it is that one can see oneself as having a self without engaging in essentialism:

I keep coming back to aspects of the idea that the having of a language is an allegory of the having of a self . . . The question comes up in the Austin-Derrida material when I say that Austin is aware not just that I abandon my words to others but that I am abandoned to them, in them . . . I recognize my words as mine when I see that I have to forgo them to use them . . . Now suppose that this having by giving . . . is allegorized in every syllable that escapes you. Then the having of a self is allegorized in every syllable . . . the self is--is identified as what is--breathed in and out.

(Philosophical 103)

While, as Cavell himself writes, there is "no position from which to *settle* this systematic turning" (*Philosophical 45*) on the concepts of presence, writing and voice in Derrida and Austin, it is crucial that the rich contradictions and possibilities suggested by the combination of Derrida and Cavell, McCaffery and Nichol are at least gestured towards.

- NONDUALITY (IN CAVELL) page 72

CAVELLIAN SKEPTICISM

Throughout three of his major books, *The Claim of Reason*, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, and *Disowning Knowledge*, the American language philosopher Stanley Cavell explores the relation between language, world, and philosophical skepticism in terms of Wittgenstein's notion of language games. He does so in order to repeatedly demonstrate that the skeptical impulse underlying philosophy's (as well as modernity's) understanding of the nature of language and the world is one that, while attempting to satisfy human longings for "true" knowledge, actually deprives both words and world of life. You will see in other sections how this skepticism amounts to a repudiation of what both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Cavell call 'criteria'--a refusal of the human which is manifested in attempts either to speak outside language-games or to overcome the externality of the world (a denial of the fact of separateness as much as connection).

- [CARTESIAN SKEPTICISM](#) page 27
- [JEALOUSY & DEATH](#) page 56
- [EXILE & HOME](#) page 42
- [BALL IN NICHOL](#) page 19
- [LOSING THE PRESENT](#) page 64

DADA AND CHANCE

Many Dadaists saw chance as a method of art production *par excellence*: chance methods would always produce something new, something independent of the creator and so ostensibly independent of tradition and conventional (read: harmful) ways of thinking. Chance not only could be used in the service of non-conventional ways of thinking, but, in its apparent obliviousness to individual human will and consciousness, chance was also the ideal means to turn away from determinist doctrines and rule-bound thought. Dadaists did not, however, hit upon the concept of chance by chance--no doubt as a result of the increasing influence of eastern art on western European art practices; for example in *Dada: art and anti-art*, Hans Richter makes a connection early on between the Dadaist concept of chance and the Chinese view of chance. In fact I would argue that the Chinese oracle *I Ching*--though a much more systematic method of chance than the systems devised by Dadaists--is a clear example of such a view. The *I Ching* is made up of sixty-four symbols (hexagrams); the user asks a question in advance and randomly (though not without method) chooses a hexagram whose symbolic meaning answers the question. Similarly, here is how chance was typically used at the beginning of Dada:

Dissatisfied with a drawing he had been working on for some time, Arp finally tore it up, and let the pieces flutter to the floor . . . Some time later he happened to notice these same scraps of paper as they lay on the floor, and was struck by the pattern they formed. It had all the expressive power that he had tried in vain to achieve. How meaningful! How telling! . . . He accepted this challenge from chance as a decision of fate and carefully

pasted the scraps down in the pattern which chance had determined.

(Richter 51)

Although it was mostly in the visual arts that chance techniques were more fully systematized in a way that attempted to ensure that the user (“the artist”) was extricated from the creating process, chance was also taken up in the literary arts. Tristan Tzara was probably one of the first of the dadaists to use chance as a way to generate poems whose language resisted subsumption by dominant meaning-making processes. Tzara writes in “TO MAKE A DADAIST POEM”:

Take a newspaper.
 Take some scissors.
 Choose from this paper an article the length you want to make your poem.
 Cut out the article.
 Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put
 them all in a bag.
 Shake gently.
 Next take out each cutting one after the other.
 Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.
 The poem will resemble you.
 And there you are--an infinitely original author of charming sensibility,
 even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd. (Tzara 39)

This both was and was not a denial of individual consciousness and all its attendant conventions surrounding notions of an author, individuality, authentic poetic genius through systematic chance-operations. On the one hand the chance-generated poem was intended to better get at who that ‘you’ was (“the poem will resemble you”) at the same time as it was intended to transcend the ‘you’ and the ‘I’ and the arrogance in seeing ‘you’ and ‘I’ as single, individual and unique entities. The chance poem also was and was not a flat-out denial of the human in favor of passive submission to a unknowable, universal machine. Unlike enlightenment-based scientifico-rationalist

discourses which dismantled God as the transcendental source of knowledge and truth only to replace it with the transcendent objective gaze, the mechanism of chance operations deliberately ruptures linearity, cause and effect, signifier and signified, the Cartesian dictum of mind over matter (and so dualistic thought in general) in order to emphasize the essence of the thing, the human itself, the event, the word *as it exists in flux* . Thus chance has nothing at all to do with unknown causes but more with the nature of a world in process--a world which may be chaotic and ultimately unknowable, and this is its 'overriding order.'

- PARTS OF A WHOLE page 79

DEATH AND JEALOUSY IN bpNICHOL

Although not overt, there is a possessiveness (that could be named jealousy) about some of bpNichol's sound poems, in addition to (more overt) references to death, disappointment and betrayal, especially in his early sound poetry and in the first two books of *The Martyrology*. Similarly, there are as many instances throughout this early work which are attempts to animate the world, tease out a voice as much as there are refusals of the kind of exclusive intimacy that propels so many of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists on to their own ends. Although Nichol's declaration in 1975 of the poetics informing his work--that "you see it, and you acknowledge that you are not it. It is it, you are you . . ." ("Interview" 341)--seems clearly to bespeak health and sanity, there are many instances in which this same poetics is used to give voice to (or impose a voice on) the world; in so doing, Nichol's poetics also bespeaks the kind of unhealth and madness that results from a refusal of the human, from what I have called a (jealous, possessive) desire for final knowledge and certainty, for something above and beyond the human.

I begin this section with *The Martyrology* because it provides a narrative cohesiveness to ground what I have said about Cavell that is not as easily done by quoting from his sound poetry which is almost inherently un-quotable (Paul Dutton, speaking of Steve McCaffery's sound poems, observes that "you've got to be on the right platform at the time his train passes through or rely on secondary retrieval by tape" (quoted in Jaeger 102)). Also, the themes of exile and alienation all continually resurface throughout the entirety of *The Martyrology*; Scobie writes that its saints "are, most characteristically, alone" and in being "exiled from Cloudbottom, their ideal lost community," they are also in perpetual isolation from each other (Scobie 115).

However, Nichol also has said that *The Martyrology* initially grew out of his work with sound and concrete poetry, and so Books 1 & 2 serve as a rich subtext to and poetic statement of what he was doing elsewhere at the time. In an interview with Raoul Duguay in the fall of 1973--one year after the publication of Books 1 and 2--he states:

well *The Martyrology* is like a journal--a journal of why i write the other type of writing . . . when i look at *The Martyrology* now what i see is my own personal journey thru life out of a very split view of things--being very distant from oneself & from the world around me--to more and more involvement with the world around me--& to a greater & greater involvement with the--with the very core of language. (30)

I see the sort of distance from oneself and the world that Nichol was speaking of in the *Brick* interview as being symptomatic of a dualistic thinking which not only insists on a wide-reaching process of externalization but also, at least according to its defining dictum, *Cogito ergo sum*, brings on a sense of profound disconnection and exile from the physical world, others and oneself; within the context of Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein-inspired work, this "duality that does not see" (as Nichol calls it in Book 2) is synonymous with skepticism. And, as I have tried to make clear elsewhere, since the skeptical impulse cannot be annihilated altogether without annihilating the human, and so is always present, the themes of death, disappointment, and betrayal related to such a split, as well as a double-edged use of animism mentioned above, serve to enrich our understanding of Nichol's endeavor as being a thoroughly *human* endeavor; this confirms once again that his work in sound necessarily represents voices of both temptation and correctness. As Thoreau writes early on in *Walden*, "Not till we are lost,

in other words, not till we have lost the world . . . do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (24); for me, in the context of Nichol’s poetics, this means not a linear journey from lost to found, from one side of the Cartesian split to the other, but the necessity to live as both lost and found, to see oneself simultaneously as both these things.

On the one hand lostness as an extension of a lost present, lost presentness, lost in the philosophical turnings of the problems of knowing and living, all of which fall into the second sense in which the skeptic is ‘death-dealing’; and on the other hand finding, finding oneself in the present as present: both are equally touchstones of the first three books of *The Martyrology*. But I would say that the jealousy of otherness, unappeasable desire to completely possess both language and a complete knowledge of the world--all characteristics of lostness--are the most predominant and powerful strands that Nichol self-consciously works out in Book 1, and it is the meshing of both resonances of lost and found (or, in Cavellian terms, the expression of both voices of temptation and correctness) that form the sounding note of Book 2, and especially in Book 3 that the redemption and healing most fully takes place.

- ANIMATING ANIMISM page 13
- NARRATING DOUBT page 70

EARLY ISMS

In the early part of the twentieth century, there are important ‘isms’ that later proved to be influential and so should be mentioned. Dada is the most frequently cited, especially the sound practitioners of Zurich Dada who were Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, and Tristan Tzara. While Ball is the self-proclaimed inventor of ‘Verse ohne Worte’ (poetry without words), Huelsenbeck ‘sang’ his poems and beat them into near nonsense with a large tomtom, and Tzara, in Hans Richter’s words, “declaimed, sang and spoke . . . and punctuated his performances with screams, sobs and whistles” (19)--the collective energies of which created “a high energy, performance oriented cacophony of whistling, singing, grunting, coughing and speaking . . . Defying categorization as either theatre, music or poetry, it emphasized the improvisatory, spontaneous and aleatoric possibilities of multivocal expression.” (McCaffery et al, *Sound Poetry* 8) Although not from Zurich, Kurt Schwitters (painter, publisher, poet) also played a central role in sounding Dada from the city of Hanover. His performance piece (a poem?) “Ursonate” (meaning ‘primeval sonata’) is a phenomenal four-movement sonata of pure sound and language. And as it was inspired by Raoul Hausmann’s “f m s b w”, we are also brought to Berlin Dada and the creation of the optophonetic poem. According to Hausmann:

The poem is an act consisting of respiratory and auditive combinations, firmly tied to a unit of duration . . . In order to express these elements typographically . . . I had used letters of varying sizes and thicknesses which thus took on the character of musical notation. Thus the optophonetic poem was born. The optophonetic and the phonetic poem

are the first step towards totally non-representational, abstract poetry.

(quoted in Richter 121)

- FUTURISM page 49
- PERFORMANCE page 83
- PERFORMING CONCRETE page 80

ESCAPE FROM THE REFERENT

This inability to escape from the authority of the written word (and of its conventional function as signifier) is not unlike how Dadaists such as Hugo Ball desired to “no longer take over words . . . which we did not invent absolutely anew, for our own use” (quoted in Scobie 217), but, as Steve McCaffery declares, “[f]or all their subversive accomplishments, Dada and Futurist sound poems fail to escape an ultimate organization by the signifier . . . Ball’s verse without words, for instance, is testimony to the omnipresent possibility, in cacophony and gibberish, of language returning in either recognizable words or a comprehensible “syntax” suggestive of an unknown language” (“Voice in Extremis” 164). And thus, McCaffery concludes, “[d]espite their celebration of non-sense and attendant consecration of orality, Dada and Futurism did not provoke a disavowal of the written . . .” (165-166). However, while this may be true of writers such as Ball and Khlebnikov, this is not to say that sound poems such as Nichol’s “Eight Part Suite” also fail to escape the written word and referentiality for, as I have said in “Exile and Home” and “A noun is a verb to be,” Nichol frequently takes on a Wittgensteinian approach, and as such everything about his work is always in the context of language; even when he attempts to escape language-games the work is still very much *of* language. McCaffery’s other conclusion (which also indirectly addresses Nichol) is that Dada’s and Futurism’s effect on “vocality is that voice retains its quality as ontologic presence with the mandate to communicate at least a semantic suggestion” (164).

- CAVELL AND/ON DERRIDA page 29

EXILE AND HOME

“What brings on skepticism,” Cavell writes, “is the impression that ‘I must empty out *my* contribution to words, so that language itself, as if beyond me, exclusively takes over the responsibility for meaning’ . . .” (*Reader* 339); in this way denying skepticism or the attempt to take on an anti-skeptical stance merely begs the skeptical question, reiterates and perpetuates the violence inherent to (any) philosophy which takes as a given that access to truth and knowledge is hindered by ourselves and our participation in the world, in our language. Rather, as Nichol puts it, we must become ever more involved with “the very core of language” which means accepting the nature of our relation to words.

Words come to us from a distance; they were there before we were; we are born into them. Meaning them is accepting that fact of their condition. To discover . . . what we are saying, is to discover the precise location from which it is said; to understand why it is said from just there, and at that time. (Cavell, *Reader* 291)

I should point out now that the intersection of Cavell (as a reader and scholar of Wittgenstein) and Nichol is not coincidental since Nichol, on several occasions, has positioned his own work within a Wittgensteinian framework. In another interview in 1974, Nichol declares in almost the same terms as Cavell that “. . . the fact is, the language is there before me. I’m born into the language community. The language has a history of its own. I have things I can learn, if I sit down and let myself play with it-- which is more or less the motivation behind getting into concrete, getting into sound . . .” (“Interview” 334). But the most important tenet that Nichol and Cavell share—and this

too is implied in the foregoing quotation--is that a systematic investigation of our words (of, for example, the sounds of our words) is a process of discovery by which not only our words become known to us but we too become known to ourselves. Or, alternatively, that our words and world can only return from the exile they have been driven to (I mean the exile that comes of the attempt to empty out the ineluctable presence of self from our words and world) if we take upon ourselves the task of listening to our words, recounting, recalling the ways in which we use each one. Conversely, the tendency to think of ourselves as individuated autonomous beings in a world that exists outside of ourselves (what Cavell draws out in the opening quotation) means that we deny the fact that "communication hangs together with community" (Mulhall 11), and so, in mute isolation, stop listening to our words; this is a tendency that must continually be fought against.

In his essay "Declining Decline" Cavell best characterizes this tendency towards exile as a struggle between the voices of temptation and correctness--between the philosophical thinker who believes she can gain possession of a thing's essence by separating the thing from its word, exiling it from its everyday use to the realm of the metaphysical, and the proponent of ordinary language whose (correct) desire it is to faithfully find the home language game of 'the thing.' That is, the temptation towards transcendence, metaphysics, is a manifestation of the attitude inherent to western philosophy in general which takes as a given that access to truth and knowledge is hindered by illusion; this is also what Cavell (and Wittgenstein) mean by our enduring refusal of the ordinary and the everyday, the two very things which constitute correctness. The ordinary, the everyday is not simply the status quo, the banal or the

mundane, but--placing both in the lineage of late romantic writers like Emerson and Thoreau--an acceptance of the ordinary and the everyday is an acceptance of the finitude and limits to one's humanity, and under this rubric would fall the banal, the mundane, the common, the low (in the sense of a downward transcendence).

But first, 'temptation': with its valences of bait, lure, provocation, appeal and captivation, it is that which takes one nowhere, to no-place; obviously it is not at the place of correctness, but neither is it a diametrically opposed 'somewhere else.' It is neither this nor that because it is only the mere enticement or fascination surrounding the myth of being in a better place or of being a better or a different person; moreover, strictly speaking, temptation does not imply satiation--it merely promotes possibility while precluding realization. But the idea of no-place that lures us into exile is not what we are tempted by (though this may sometimes be the case); rather the gradual slide to no-place begins the moment at which we repudiate criteria. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell writes:

Criteria are 'criteria for something's being so,' not in the sense that they tell us of a thing's existence, but of something like its identity, not of its *being* so, but of its being *so*. Criteria do not determine the certainty of statements, but the application of the concepts employed in statements.

(44-45)

Criteria, then, guarantee only the nature and identity of things ("its being *so*") and not the certainty of a thing's existence ("its *being so*"). And since this further implies that concepts, as they are defined by criteria, are inseparable from meaning and context (meaning *is* use, *is* context), the meaning of concepts always stands in relation to a

complex web of interconnected *human* constructs that have been established by way of universal agreement--‘agreement’ here consisting as much of the act of coming to agree as the state of being in agreement, and ‘the state of being in agreement’ is as much a result of the social as of the natural, the biological. This is an important, and frequently misunderstood, aspect of both Cavell’s and Wittgenstein’s work; since the concepts of criteria and agreement are paramount to the overarching notion of language games, they have frequently been taken to stand for a theory of language in the vein of relativism--a model of language based on socially convened (and so arbitrary) rules. Anthony Kenny writes:

. . . the comparison of language to a game was not meant to suggest that language was a pastime, or something trivial: on the contrary, it was meant to bring out the connection between the speaking of language and non-linguistic activities. (163)

But Kenny’s conclusion--that “the speaking of language is part of a communal activity, a way of living in society which Wittgenstein calls a ‘form of life’” (163)--fails to address the fact that this way of life, our form of life that is wrapped around and inside language, does not merely extend along a horizontal axis, the social, but along the vertical as well, the biological form of life we call human. Undoubtedly there are many instances within the playing of language-games in which agreement is or must be arrived at, and in which some order or structure is consciously imposed, but this sort of agreement logically cannot continue indefinitely: it is human nature, being what it is, which makes the concepts of language, game, agreement and criteria intelligible or useable at all.

. . . we are thinking of convention not as the arrangements a particular culture has found convenient . . . for effecting the necessities of human

existence, but as *those forms of life which are normal to any group of creatures we call human*, any group about which we will say, for example, that they *have* a past to which they respond, or a geographical environment which they manipulate or exploit in certain ways for certain humanly comprehensible motives. (Cavell, *Claim* 110-111, my emphasis)

Given that criteria not only draw contextually-bound lines of relation between language and the world, but, perhaps more importantly, criteria reflect how it is, what it means, to be human, when the skeptic takes criteria to be other than these two things--takes criteria to be that which confers certainty of a thing's existence--they repudiate criteria; and a repudiation of criteria means a repudiation of the human. As Stephen Mulhall writes, "in asking criteria to do what they cannot intelligibly be asked to do but taking that inability as a failure, the skeptic in effect repudiates *our* criteria" (164, my emphasis). That we conceive of the world like this rather than like that, that we agree (at all) on the criteria by which things fall under certain concepts and why, are in themselves expressions of human interests; simply said, "[to] speak is to say what counts."

Conversely, a refusal to say what counts amounts on the one hand to the longing to be free of the responsibility of meaningful speech, the result of which is not so much (literal) silence as it is speaking words empty of their meaning, using words apart from *how* they are used.

Since criteria outline the limits and possibilities of both language and our human form of life, the skeptic's insistent refusal to say what counts places themselves outside of language-games and amounts to an exile from words, oneself and others: in other words, the skeptic exists in an all-embracing state of being away. Mulhall writes:

. . . any attempt to speak outside language-games will result in a freezing or fixation of the world, because to speak outside language-games is to use words apart from and in opposition to the complexities of practical interaction with an active world which are precisely what the notion of a language-game is designed to capture . . . apart from that life both words and world are frozen . . . themselves deprived of life. (Mulhall 152)

And while the overarching impetus behind the struggle with temptation and exile is the perennial human desire to speak outside of language-games, it is precisely the resistance to this temptation through a return to everyday life by way of their recounting (the invocation of the voice of correctness) that leads us back home.

- A NOUN IS A VERB TO BE page 7
- BALL IN NICHOL page 19
- EXILE & HOME page 42
- JEALOUSY & DEATH page 56
- SOUND & MEANING page 96
- SOUNDING DOUBT page 100

FOUR HORSEMEN

Throughout these nodes one can see that Nichol's participation in the Four Horsemen on the one hand had a profound affect on all aspects of his solo work, ranging from his method of notation, to an emphasis on an acknowledgment of others, otherness, interconnectivity, and presentness; on the other hand the formation of the Four Horsemen presented the opportunity for Nichol to explore sound in a context that necessitated that state he attempted to achieve as a soloist. In *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*, Nichol and McCaffery define their work by these same elements, calling their work with the Four Horsemen "an experiment in collective communication, the sensing of changing [sic] biological-emotional states which guide the shifts and structural decisions in their highly improvisatory performances" (17); and in "Improvising Sound" Steve McCaffery iterates that:

. . . it's a situation that is almost like a meditation but a meditation in which it's opening up to other people and sounds . . . It's where I'm listening and contributing to something that I'm not totally in control of. I'm talking now about where I'm working with other people . . . I think it's also much more closer to a situation of survival rather than creation . . . It's more like a survival within slightly sort of predetermined areas, a survival in terms of non-semantic sound, perpetuating a state which could at any moment become a vacuum . . . (13)

- LISTENING page 61
- TIME-LINING page 108

FUTURISM

Also focussing with maximal power on the new, on a fast and powerful future, there were also the futurists who, although showing a preference for the visual arts, made significant phonic experiments. Russian futurists, dominated largely by Vladimir Khlebnikov, sought to annihilate meaning in favour of a poetry of arbitrarily created and “self-sufficient” words; eventually evolving into ‘zaum’, such a poetics of self-sufficiency often produced works of pure sound (consisting, for example, of only vowels). And the Italian futurists, headed by F.T. Marinetti and in fact very distinct from Russian Futurism, developed the concept of ‘parole in liberta’ (words in freedom), denoting a language free of syntactic order (and so, again, sense and meaning). Hugo Ball wrote in his diary on July 9, 1915 of Marinetti’s work:

They are just letters of the alphabet on a page; you can roll up such a poem like a map. The syntax has come apart. The letters are scattered and assembled again in a rough-and-ready way. There is no language anymore. . . Disintegration right in the innermost process of creation.

(Ball 25)

Unfortunately, and ironically in this context, in the process of history-making the futurists’ work with sound has largely become eclipsed by Dada sound experiments.

GRID ART

But there is a great deal more to be said about these seemingly facile pieces. In many of Nichol's experiments with sound the best possible way to acknowledge the noun (which of course also extends to an acknowledgment of the world, the things and persons of the world) without imposing the ego, the 'I', was to write poems by playing games with the words, using rules in such a way that the 'I' simply had no way in. In a poetry seminar held at Simon Fraser University in 1983, Nichol declares about his early work that "a lot of the pieces I did when I began to work in concrete really came out of childhood notions of play . . . came out of a feeling that I was bringing too much to the poem, I wasn't allowing the activity of writing to be its own activity . . . I wanted it to be so that I wasn't dictating." Consequently, Nichol wrote a collection called "Cycles" which was first published in 1965, more "Cycles" being added to the series in subsequent years.

In essence, it ["Cycle #22"] . . . works with the rigid grid you have with the typewriter . . . eventually you just . . . filter the whole text through that grid and once you've reached the end of the filtering process you've reached the end of the poem . . . I suddenly realized that these pieces were sound poems . . . but I'd come at them through the eye so I didn't hear them at first. (Poetry Seminar)

Insofar as cyclical, permutational poems such as "Cycle #22"--as well as other early poems such as "Ballads of the Restless Are" (1967) and "Love Poem for Gertrude Stein" (1969)--are written entirely according to pre-set rules and practices which exclude both the imposition of human will and pre-determined meaning, these pieces embody a

non-Aristotelian logic that inflects, even if it is not reflected in, all of bpNichol's work. Looking at "Cycle #22" as a poem written according to the strict x and y axis of a graph, perfectly enforced by both the metronomic spacing of the typewriter and the almost algebraic rearrangements of the letters: this poem is the "mapping of the space inside the frame onto itself" (Krauss 19) at the same time as it is an arbitrary construction framed by space, and so one that emphasizes all space--all space as unknowable and without origin. As such, when the space inside the frame of the grid is one of letters or words--"drum and a wheel"--as readers we are no longer excavating language for the meanings we assume must rest on the deeper surface upon which the grid has been placed; rather, the introduction of chance into the artistic process means that the poem practically writes itself, which in turn means that since neither reader nor writer are harnessing language to get at the orderly and static universe that the x and y axis of science and math is commonly believed to reflect, meaning rests only on a perpetually shifting surface. This does not necessarily mean that meaning, as such, is being foregrounded so much as it is the mechanisms by which we construct meaning that are being laid bare.

However, while chance-generated art does amount to a "foregrounding of the written sign itself" (Perloff, *Radical* 138) by way of strict adherence to rules, this tendency to confine the poem and divide the poem with a grid, is not a return to formalism. In her discussion of what she calls the "Return of the (Numerical) Repressed" in twentieth century poetry, Marjorie Perloff makes the very important point that choosing to write a sonnet, or a haiku is very different from procedural poetics. While it is true that the rule of sonnet-writing is that one must make the language of the poem

conform to fourteen iambic pentameter lines linked by a particular rhyme scheme, one always knows ahead of time what shape the poem will take as well as its content--which amounts to an intense emphasis on intentionality, an extreme imposition of human will and consciousness on a world that is inherently orderly and causal. Rather, a procedural poetics "is primarily generative, the constraint determining, not what is already fixed as a property of the text, but how the writer will proceed with his composition" (Perloff, *Radical* 139). What is also so interesting about the procedural poem is that, while it turns away from notions of an individual artist who struggles to create an authentic poem, represent an authentic emotion or experience, it is still seen as an expression of authenticity--but it is one that, by taking away the author's position/presumption of authority over the word, is seen to more accurately represent the way things are: a world that is orderly in its arbitrariness at the same time as it and all its constituent parts exist on an infinite plane of relation and interconnection.

- OPENING UP TO CHANCE page 78
- STRUCTURED IMPROVISATION page 105
- TO GET THE 'I' OUT page 111

INSIDE LANGUAGE

As yet another counterpoint to the definition of sound poetry as aural nonsense, one also cannot say, as the editors of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* do, that “when sound for its own sake becomes the principal expressive medium, sometimes even at the expense of lexical sense, then it becomes meaningful to describe a work as sound poetry” (1182)--sound within the context of a sound poem always stands in relation to language, even when it stands outside of lexical sense, and so is never for its own sake.

- 1875 TO 1928 page 6

INSTRUMENT OF SOUND

St. Reat emerges in *The Martyrology* as the healing side of St. Ranglehold and St. And, as the “saint of speech & song” who is on a journey to (re)find the origins of breath. In “Saint Reat and the Four Winds of the World” of Book 1, the narrator begins, “Once upon a time, so the story goes, Saint Reat lost his voice but was given it back on the condition that he go on a quest for the origins of all breath.” There is an obvious connection here between St. Reat and Hopi mythology which locates the origins of all life in bodily sound produced through the throat, and conversely the loss of origins with the loss of life, sound and embodied speech--“i speak lip tongue / no throat // lost touch with / the whole thing // never learned to dance to / my voice / sing / praises / rejoice.” There is also a connection between Reat and Cavell’s (or Wittgenstein’s) notion of home as being present in one’s home language-game and exile as being outside of one’s home language game, and so away from language, world, self, presentness, and community--“wind home / how shall i reach you with all speech gone? . . . never knew this life / because you occupied another . . . let your sounds lead you out of that dead time”; and in “Auguries” of Book 2 Nichol writes, “we were lonely // we had never known home . . . hello you said i could not answer // hello you said the words were empty.” But by the end of Book 2, the narrator begins to find his way out of “that dead time” and back to his home, rooted in right speech alongside Palongawhoya, now turned ‘palongawhoa’--“your name is many as you are the one . . . nothing matters but that He has created / & we sing Him sing His praises . . .”

- PERFORMING CONCRETE page 80

INTERFERENCE

The performance of sound poetry must be live and cannot be interfered with electronically or digitally (for the purposes of enhancement or retrieval), for how else would one become “directly aware that I am alive” (quoted in Melzer 36)? How else could one experience it as a coming-into-the-moment? An experience-of-the-moment through sound? And what about those pulsations, swayings, heavings, vibrations of the body that are the very means of sound, of the production of vocal sounds? Because I am not talking merely about how “. . . the significant fact of the poetry reading is less the presence of the poet than the presence of the poem” (Bernstein, Introduction 13)--I am speaking of the fact that language, as it is inherently constituted in and by sound, is in fact about its humanness, about how it reflects human cultures and so awakens each of us to our own humanity. I am talking about the presence of the performer, the poet equally as much as the poem and its words.

- BALL IN NICHOL page 19
- MACHINE IS/AS/OR HUMAN page 68
- TECHNOLOGY page 106

JEALOUSY AND DEATH

But while in “Cavellian Skepticism” I declared that “criteria outline the limits and possibilities of both language and our ‘form of life,’” this schema inadvertently places language above all else, determinedly skirting around the implications of the exile from world and others that such a willful ignoring of criteria amounts to and which may then surface in language. What is at stake here is not simply a rejection of everyday language which means exile from language and from ourselves--or ‘I am nowhere if I cannot word the world’; and further I am not simply brought back home by way of a methodical restoration of each word to itself. A central tenet of Cavell’s work expands on the idea that skepticism towards language is symmetrical to, and therefore carries the equivalent power of, skepticism towards the world, the things and beings that fill and inhabit it; there is a dehumanization implicit in a forgoing of criteria, and the power of the voice of temptation that brings this about is not limited to the realm of language.

Again, “I lose the world in every impulse to philosophy . . . the loss of presentness . . . is something that the violence of skepticism deepens exactly in its desperation to correct it, a violence assured in philosophy’s desperation to answer or refute skepticism, to deny skepticism’s discovery of the absence or withdrawal of the world, that is, the withdrawal of my presentness to it.” (Cavell, *Reader* 172-173). The impulse to philosophy is not only using words in opposition to how they are normally used, outside of their home language game. Driven by doubt and the need for certainty, it is to tightly grasp the world while still expecting a like response from it in a way that not only makes the skeptic blind to the way the world is, but--in the face of the failure of the world to live up to the impossible demand of a response (and of course only a very particular kind

of response counts as a response for the skeptic)--makes the world go dead for her. S/he is so far from being present to both the world and herself that the loss of both is not even something to be mourned since they are not apparently necessary to accomplishing the certainty she desires: "the world as a whole should be thought of as becoming not so much unknown or unknowable but no longer relevant; he is past caring for it, it is dead to him" (Mulhall 150).

This 'impulse to philosophy' sounds like abstract philosophizing until one turns to Cavell's most provocative work on Shakespeare, in which he illuminates the ways in which tragedy is a working out of skepticism. One of the things he argues for in *Disowning Knowledge* is that Othello embodies the skeptic driven by an unappeasable doubt that impels him, in his mad hysteria, to murder Desdemona; and thus, in her helplessness or inability to give Othello the certainty he desires, or to be possessed entirely by Othello as he wishes (both of which result in her death), Desdemona embodies the skeptic's world. Skepticism, then, is not straightforwardly (as it appears to be) rampant intellectuality which may be (loosely, ineffectively) countered with a turn towards irrationality, the body, or holism. ". . . [S]kepticism's 'doubt' is motivated not by (not even where it is expressed as) a (misguided) intellectual scrupulousness but by a (displaced) denial, by a self-consuming disappointment that seeks world-consuming revenge." (*Disowning* 6) Undoubtedly *Othello* may *still* be understood as a case of words being understood and used in opposition to their home language-game, but it is also (or more) a case of Othello rejecting the criteria by which things, people, the world *can* be known.

- DEATH & JEALOUSY IN BPNICHOL page 36
- TRAGEDY page 113

LISTENING AS READING

The series of interviews Nichol conducted with ten Canadian sound poets, called “Improvising Sound,” spells out listening/reading in terms of improvisation. Penn Kemp asserts that improvising through sound is “almost the breakdown of consciousness in the bicameral mind and those words are just dropping into the head from some outer place where they’re heard” (8); Gerry Shikatani declares that “the main thing is working with the sense of non-self as performer” (9); and Susan McMaster says that “I’m listening . . . I’m trancing. I’m moving into a bio-feedback system, an environmental feedback system. I’m letting myself be pulled by whatever the creative aspect is rather than pushing it from behind . . .” (24) There is a connection, then, between sound poetry, listening, stream-of-consciousness and a state of non-self, and I would define this connection as sound poetry being the product of a state of non-self--not unlike stream-of-consciousness--that is created through listening as a form of acknowledgment. In these terms we can understand many of Nichol’s sound poems as examples of his attempt to achieve a state of non-self and acknowledge language. I mean that “Love Song for Gertrude Stein” should also be read (we, as listeners, should attempt to acknowledge it) on the one hand as Nichol standing-in, through sound, as Stein, taking on Stein’s emphasis on insistence and stream-of-consciousness as his own, and on the other hand as Nichol standing-in as the words themselves, attempting to acknowledge the words ‘beginning’ and ‘ending’ as entities unto themselves. Similarly, poems such as “Eight Part Suite,” “Meeln” and “Outsize Reference” can also easily be read along the lines of listening and acknowledgment, of Nichol’s reading of the sounds/meaning in ‘th,’ ‘ilneu,’ ‘korf,’ ‘rrrr,’ or ‘hhhhh.’ Moreover, returning to “Improvising Sound,” what

is being acknowledged as language is not only their meaning and sound, but also their “energy field . . . that even within words--the phonemes, the syllables--there’s the overall energy field of the word and then sort of sub-fields as it were . . .” (10) (This makes more sense when one considers it in the context of Charles Olson’s manifesto-like “Projective Verse,” whose first assertion is that “[a] poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader . . . Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge” (52); Olson later asserts that “speech is the ‘solid’ of verse, is the secret of a poem’s energy” (56).)

- BODY OF LANGUAGE page 24
- NONDUALITY (IN CAVELL) page 72
- BALL IN NICHOL page 19
- PERFORMANCE page 83

LISTENING

There is another side to Nichol's reading of "Love Song for Gertrude Stein," "Eight Part Suite," "Meeln" and "Outsize Reference" that is other than a literal reading from a text; 'reading' can mean that the world or the thing is treated like a text insofar as one reads the natural world (as if divining its nature) and spontaneously communicates this reading to listeners, to the audience. This style of reading is exactly equivalent to the redemption from death-dealing skepticism that I have called an acknowledgment of the other, and which I have linked with Cavell's notion of recounting criteria which is in turn linked with home, presentness in time and self, and an animated language and world.

The practice of recovery or reanimation that [Cavell] offers is that of reminding us of the criteria which govern our words, the means by which and the terms in which the things of the world count for us, matter to us; and in reminding us of this, in getting us to acknowledge this, he gives us the opportunity of reviving our interest in the world, of reinvesting it with our care and concern and so reviving our interest in our own lives.

(Mulhall 162)

Acknowledgment, therefore, means acknowledging the other as both separate (acknowledging its nature independent of one's own) and essential to one's own existence (acknowledging the fact of one's need for and attraction to it). Cavell gives the most elucidating explanation of acknowledgment, here called 'empathic projection,' in his earliest major work, *The Claim of Reason*:

. . . the view of others as based upon empathic projection . . . seems to

take the idea of an attitude towards a soul as some appropriateness of my response. But why shouldn't one say that there is a required appropriateness with respect to each breed of thing (object or being); something appropriate for bread, something else for stones . . . something for each human contrivance and for each human condition; and, if you like, on up? For each link in the Great Chain of Being there is an appropriate hook of response. (441-442).

Cavell's *King Lear* essay, "The Avoidance of Love," also clarifies the concept of acknowledgment. He begins by arguing that what is foregrounded in the theatre is a mimetic involvement which is characteristic of our everyday lives: the actor stands-in as the character, and we stand-in through the actor's standing-in to experience similarities between ourselves and the character. However, this is far more than mere identification with the character, as in regarding the other as the same or as in imagining oneself to be thinking or behaving like the other--both of which perpetuate ways of thinking still grounded in the maintenance of a clear separation between self and other; rather, as Cavell writes: "It is in making their present ours, their moments as they occur, that we complete our acknowledgment of them. But this requires making their present theirs. And that requires us to face not only the porousness of our knowledge . . . but the repudiation of our perception altogether." (Cavell, *Reader* 152) And through this standing-in as the other which is a surrender of ourselves, not only do we gain access to the recognition and acceptance of each of us in our shared humanity, but surrender becomes the enabling condition to the creation of an objectifying-distance, granting us clarification of those things about ourselves which we are usually blind to or

self-deceptively unaware.

- FOUR HORSEMEN page 48
- TECHNOLOGY page 106
- TIME-LINING page 108
- TO GET THE 'I' OUT page 111
- STANDING-IN AS THE OTHER page 104
- BODY OF LANGUAGE page 24
- NONDUALITY (IN CAVELL) page 72

LOSING THE PRESENT

The significance of Cavell's work on skepticism and to what I see as
 bpNichol's working out of skepticism is not just that an "inherent aspect of philosophy
 is that access to truth and knowledge is impeded by illusion" (Cavell, *Reader* 323); or
 that our sense of our inability to know, in a final sense, the external world mirrors our
 sense that we also cannot know, finally, the other, another; and it is not just that such
 skepticisms leave us speechless (if our everyday experiences of the world and of others
 in it are suspect then so too is our everyday language: we cannot mean what we say).
 Skepticism is all these things but it is also a 'meta' story of our human subjection to
 doubt and of our "wish to deny the condition of human existence." This is precisely why
 skepticism cannot be countered with anti-skepticism--asserting loudly that "I am
 awake!," or pointing out that 'that is' and 'that is not' merely begs the skeptical question.
 Since "the negation of the human is also an essential feature of the human" (Cavell, *In
 Quest* 88), such negations cannot be countered by further negations without negating the
 human. Essential to both skepticism and anti-skepticism is the loss of the human, the
 loss of the world and our presentness to it and to ourselves.

. . . I lose the world in every impulse to philosophy. . . the loss of
 presentness . . . is something that the violence of skepticism deepens
 exactly in its desperation to correct it, a violence assured in philosophy's
 desperation to answer or refute skepticism, to deny skepticism's discovery
 of the absence or withdrawal of the world, that is, the withdrawal of my
 presentness to it; which for me [also] means the withdrawal of my
 presentness to . . . language. (Cavell, *Reader* 172-173)

Significantly, the re-animation of the human in the face of such skepticism (or even anti-skepticism) is precisely what I see Nichol working towards in his sound poetry--“let your sounds lead you out of that dead time” (*Martyrology* Book 1). Leading into where I see Nichol speaking in tandem with Stanley Cavell: while it is true that they are both concerned with “what challenges one’s humanity . . . and tempts one to excessive despair or to false hope” (Cavell, *Reader* 327), “a logic which makes philosophy [or each of us, as philosophers] appear driven to emptiness” (162), what Nichol and Cavell are most forcefully speaking out against is the violence in our attempts to overcome skepticism. Such violence is expressed either through our complete withdrawal of presentness to and of the world, or through an obsessive grasping and possessiveness of the world and others in it. As both Nichol and Cavell make clear, skeptical doubt renders us inanimate, life-less, and--in one way or another--in exile from words, world, ourselves, others and (more importantly to this study of sound poetry) the sounds of words, world, ourselves, and others. As Charles Bernstein evocatively writes, “In sounding language, we sound the width and breadth and depth of human consciousness--we find our bottom and our top, we find the scope of our ken” (Introduction, *Close Listening* 21).

LOST AS FOUND

Recall Thoreau's assertion that "Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world . . . do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations" (24). I wrote in "Death and Jealousy in bpNichol" that Thoreau's approach to the twin concepts of lost and found fit well with Nichol's poetics insofar as Nichol's writing exemplifies the necessity to live as both lost and found, and I assert this again. It is true that on the one hand the themes of lost and found, or, in Cavellian terms, the voices of temptation and correctness, are present throughout the entirety of Nichol's writing, in both his early and late sound poems, but there is also *humanity* in these poems because they *necessarily* speak out of both voices. While a poem such as "Scruptures--Fifth Sequence," for example, is essentially not a healing text, it is or could be healing insofar as, from the position of the writer, speaking of alienation and exile brings one back into the realm of language and back into the world and its communities of common language-speakers; or, from the position of the reader, our own alienation is given voice and so, in that recognition, we are brought back to life, back to ourselves, from lost to found. Whether consciously working through exile and alienation, as in pieces such as "Son of Sonnet," "Dada Lama," "White Text Sure," and "Generations Generated," or whether being lost himself (or complicit with skepticism), as in such early poems as "Scruptures," I want to make it clear that these distinctions are neither useful nor accurate for describing Nichol's work (as they suggest a progression in his work rather than an ongoing exploration); rather, we ought to approach all of Nichol's sound poems as examples of what it means to be human, to struggle with skepticism, language and knowledge of the world.

- DEATH & JEALOUSY IN BPNICHOL page 36

MACHINE IN/AS/OR HUMAN

In a recent, and revealing essay on sound by Steve McCaffery, “Voice in Extremis,” he lucidly writes in a footnote:

It is frequently argued that twentieth-century sound poetry has been a development of two opposing dispositions: the scientific and the primitive. Beneath this binary are two separate interests: one, an embrace of technology as a positive alliance with the human voice; the other an eschewal of all forms of technological contact. Regarding the first interest, the voice is treated as a material point for departure; for the second it is a still not fully fathomed phenomenon in its basic libidinal-acoustic state. Ellen Zweig offers a peacefully coexistent version of this bifurcation: “Sound poetry explores the human voice as human. Sound poets take language apart to see how it works . . . The poet becomes close to animal, close to child. Sound poetry explores the voice as other. Sound poets record and manipulate the voice . . . They cut the voice into pieces, reverse it, change its speed, make it digital . . .” (176)

- TECHNOLOGY page 106

THE MARTYROLOGY

Once the reader actually begins Book 1, the narrator turns his focus to the saints that eventually lend structure to *The Martyrology*, and it is the combination of the figures of St. And and St. Ranglehold who best embody the exile, lostness, jealousy and possessiveness that is brought on by skeptical doubt.

- SAINT AND page 91
- 'ST.' IN 'STRANGLE' page 94

NARRATING DOUBT

What is evident in Book 1 of *The Martyrology*, and what becomes evident as a driving force behind Nichol's early sound poetry, is the devastation brought about by such a search for certainty which explodes into a mad, Othello-like jealousy; this is an element that is equally as present as, though quite in opposition to, Nichol's attempt to 'heal' the dualistic split and return from exile to presentness.

Beginning with "The Chronicle of Knarn" which is a prelude or introduction to Book 1:

i've looked across the stars to find your
eyes

they aren't there . . .

i think it's over

somewhere a poem dies . . .

i don't know where the rim ends
to look over
into the great rift

i only know i drift without you
into a blue that is not there

The narrator in "The Chronicle of Knarn" tells of how his search (in the stars) for truth and transcendental love collapses into a state of nihilistic nowhere-ness and results in a belief that the only kind of knowledge that *can* be had is this nowhere-ness--in other words, total ungroundedness. It is also no coincidence that the narrator addresses and moves centripetally around an infinitely interpretable "you"--there is no way to tell if "you" is Knarn, an undisclosed other, the world or language; everything, within the

context of the grammar of belief and doubt which for the skeptic is tied up with certainty and the possession of knowledge, has been compressed into a generic other/speaker believed to be capable of responding to the narrator, but who nonetheless cannot. Not only is there no longer any differentiation between things and people, in other words a refusal of criteria, but there is nothing now to hold his desires, his attention or to fuel his quest: “we have moved beyond belief / into a moon that is no longer there.” And following this line with “i used to love you (i think) / used to believe in the things i do / now all is useless repetition,” there is--with the enjambment which creates an extra turn on ‘now’--the related implication that such ungroundedness does not in fact take one away from the pain of belief and doubt but rather, still driven by the same desire for transcendence, flattens the past, present and future into a redundancy of days. The narrator is as enmeshed in skepticism as he ever was, and the more enmeshed he becomes the less life holds for him.

- SOUNDING DOUBT page 100
- ANIMATING ANIMISM page 13
- INSTRUMENTS OF SOUND page 54
- THE MARTYROLOGY page 69

NONDUALITY (IN CAVELL)

Compare these two passages, the first from David Loy's *Nonduality*, the second from Nichol's *The Martyrology* Book 3:

There is a line a famous Zen master wrote at the time he became enlightened which reads: "When I heard the temple bell ring, suddenly there was no bell and no I, just sound." In other words, he no longer was aware of a distinction between himself, the bell, the sound, and the universe. (70-71)

silence & speech
it is one

talking and listening
there is no duality

'i have nothing to say
& i am saying it'

listen to what i don't say
what i do say
listen to me

As Nichol's work circles around an attempt to annihilate dualities, embrace the ordinary and the everyday, to repudiate our perception, make another's present ours and give them/it their/its own present, we see how extensively the concept of nonduality--as an antidote to both skepticism and Cartesian dualism, and as it is found in many eastern philosophies--figures strongly in both Cavell's and Nichol's work. Moreover, put this way, it would also seem that what is at issue here in my comparison of Nichol with Cavell is an alternative vision of the self in relation to the outside world, one that seeks to overcome the barrier that separates the two.

Lines from both writers can easily be drawn to Buddhism (for Nichol the lineage would begin with psychotherapy, chanting, meditation, and, as in the above quote, John Cage; for Cavell it would begin with Wittgenstein and Heidegger), whose central tenet is that a separation between self and the world lies at the heart of our inability to be happy. David Loy writes of nonduality and Buddhism's belief in the necessity to rid ourselves of dualities:

Due to our dualistic, conceptual ways of thinking, we experience the world as a collection of discrete objects interacting in space and time. One of these objects is *me*: I experience myself as a subject looking out at an external world and anxious about my relationship with it . . . The nondualist systems agree that this way of experiencing is not the only possible way, and not the best way, because it involves delusion about the true nature both of the world and of ourselves, and that delusion causes suffering. If our thinking changes . . . we shall experience the world as nonplural and, most important of all, we shall overcome our alienation in realizing our nondual unity with it. (*Nonduality* 36)

Suddenly we can understand exile and alienation not simply as symptoms of skepticism, but as part of skepticism which is in turn a symptom of separateness, of a vision of self divided in two. Moreover, we can also understand home and presentness not just as the dual opposites of exile and alienation, but as the necessary and inextricable counterparts of a self living out these two, simultaneously. While I have drawn on Thoreau as an example of how one comes home to the present, to the everyday when one ceases to see oneself as either lost or found, and instead sees oneself as both these things, Buddhism

also provides a similar example through its pairing of a “Great Death” and a “Great Awakening.”

The Great Death is also the Great Awakening, and the existential awakening to one’s true self is called enlightenment . . . It is the entry into the life of non-duality where one is no longer caught by the play of opposites, where self is not set over against other . . . The Great Awakening that follows the Great Death returns a person to a home ground in this world . . . (Suzuki xvi-xvii)

And further, while I have commented on the remarkable similarity between Cavell’s philosophy of the everyday and Nichol’s declaration that “to glimpse the face of the ordinary is, in fact, to be given something,” (“Narrative” 35-36), we can understand the concept of *satori* in Zen Buddhism as yet another articulation of a nondual vision of the self:

Satori is a conversion, but not one that leads anywhere outside the person or to a “higher” being or “higher” value . . . Zen calls attention to, and puts the ultimate value on, everyday living. It is literally an everyday state of mind. (Muller 21)

Once *satori* is reached, Zen is the most ordinary thing in the world . . . Zen introduces us to the everyday, the ordinary, and shows us how truly extraordinary--and sufficient--this is. We see with new eyes and hear with new ears, so that what was once ordinary is now ordinary and special. (Muller 26)

These comparisons between the philosophy of the everyday, Wittgensteinian

philosophy and eastern philosophy not only provide another philosophical system by which we can understand Nichol's sound poetry; the comparison also serves to widen the range of issues surrounding Nichol's sound poetry from that of being an antidote to skepticism, a panacea for the so-called ills of western philosophy, to being a means to experience, duplicate and encourage nondual perception, thinking, time, space and selfhood. The concept of nonduality that is essential to numerous eastern philosophies is not just an alternative philosophy to western philosophy (ironically it is frequently an 'other' and marginalized philosophy in the west) but it is an alternative way of living and, naturally, of creating/experiencing/understanding art. Just as Hans Richter described Kurt Schwitters' first performance of his "Ursonate" as a moment at which "something had been opened up within [the audience-members], something they never expected to feel: a great joy," (Richter 162-163) so too is nonduality a means of opening ourselves up to the world, to ourselves and others--an 'awakening' in every sense of the word.

- BODY OF LANGUAGE page 24
- STANDING-IN AS THE OTHER page 104

OPEN READING

Rigid notation and reading is something that Nichol gradually moves away from and into a more open style which both allows for a fluid reading (through improvisation) and takes into account the audience's reaction while still remaining within a fixed structure. This move was likely necessitated by his involvement in the Four Horsemen's group performances, the very nature of which demanded an organized structure that had room enough for the performers to respond to each other and to the audience. In 1979 Nichol writes:

once upon a time i used to write out the texts wringing a formal number of semantic or phonemic changes and perform that piece according to that set text (most classically for me is Dada Lama . . .) [but] my poems have evolved more & more into free structures as my grasp of sound, my ability to shape & form the poem according to my physiological response & the audience's physiological response during the reading of it, has grown i could not have gained this grasp had i not gone thru the formal structure first but beyond this in the last year i found my interest in the solo sound poem waning & at the suggestion of Rafael Barreto-Rivera . . . he & i & steve & paul dutton formed a group to work off into the area of group sound poems & we've just begun this fall giving readings under the name THE FOUR HORSEMEN here we have evolved a notational system simply to let ourselves know at which point our voices come together, at which point they follow different courses, while at the same time leaving wide variation in terms of what each voice does in his

section with, of course, an ear to what each other voice is doing . . .

(Kostelanetz 335)

Thus, many of Nichol's poems in the late 70s are written for the Four Horsemen while, as Nichol states on the cover of *Ear Rational*, those that are solo pieces "shift toward the more narrative & prose-based concerns evident in 'Interrupted Nap' & 'Art in Upheaval'"; as such, his method of notation changes from being pictorially and spatially based (in other words, an interpretive reading of what's on the page that is highly subjective) to being largely based on a grid which allows fluidity at the same time as it precisely pinpoints "who's doing what when, with whom, & what elements they have to work with" (*Prose Tattoo* 1). Examples of Nichol notating according to a grid are poems such as "The Dreams Remain," "Another Motive," and "Three Poems"; however, given the Horsemen's emphasis on the absolutely live and un-repeatable performance, no published recordings of these poems exist.

- FOUR HORSEMEN page 48
- PERFORMING CONCRETE page 80

OPENING UP TO CHANCE

Nichol's interest in procedurality and chance grew out of his interest in Dadaists such as Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara and Kurt Schwitters, and feeds into not only his method of composition but his method of notation and dual emphasis in his sound poetry on improvisation and listening. In "A System of Notation for a Poetry of Sound" Nichol writes that "chance is a key factor. put chance into the poem. read the poem in any sequence of units." And in "Some Notes on a Personal Movement Towards a Poetry of Sound" he declares in the voice of a healer:

don't inform. create. be open to chance. be open to change. there's more than one way to approach the poem. let the feelings thru. let the sound out. locate yourself somewhere in your core. the poem comes from there. it's sound first. it was sound first. it will become words later. find your own sound. relax. rest. now speak in the calmness of your sound. listen to your own words. (unpaginated)

- BALL IN NICHOL page 19
- PARTS OF A WHOLE page 79
- GRID ART page 50
- TO GET THE 'I' OUT page 111
- DADA AND CHANCE page 33

PARTS OF A WHOLE

If one accepts chance as a universal ordering principle (as many Dadaists did), then the process of creating a work of art that is aligned with chance (and that is something distinct from chance events in everyday life, in which case either nothing or everything could be art) must be one that is governed by a strict structural principle that not only excludes the creator but also excludes the ordinary, the 'natural,' the everyday world. Thus, one can see a gradual shift in Dada art from free association and automatic drawing and writing (later taken up by surrealism) to the intersection of organization with chance--organization being the only way to actively participate in an instance of chance in art at the same time as avoid interfering in the unveiling process.

“Organization submitted to chance. Chance gave variety to organization . . . a kind of controlled freedom or emancipated discipline within which chance could be given a comprehensible meaning” (Richter 61-62)

- TO GET THE 'I' OUT page 111
- OPEN READING page 76

PERFORMING CONCRETE

“Love Song for Gertrude Stein,” along with “Scaptures: fifth sequence,” “Cycle #22 ” and much of Nichol’s solo work in the late 70s that appears on *Ear Rational* are also visually-based (if not visual poems). There is, in fact, a long-standing relationship between visual poetry and sound poetry that goes back at least to Italian Futurism’s (or F.T. Marinetti’s) ‘parole in liberta’ (words in freedom) and Kurt Schwitters and Raoul Hausmann’s ‘scores’ of their sound poems which, more than contributing to sound poetry, influenced the visual notation of poems--“It was an attempt at syntactic explosion, at the liberation of the word from all linear bondage and the consequent conversion of page, from a neutral surface holding neutral graphic signs, into a dynamic field of typographic and sonographic forces . . . “ (Bernstein, Introduction 8). Thus, to see the text version of poems such as “Love Song for Gertrude Stein” is to realize that Nichol’s performances of these poems are not just him sounding out but they are readings of a particular notational system. In fact, in a series of interviews conducted by Nichol in 1986 for a special issue of *Musicworks*, called “Improvising Sound: ten sound poets on the poetics of sound,” he adds a footnote in the manuscript transcription of Richard Truhlar’s interview:

There’s a suggestion here, which I love, that what writers have been learning about reading these last twenty years could be of benefit to musicians, that we could be in a position to do a radical rereading of, say, Vivaldi. And it strikes me now that sound poetry was never really about sound; it was and is about reading. (17)

However, in addition to those mentioned above, Nichol’s performance of early

notated poems such as “Eight Part Suite” (1971), “Meeln” (1973), and “Outsize Reference” (1973) adheres very rigidly to the pre-set score, and the effect of such a careful rendering of the poem in sound according to the text is that of closure, of that dynamic in a conventional reading in which the author/reader is entirely shut off from spontaneity, from participation or interaction with the audience (except for the applause required from the audience at the beginning and ending of a reading), and in which the audience is seemingly shown the ‘correct’ reading of the text by the author’s reading of their work. For instance, when heard only by ear “Eight Part Suite” is an accumulation of sounds, or of eight representations of eight different sets of numbers, syllables, morphemes and sub-morphemes--all of which sound like language-based sounds; however, when one reads the text alongside Nichol’s recording of “Eight Part Suite,” it becomes evident that, through an elaborate system of ascending, descending and spiralling lines, changes in type-face and size, this poem is a reading, through sound, of an already existing text. The fact that Nichol is reading directly from a text does not take away from the poem’s power to bring its listeners inside language and to the roots of words, in fact most listeners would only ever come to know the recording because the texts of these poems (with only a few exceptions) were never published; but my point is that, although Nichol emphasized sound as necessary for and perhaps even prior to an embodied presentness, live language and world, the basis of the poem in an already written text points towards the fact that--perhaps despite his best intentions--he still approaches sound, or the sounding of a poem, as secondary to the written word, and consequently the poem is less of-the-moment, less open and so less animated than it could be.

- LISTENING page 61
- ESCAPE FROM THE REFERENT page 41
- OPEN READING page 76

PERFORMANCE

. . . the kind of diffuse poetry which we identify with natural and spontaneous energy . . . must find its integral expression, its purest, sharpest and most truly separated expression, in the theatre. (Artaud, quoted in Derrida "Theater of Cruelty" 47)

Even though Artaud's call for a theatre that is "diffuse poetry," that is not determined solely by an authoritative text but rather seeks to "recover a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought" (Artaud 89), also involves things like characterization and props (of a sort) that are specific to the theatre, it is still useful for its basic premise: that language is performative, that poetry, as a special class of language-use, bears with it the potential to foreground such performativity. Taking my cue from Artaud, I am talking specifically about the performative aspect of sound poetry, the fact that it takes place in 'real time' and space, that the sounds of sound poetry (its aurality, orality) take precedence over the (or its) written (determinate) form, that the "respiratory and auditive" aspects of it (as Kurt Schwitters called it) must be performed and seen as pulsations, swayings, heavings, vibrations of the body (either human or electric) as much as heard and felt. Back to Artaud again:

[this] language of the theatre . . . turns words into incantations. It extends the voice. It utilizes the vibrations and qualities of the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile-drives sounds. It seeks to exalt, to benumb, to charm, to arrest the sensibility . . . It ultimately breaks away from the intellectual subjugation of the language . . . (Artaud 91)

Thus, in this sense, sound poetry is not only performative, but it performs (through

excavation) the performative nature of language.

Beyond Artaud, it is no coincidence that Hugo Ball is, once again, the central figure of this historically contextualized story of the performativity of sound poetry--he was, after all, as involved with the theatre as he was with poetry. Aside from his adolescent involvements with the theatre, as soon as 1914 (a full two years before the formation of the Cabaret Voltaire) Ball was proposing to start a "new theatre"--"Only the theatre is capable of creating the new society. The backgrounds, the colors, words, and sounds have only to be taken from the subconscious and animated to engulf the everyday routine along with its misery" (Ball 8). By March 1916 this new theatre was the Cabaret Voltaire, host to "silence, music--declaration . . . latest rage the big drum . . . cubist tinkle dance . . . great enchanted gyratory movement of 400 persons celebrating . . . music, theories, manifestoes, poems, paintings, masks . . ." (quoted in Melzer 31). Of the poems read or performed, Ball's "Gadji Beri Bimba" is the most well-known, and the description of its first performance that Ball offers in his diary is the most frequently quoted (perhaps simply because Ball documented himself so well). If only to make clear Ball's attempt to do as Artaud exhorts us to do--extend the voice in all directions, break away "from the intellectual subjugation of the language"--as well as point towards his failed and successful escape from the poem's written form (on the one hand the reading never veers away from the pre-determined text and its referential title, but on the other hand the poem and the performance are ultimately about the sound, the rhythm, the presence of the words themselves, independent of the page and of referentiality), I too quote from Ball's description:

I have invented a new genre of poems, "Verse ohne Worte," . . . in which

the balance of the vowels is weighed and distributed solely according to the values of the beginning sequence . . . [I] began slowly and solemnly:

gadji beri bimba

glandridi lauli lonni cadori

gadjama bim beeri glassala

glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim

blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbrabim . . .

The stresses became heavier, the emphasis was increased as the sound of the consonants became sharper . . . The heavy vowel sequences and the plodding rhythm of the elephants had given me one last crescendo. But how was I to get the end? Then I noticed that my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation . . . (Ball 71)

Thus for Ball, maybe even for Artaud and for many subsequent practitioners of sound, sound poets are the priests, or, less dramatically, the overseers/undertakers of the life of language, keeping alive (through vocalization) the sounds of our words which are the sounds of us and of the (animate and inanimate) world. They are the medium through which poetry is made present and thus we--through them and through the sounds--are also made present, we, as we are, are brought into the present.

Dada's other significant contribution to poetry and/as performance came with their adoption of "simultaneism" (as it was first coined by Robert Delaunay and Apollinaire) which was yet another expression of their belief that through sound, a venture outside the intellect, comes life, especially life-in-the-now. Simultaneism, as it was later used by the Dadaists, was used as a technique to present a number of actions, thoughts, words,

phrases--any experience was legitimate--at the same time, thus enacting the world as they saw it (a world out of joint, not coherent, static and closed). The more the work evoked disconnection, disjuncture, illogicality, abruptness, even conflict--and all in real time and space--the better. Naturally, such experiments in simultaneity led to multi-voiced works; for instance, the first simultaneist poem, "L'Amiral cherche une maison a louer," was performed by Huelsenbeck, Tzara and Janco--"a contrapuntal recitative in which three or more voices speak, sing, whistle, etc., simultaneously in such a way that the resulting combinations account for the total effect of the work, elegaic, funny, or bizarre." (Richter 20) Richard Huelsenbeck, however, most aptly links performance with (sound) poetry in his description of the simultaneous poem:

It presupposes heightened sensitivity to the passage of things in time . . . and attempts to transform the problem of the ear into a problem of the face. Simultaneity is against what has become, and for what is becoming . . . From the everyday events surrounding me (the big city, the Dada circus, crashing, screeching, steam whistles, house fronts, the smell of roast veal), I obtain an impulse which starts me toward direct action, becoming the big X. I become directly aware that I am alive . . . and so ultimately a simultaneous poem means nothing but "Hurrah for life!"
(quoted in Melzer 36)

- PERFORMANCE page 83
- INTERFERENCE page 55
- TECHNOLOGY page 106

- BALL IN NICHOL page 19
- BODY OF LANGUAGE page 24

PRIMAL THERAPY

Primal scream therapy was borne out of Arthur Janov's Primal Therapy which is based on the hypothesis that emotional trauma begins with the denial of an individual's primary needs; not only can such trauma be exaggerated if the individual denies the emotional pain that results, but their access to emotions may also become eroded; Primal Therapy thus seeks to feel the original trauma for the first time. Of primal scream therapy, Janov writes:

To even try to discuss an early, preverbal trauma (as happens in so many therapies) means to be taken *out* of the feeling and into something countertherapeutic, away from the possibility of final resolution. In this sense we can understand that at certain stages in Primal Therapy the scream *is* curative; it *is* the connection of the early hurt and it is the only possible expression appropriate to the brain at the time of the trauma.

(Janov 91)

It is as if Janov is in fact writing of a therapy that attempts to break the connection between early trauma and later skepticism (a later trauma of sorts caused by an intellect gone wild that takes one out of one's body and self and into an all-embracing state of exile); and further, in inadvertently echoing Stein's belief in presentness through an emphasis on remaining in one's body, in the experience of pain, Janov points also towards Nichol who similarly believes in presentness as a way to return from the exile brought on by skepticism. While for Stein such presentness is best embodied in art and poetry, for Janov and Nichol presentness is best embodied through sound and through the healing possibilities inherent in sound.

RIGHT SOUND

While the belief in the healing-properties of sound may not be perfectly evident in Nichol's sound poetry, he makes certain it is clear in *The Martyrology* with the second half of the dedication in Book 1 that follows the reference to Hindley-Smith:

& for palongawhoya

“he made the whole world an instrument of sound”

Niechoda traces Nichol's knowledge of the Hopi legend of Palongawhoya to Frank Water's 1963 *Book of the Hopi* (from which the foregoing quote is taken) in which he traces the lineage of Hopi mythological figures beginning with the creator, Taiowa. Taiowa's first creation was Sotuknang who, after declaring that “there is no life upon it [the earth]. We see no joyful movement. We hear no joyful sound. What is life without sound and movement?” (Waters 4), in turn created Kokyangwuti who made life out of earth and saliva. Her first creation was the twins Poqanghoya and Palongawhoya; the former was given the job of solidifying the earth while the latter was given the job of “[sending] out sound so that it may be heard throughout all the land . . . All the vibratory centers along the earth's axis from pole to pole resounded his call . . . Thus he made the whole world an instrument of sound, and sound an instrument for carrying messages . . .” (4-5). The reference above to Hopi cosmology emphasizes the dual importance of sound as a metaphor for living words (breathing sound into words is akin to breathing life into them) and a metaphor for life (only when the world is sounded is it truly alive), and the further importance of sounding poems, regardless of whether or not they are designated ‘sound poems’ (evidenced by the fact that with are only five sound poems on *bpNichol*, while the rest of the album is taken up with Nichol reading from *The Martyrology* and

love: a book of remembrances).

When Nichol more fully repeats the story of Palongawhoya, he adds that harmony on earth was disturbed after people “got tricked by Raven and they began to use speech as a way of talking inside their teepees to each other. And this was a false use of it” (“Interview” 325)—the implication being that a wrong-headed use of speech and sound exiles one from one’s roots and from one’s original purpose on earth: to sound out “throughout all the land,” thereby uniting people with each other and with the world through sound. As Nichol wrote in a note from 1968, “sound & poetry,” “THE POINT, THE PURPOSE, THE CREATIVE REASON FOR SOUND POETRY IS TO SET THE BODY’S AXIS BACK IN TUNE WITH THE UNIVERSE . . . it paves the way for a rebirth of the poem as a universal form of expression.” (unpaginated) Nichol, then, is not simply concerned with sound but with ‘right sound’ and ‘right speech;’ in other words it is not just sound (noise) that is healing, but it is a self-aware use of sound through the body for the purpose of (re)creating life and relationships that is healing.

There is another relevant passage in *Book of the Hopi* which corroborates the importance of the body as an instrument of sound. According to Hopi mythology, humans have five vibratory centres located around the central axis in the spinal cord: the top of the head, brain, throat, heart and solar plexis. Of the throat Water writes:

It tied together those openings in the nose and mouth through which he received the breath of life and the vibratory organs that enabled him to give back his breath in sound . . . New and diverse sounds were given forth by these vocal organs in the forms of speech and song . . . (10)

The natural cycle of human life is first to take in air and then give back sound.

ST. AND

Like “you” in “The Chronicle of Knarn,” St. And is infinitely interpretable; as Frank Davey has pointed out, he could be read as either symbol (of a human, humanity or of language) or sign (a signifier which “gain[s] [its] meaning from use and on-going construction” (Davey, “Exegesis” 42)); or, as Stephen Scobie has pointed out, the figures of the saints throughout the entirety of *The Martyrology* may be approached as “word-games, as mythological characters, and as language” (Scobie 111). However, with lines describing St. And as “a statue / a corner lost” who is “living / without understanding,” whether word-game, figure or language, “The Martyrology of Saint And” which opens Book 1 outlines the loss of self, time, space, and faith--perhaps in God, but more importantly the loss of faith in both language and the power to speak; put another way, St. And is the patron saint of incompleteness and ungroundedness rather than of the possibility and openness that may otherwise be suggested by the conjunction ‘and.’ Nichol writes early on in this Martyrology, “gold frame the windows / i’ve looked out your eyes years now saint and / how i tell you / no”, as if to say not only that St. And’s vision cannot help but to bring on loss (the loss of now which turns into “no”) but also that he is both self and other; the narrator is not only relaying the story of St. And but, by having him speak, the narrator gives voice to himself. Consider the accumulation of these lines, all of which appear before the specific references to St. And later on:

elephants
 drag your words
 over impossible hills
 into the valleys beyond . . .

the mouth
takes up the feeling &
confuses

the fused words move out

where the ears were a numbness grows . . .

it is a landscape without hearing

a sea of cries

Here the narrator describes St. And's vision of the world as being one in which there are only unconnected nows with no grounding in an understanding of the present, a lack of embodiment in language and a disjunction between sayer and what's said in the face of a world incapable or seemingly unwilling to respond. This characterization of St. And continues on in Book 2 where we come to know that he, along with St. Reat, descended from Clowntown in search of a home, eventually in search of love. Returning to the passages quoted above, with these lines again centring around "you," it becomes important to see this narrator as one who does not differentiate between myth and present-day fact, story, personal history and cultural history--once again he is enmeshed in a world of neither differentiation nor criteria, a world that has roots in neither space nor time.

It is interesting to note that groundedness in the world, in language and articulateness comes through the invocation of particular figures and/or words; as I claimed above, this is what gives him and *The Martyrology* its structure. It could also be said that the saints are structurally important to the narrator, and this is partly what makes these figures and/or words saintly. Despite the fact that the narrator continues on

to tell of how “saint and does not amaze,” of how “saint and has lost all hope / & cannot walk or swim there / anymore,” how for him “every gesture of his hand / is another nail that has failed / to hold,” his telling in itself constitutes healing. In contrast to the narrator’s general lostness in “The Chronicle of Knarn,” as well as in “The Martyrology of Saint And” (“the undated poem is / found and / forgotten / passes . . . bank of clouds / no returns / goodbye / to this world”), the introduction of particularities (something like a recounting of the grammar of the world) can be thought of as a turn towards healing, towards differentiation and the recounting of criteria.

- ‘ST.’ IN ‘STRANGLEHOLD’ page 94

'ST.' IN 'STRANGLEHOLD'

St. Ranglehold represents that other side of the skeptic which jealously desires perfect possession of the world in order to obtain complete knowledge and certainty. It is interesting to read a quotation that appeared in earlier drafts of Books 1 and 2 in which Nichol writes that St. And "is as important as saint ranglehold or saint reat who, after all, are merely expansions of tiny facets of saint and's personality" (quoted in Niechoda 77-78). St. Ranglehold first appears in Book 1 "oblivious in his bathtub / sails plastic boats & sinks them // cries of the sailors caught in the heaving line the tongue can't speak"; and further on he is described as random and cruel, "ruler of the ships & sea / saint ranglehold guides lovers with a flaccid hand // snickers knowingly / as they flounder on dry land." As one who is also away from home (away at sea, away from Cloudtown and, I would say, away from world and words), Ranglehold lets loose his disappointment on the world with what Cavell calls an extreme "death-dealing passion" brought on by doubt and subsequent exile, fed by a desire to possess the world which finally results in disappointment and jealousy over his inability to do so. Again, recall Cavell's reading of Shakespearian tragedy:

[the skeptic] seeks a possession that is not in opposition to another's claim or desire but one that establishes an absolute and inalienable bonding to himself, to which no claim or desire *could* be opposed, could conceivably count; as if the jealousy is directed to the sheer existence of the other, its separateness from him. (*Disowning* 9)

As such, can we not see St. Ranglehold's viciousness as the result of sustained, unsuccessful attempts to establish absolute intimacy, absolute knowledge, and so

absolute certainty? Surely Cavell's version of the death-dealing skeptic (read through the death dealt to Desdemona by Othello) explains Ranglehold's desire to brutally punish the sailors for not being possessable, for representing all that which he cannot possess? And surely Ranglehold is a saint to the extent that his killing off of language as well as others, their selves, and the world provides in the re-telling, the re-counting of these deaths, a space for life, an embodied language, and presentness to self, others and the world?

- ST. AND page 91

SOUND AND MEANING

In their vocal expulsions which sometimes sound more like crying, barking or machine-gun fire than anything meaning-full, and to which we may sometimes be tempted to shake our heads, laugh and walk away, Nichol's sound poems invite us to listen to the life of these words even more rigorously; to remember that "sound enacts meaning as much as it designates something meant", that ". . . the relation of sound to meaning is something like the relation of the soul (or mind) to the body. They are aspects of each other, neither prior, neither independent" (Bernstein, Introduction, *Close Listening* 17); and keep in mind what Cavell exhorts us to do:

1) that every mark of a language means something in the language, one thing rather than another; . . . 2) that words and their orderings are meant by human beings, that they contain (or conceal) their beliefs, express (or deny) their convictions; and 3) that the saying of something when and as it is said is as significant as the meaning and ordering of the words said.

(*Reader* 279)

If we do not undertake to listen to Nichol's sound poems in this way, then we are left calling them instances of Nichol approaching language as "intrinsically meaningful" (Davey, "bpNichol" 209) or as attestations to his "desire to move beyond meaning towards an aesthetics of pure form" (Harvey 19). Not only am I trying to make it clear that Nichol is working firmly within language (rather than trying to transcend it, situating his work outside of language and beyond those who use it), but I am also arguing that--properly understood as such--poems such as "Cycle 22" are the articulation of the danger we put ourselves in daily as well as the invocation of an alternative that is the

embodiment of how one might begin to resist the lure of exile, and begin the work of restoring each word to itself, each thing to itself, each person to themselves.

SOUND POETRY

Not surprisingly, there is no one static set of adjectives that accurately characterizes ‘sound poetry.’ Richard Kostelanetz, who calls it ‘text-sound art,’ flatly claims that the term refers to “language whose principal means of coherence is sound, rather than syntax or semantics--where the sounds made by comprehensible words create their own coherence apart from denotative meanings” (14). But, as Stephen Scobie has pointed out, while this definition is useful since it “clearly maintains the situation of sound poetry *within language* . . . with sound *as an aspect of language*” (56), Kostelanetz’s assertion that these are sounds of “comprehensible words” is not true in all cases since numerous sound poems undoubtedly generate sounds out of *incomprehensible* words and do so precisely to better get away from denotative meanings. Other than bpNichol’s contemporary work, another strong example of what might be called ‘aural nonsense’ (at times focussing almost solely on just “the coherence of sound”) is Francois Dufrêne’s work with sound from the 1940s which centres around “the full expressive range of pre-denotative forms: grunts, howls, shrieks, etc.” (McCaffery et al, *Sound Poetry* 10). Precedents for Nichol and Dufrêne’s aural nonsense span the history of human cultures (that “vast, intractable area of archaic and primitive poetries, the many instances of chant structures and incantation, of nonsense syllabic mouthings and deliberate lexical distortions . . . (McCaffery et al, *Sound Poetry* 6)); however, it is in that cross over period of the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century that aural nonsense, as well as a more denotative style of sound poetry, began to find full expression as a movement.

- CAVELLIAN SKEPTICISM page 32
- INSIDE LANGUAGE page 53
- 1875 TO 1928 page 6

SOUNDING DOUBT

Whether conscious or not, there are many examples of the skeptical impulse (or, as I say in “Exile and Home,” the voice of temptation is everywhere) in Nichol’s writing--in the early books of *The Martyrology* as well as in his early sound poetry. No doubt this sense of being away from home, in exile from world and words, of the need for absolute intimacy and possession comes out of the fact that Nichol was in an actual state of exile from the Canadian literary world in the late 60s and early 70s. He has commented on this in several different contexts, one of which I quote below:

. . . when I started doing this stuff . . . like there was *nobody*, and I mean but *nobody* who was doing it. I really felt sort of crazy; why was I doing it? . . . From 1965-67 it was really vital that I have that European-South American connection because it was really the only place from which I got feedback input that propelled me on. (“Interview with bpNichol” 250)

Although Nichol is referring mainly to his work in concrete in the late 60s, it seems to me that such ‘craziness’ comes through in his work with sound--a craziness which is strongly reminiscent of Othello’s jealousy. Further, although Othello’s exile was self-imposed while Nichol’s was not, both Othello and Nichol exhibit a kind of madness that results from being in exile from knowledge, language and humanity, disconnected from community, from the ways in which knowledge, language and humanity are communally defined, and from a necessary knowledge of the limits and possibilities inherent in each of these three things. The early piece, “Scraptures--Fifth Sequence (four movements)” which is included in Nichol’s first collection of sound poetry, *borders*, is, I think, the clearest example of Nichol expressing through sound exile, madness, jealousy

and (Cavellian) skepticism; this poem is also particularly apt as it was in the “Scrapures” poems that Nichol discovered the saints of *The Martyrology*--as he says in a seminar held at Simon Fraser University in 1983, “I was conscious of uncovering meaning [through the saints] . . . in ‘Scrapures’ I talked to them [the saints] and got this information . . .” (Poetry Seminar). As such, it is no coincidence that this “Scrapures” piece almost seems to give voice to the composite figure St. And / St. Ranglehold--each of which, as I have said in “Sounding Doubt,” represents aspects of the death-dealing skeptic.

“Scrapures--Fifth Sequence” is difficult to describe, if only because its defining feature is a sense of otherworldliness which is likely because, unlike the majority of Nichol’s sound poems, this piece has been technologically altered and enhanced. On the back cover of the album jacket for *borders*, Nichol includes a facsimile of the notational system he used in the performance of “Scrapures” to signify tape fade-out, overtracking, sound distortion, tape reversal, speed-up and slow-down, mixer, echo, and machine noises; only once does “N” appear to signify his normal speaking voice. Thus, while the voices in the first movement obviously all belong to Nichol, and so it might be argued that this piece is grounded in a human, worldly presence, what is in fact most noticeable is the way in which Nichol’s voice has been altered to sound mostly electronic and only barely human, only barely Nichol. With the help of dubbing technologies, the presence that the listener comes to know is one that is fragmented, disparate and without any sharp or defining outlines--it is simply a marginally human voice fading in and out of other marginally human voices that sound as if they *might* all be versions of one voice. Such otherworldliness is only exaggerated in subsequent movements; the second

movement is a fast paced piece whose “melody” is, once again, delivered through a human/machine hybrid and harmonized with pure electronic sound sliding up and down a diatonic scale; the third movement pushes this exaggeration farther into the realm of the non-human, of pure abstract sound; and the fourth movement is a slow, almost mournful variation of the first movement, this time sung by Nichol on a background of heavy, repeated breaths--all of which eventually fades into pure electronic/artificial sound. The effect of “Scraptures--Fifth Sequence” is, overall, one of alienation--the listener is alienated from the sounds which in themselves seem to imply alienation, a lack of belonging, a definite withdrawal from the world and from language that recalls these lines from “The Chronicle of Knarn” in Book 1 of *The Martyrology*: “elephants / drag your words / over impossible hills / into the valleys beyond . . . the mouth takes up the feeling & / confuses . . . it is a landscape without hearing.”

The foregoing analysis provides, I think, ample evidence of a death-dealing impulse in “Scraptures” that comes out of being in exile from words and world. But what of the other death-dealing impulse which comes out of jealousy and possessiveness? Certainly the alternately melancholic and howling sounds of the third and fourth movements can be heard as inarticulate expressions of frustration and disappointment in the face of a world gone dead, a “landscape without hearing.” However, if this poem locates itself outside of the human, the world and language, and thus is not addressing a listener, can it be said that “Scraptures” addresses a world gone dead, speaks to the world as if it were an animate other precisely in order to re-animate it? I do not mean ‘re-animate’ in the sense that the world would be brought back to full life, but back to a responsive, ultimately knowable world with which the skeptic can

have exclusive intimacy. To return directly to Cavell again:

But the world's deadness to him [the skeptic], its inability to attract and maintain his interest, is in fact caused by him . . . The world disappoints him precisely because he interprets his goal of achieving and maintaining an undispossessable possession of that world--a literally fantastic, necessarily unattainable ideal . . . his jealousy ensured that the world could not possibly satisfy him. (Mulhall 150-151)

I would argue that the answer to my question posed above is 'yes.' This poem stands in direct contrast to slightly later poems such as "Dada Lama" or "Cycle No. 22" which reflect Nichol's stance towards language as healing; "Scraptures" does not reflect relation or connection, and it is not an instance of Nichol acknowledging the noun "free of adjectives . . . to reclaim it" ("Interview" 343), to "let it regain its own resonances" (332); rather, it stands as a parallel example in sound to St. Ranglehold and St. And in *The Martyrology* Books 1 and 2--figures who situate themselves outside of the world and language, and who are both driven by death-dealing passions.

- [ANIMATING ANIMISM](#) page 13
- [ANIMISM OR ANIMATING?](#) page 17
- [INSTRUMENTS OF SOUND](#) page 54
- [LOST AS FOUND](#) page 66

STANDING IN AS THE OTHER

The act of standing-in as the other is a breaking-down of the boundary between self and other, not so that there is no differentiating between the two, but so that the one makes the attempt to become the other, to experience their/its life while leaving behind one's own life. And further, this experience of the other constitutes a listening to the other, a listening which is a reading.

- LISTENING AS READING page 59
- NONDUALITY (IN CAVELL) page 72

STRUCTURED IMPROVISATION

The Dadaist use of chance as an ordering principle that bears with it the power to shut out human volition and ego influences Nichol's work in sound throughout his years as both a solo and group performer. Not only did he compose a number of sound poems generated according to the strict structure of a grid both early and later on in his career (from his 1966 "Cycle #22" to his 1977 "Generations Generated"), but so too did the grid act as the primary structural principle behind many of the sound poems Nichol wrote for the Four Horsemen, poems which were mostly improvisational and free-form but for the restriction of the grid-lines which dictated transition points and the basic elements of each improvisation.

- OPEN READING page 76

TECHNOLOGY

Although Hugo Ball and his simultaneist counterparts did not use electronic or digital enhancement because they did not have access to such technology, I should point out that if the emphasis is on the human construction of sound, then the performance of sound poetry does not have to be live, it may be electronically or digitally enhanced or retrieved; it may even be either (electronic/digital or simply of the body) or both. If we are talking about (as Artaud talks about) extending the voice in all directions, how better to do so than by speeding the voice up, slowing it down, splicing, overlapping, multi-tracking, even totally altering the voice beyond recognition? What we are there to see and to hear are words made animate, our sounds and the sounds of ourselves brought to life--this is a presencing of (sounds of) words, not a presencing of the poet.

However, such electronic machinations were not available to the Dadaists, and the use of these techniques only became possible in the 1950s . . . after 1955, a verbal artist . . . could change the volume and texture of his microphone assisted voice; he could eliminate his high frequencies or his lows, or accentuate them as well as adding reverberation . . . With recording technology, the language artist could add present sound to past sound . . . thereby making a duet, if not a chorus, of himself . . . More important, he could also affix on tape a definitive audio interpretation of his own text. (Kostelanetz 17)

Ironically enough though, it could be argued that the blending of past and present sounds, human and non-human, natural and artificial are alienating techniques that leave the listener uncertain about their own humanness, the limits of humanity (at what point

does the human cross over into the machine, slip into or stand apart from the natural world, have no grasp of either time or space); and so technologically altered sound poems are not about presence at all but about uncertainty, if not denial, of the special category 'human'. However, it also could be argued that these are human preoccupations, this engagement with machines and the human, with the hybridization of human and machine, and that this is the stuff of our contemporary human world. To acknowledge things as they are is to acknowledge ourselves; to be in the present as present alongside our machines, conducting our machines, is to acknowledge the present as such.

TIME-LINING

Of course Nichol's 'early' sound poems do not begin and end at any definitive point in time; however, there are certainly gradual changes in style and concern in his overall sound poetry oeuvre that can be roughly mapped out. I would place the first coordinates at the mid-sixties and at 1970 during which time Nichol began to work consciously with sound--primarily on his own, though with an awareness of the work undertaken by the sound poets of the early twentieth century avant garde (the dadaists, Russian and Italian futurists etc.) as well as by contemporaries such as Michael McClure and Bill Bissett; in the introduction to *The Last Blew Ointment Anthology* Nichol writes:

In his reading McClure growled and howled his beast language, and in his bill used some abstract sound elements and a lot of silence . . . i'd been reading about sound poetry in '62 '63 because a friend of mine, Jim Alexander . . . had convinced me to buy . . . *The Dada Painters and Poets* . . . along the way i was reading about sound poetry, the writing and performances of Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara and Kurt Schwitters . . . [but] where McClure's work seemed too tied to a biological model, Bissett's pointed beyond it to the page, back to the voice and outward to the whole world of operating signs, to a region between poetry, painting and music. (9)

It was also at this time that he began to gain an international reputation as a visual/concrete poet. I would place the second (far less distinct) period beginning at 1970 with the formation of the sound poetry ensemble, The Four Horsemen (with Steve McCaffery, Rafael Barreto-Rivera and Paul Dutton) which--according to Nichol--renewed his waning interest in sound poetry (Kostelanetz 335); I make this

distinction because the effects of such group collaboration can be read into the thematic and tonal transformations that occur throughout *The Martyrology* Books 1 & 2 where one sees the persona's (poetic) vision change from one informed by solitude, exile, nihilism, to one informed by an ever-present awareness of, emphasis on, others, otherness, interconnectivity, presentness. For me, these first two periods constitute Nichol's early work. The next influx of creative inspiration after the publication of the first two books of *The Martyrology* (1972) makes itself manifest in Nichol's sound poetry, and undoubtedly comes from the collaborative writing and thinking of the Toronto Research Group that was formed in 1973 with Steve McCaffery--the most obvious result being Nichol's exposure, through McCaffery, to theorists such as Barthes, Derrida, Jabes, and Lacan.

As a soloist, though, Nichol wrote and performed relatively few sound pieces on his own in the late seventies. I can say, however, that while such later work is created out of the same problems and issues which Nichol was concerned with in the early seventies--surrounding being 'split', "being very distant from oneself & from the world around me" (Nichol, "Raoul Duguay Interviews" 30)--his alternative to a dualist thinking, writing, living, is increasingly nondualist--a concept which I argue is not only related to such philosophers of language and of the everyday as Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, but also comes out of eastern philosophy and religion. Furthermore, while Nichol stayed with the Four Horsemen and the TRG until his death in 1988, he became less active in both groups in the eighties and even as a soloist he published very few sound poems--as far as I can tell the only solo pieces from the eighties are two poems published in a 1986 edition of *Musicworks*. In a recent interview with Steve McCaffery

in *Open Letter*, McCaffery explains this shift:

It was during the early 1980s that Nichol took up script writing as a major source of income. As I recall, it was Dennis Lee who introduced him to Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppet Show. Barrie wrote for the show and became involved in more travel . . . Moreover, by the mid-1980s our collaborative involvement with the Four Horsemen was at a creative low--few new pieces were being written. Yet ironically that was the time when our international reputation was solidly established . . . (85-86)

- CAVELLIAN SKEPTICISM page 32
- FOUR HORSEMEN page 48

TO GET THE 'I' OUT

There are some striking contradictions here, in both Dada's and Nichol's use of chance that extend beyond the most obvious contradiction--that chance offers the opportunity for "emancipated discipline" (Richter 61). The most fundamental contradiction rests, I believe, in the picture of the self that chance offers--one that, on the one hand, breaks the illusion of the individual, authentic self and substitutes it for a vision of the self as subject to and intrinsically part of a world that is constantly changing. This redemptive vision of the self, though, also appears to be in direct contradiction with the Cavellian philosophy that is at the heart of this study and that, through an acknowledgment of language and of others, attempts to bring us back to--not away from--our selves; in fact, recalling Cavell's assertion that "the impression that 'I' must empty out *my* contribution to words, so that language itself, as if beyond me, exclusively takes over the responsibility for meaning' . . ." (*Reader* 339) is what brings on skepticism, the use of chance could seem to be doing just that, dehumanizing language and so dehumanizing ourselves. However, I would argue that--contrary to both Dada's and Nichol's assertions that they are attempting to remove or deny the 'I' altogether, deny the ego and thus the self--chance offers the user the opportunity to experience nonduality, a lack of division between self and other, 'I' and 'you,' the world out there and my own, interiorized world; nonduality not in the sense that any one of the two in these pairs are denied but so that such distinctions between them disappear. "There were not two; beholder was one with beheld; it was not a vision compassed but a unity apprehended" (quoted in Loy 1), writes the philosopher Plotinus. Thus, in contrast to "this duality that does not see," nonduality--which is can be achieved as much through

acknowledgment as through chance--is not based on a denial of reality, of the world or of self, but on a deeper understanding of these things which is very much grounded in the way things are, very much based on a philosophy of downward transcendence. I would also argue that these latter terms (rather than the terms of denial) are what Nichol attempts to achieve in his later work with sound.

- EXILE & HOME page 42
- LISTENING page 61

TRAGEDY

If the comparison stands between Othello and the skeptic, Desdemona and the skeptic's world, then there is the implication that the skeptic is death-dealing in two senses; first, he 'kills' his connection to *both* language and the world (including others in it). And secondly, there is the more fantastic implication that the skeptic treats the world as if it were a live thing, as if it were capable of responding to him, of offering assurances and answers to him as he (madly, jealously, possessively) strikes up his search for 'true knowledge.'

Here one would one day have to look at the philosopher's extraordinary treatment of objects, as in Descartes' wax that is melting . . . to explore the sense of hyperbolic, unprecedented attention in play. It is not just careful description, or practical investigation, under way here. The philosopher is as if it were looking for a *response* from the object, perhaps a shining. (*Disowning* 8)

When seen in this light, Descartes' highly detailed musings about a piece of melted wax, intended as an experiment in what I have called rampant intellectuality ("my mind loves to wander . . . let it be that way then: let us allow it the freest rein in every respect . . ." (Descartes 15)), begin to read like persistent questions posed to the thing; further, there is disappointment in the face of there being no response, nothing but perceptions of the perceiver, his intellect, and so nothing but proofs for the existence of the writer's own mind (and so of the writer himself). While the skeptic's treatment of the world as a live thing can lead into a labyrinthine philosophical argument around the concepts of doubt and belief, Stephen Mulhall observes that the equation of Othello and Desdemona with

the skeptic and his world implies that “the skeptic’s doubt is a cover for or function of jealousy, that his desire is to establish an exclusive and complete relationship with the world, as if the world were not just an animate other but an Exemplar (just as Desdemona is Othello’s Exemplary other)” (146). As an explanation of what I take Cavell to mean by the philosopher seeing the world as animate, and further what I take Mulhall to be saying here, I would like to return to the example of Descartes that runs parallel to both Othello and skepticism in general—in particular the lengthy descriptive passage on the nature and existence of a piece of melting wax in “Meditation Two: Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind: That the Mind is More Known Than the Body.”

It begins with “[w]hat was there then in the wax that was so distinctly comprehended? . . . But just what precisely is this thing which I imagine thus?” and moves to “[w]hat is this flexible and mutable thing? . . . What is this extended thing? Is this thing’s extension also unknown?,” the passage finally ending with “[b]ut what is this wax which is perceived only by the mind?” (17). For many, such questioning does not sound out of the ordinary, indicative of either a belief in animism or even of a latent possessive jealousy of the world. But according to Cavell, our statements about our perceptions of the world are not only phrased around the concepts of doubt and belief (grammatically-speaking, saying ‘I see a table before me’ is equivalent to saying ‘I believe there is a table before me’), but the invocation of doubt or belief is always dependent upon other speakers—*your* belief about whether or not I see a table is dependent upon your believing me, and if you believe me then you believe that what I say is true. It might then follow that Descartes’ questions, assertions and denials of the nature and existence of the wax place it in the position of a speaker.

In turning the concept of belief to name our immediate or absolute relation to the world . . . a relation no human other *could* either confirm or compromise, the philosopher turns the world into, or puts it in the position of, a speaker, lodging its claims upon us, claims to which, as it turns out, the philosopher cannot listen. (*Disowning* 7-8)

And if the skeptic sees the world as being animate, as a being capable of responding in like manner, s/he sees their relationship with the world as being one-on-one--again, as “an exclusive and complete relationship with the world, as if the world were not just an animate other but an Exemplar” (Mulhall146). For example, the nature and existence of the entire world is compressed into Descartes’ piece of wax just as Desdemona is for Othello--“My life upon her faith” (I ii 24), “. . . when I love thee not / chaos is come again . . . If I know anything, I know this” (III iii 91-92). Now it is not too difficult to draw a line from the skeptic’s desire for exclusive intimacy with the world to his inevitable jealousy; the desire for exclusivity always bears with it the possibility of jealousy, though in this case it is not jealousy of potential rivals but jealousy of that unbridgeable gap that exists between her/him and the world, the perpetual separateness which can never be overcome. There is also a connection between the skeptic’s desire for exclusivity and disappointment in the face of the world’s perceived unresponsiveness. What’s worse, as Cavell points out at the end of the passage on the concept of belief quoted above, is that jealousy, disappointment and betrayal are brought on by the skeptic herself: her/his mad grab for absolute ownership of knowledge is not only driven and defined by the hope for a response from the world that is doomed from the start, but the skeptic is so deaf to the world, and so beyond listening to it that were a

response to come she would not hear it.

- DEATH & JEALOUSY IN BPNICHOL page 36

TRANSFORMATION

Transformation, being in a state of transformation, is central to Nichol's sound poems; the theme of giving oneself over to the possibility of transformation results in the combination of apparently contradictory emotions, tones (from sustained laments and depression to ecstasy and entreaties to "let your sounds lead you out of that dead time") and apparently uses of animism that emerge in Books 1 and 2 of *The Martyrology* and in certain sound poems from the early 70s. Putting aside *The Martyrology* for the moment, the sound poem that is the strongest example of being torn between two states, caught in a painful transformation still full of possibility, is "Beast (for Hugo Ball)," also from *bpNichol*. The fact that the opening of this poem ends Nichol's album and begins the Four Horsemen's first recording, *CaNADAda*--both of which were released in 1972--testifies, I think, to its importance to Nichol.

Nichol introduces "Beast" by saying that "it is dedicated to Hugo Ball, who is more or less the daddy of sound poetry . . .", and then begins to sing to the tune of "Joe Hill":

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

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

Certainly this is a literal (and, as Scobie has noted, accurate) portrayal of Hugo Ball who, as one of a few Dadaist sound practitioners, was a pivotal figure in the early days of the

twentieth-century avant garde. Throughout his life, though, Ball was psychologically unstable and perpetually isolated; thus the “world of pain” Ball lived in probably refers to the antagonistic relationships he had with the socio-cultural setting he found himself in, the dominant artistic and literary worlds of the time, as well as with himself.

However, while the dedication of “Beast” (and in a sense the dedication in *CaNADAda*) to Ball points towards his influence on Nichol (and the Four Horsemen), the poem is not only about Ball.

Nichol ends the introductory song to Ball by singing a rapidly fluctuating note, after which he loudly chants:

Now I come to the blood, animal! Now I come to the blood, animal! . . .
 Bleeding breathing bleeding breathing bleeding . . .
 Come like lambs to slaughter, come like lambs to slaughter . . .
 Bleeding bleeding bleeding bleeding bleeding . . .
 Come like lambs to slaughter, come like lambs to slaughter . . .
 Breathing breathing breathing breathing breathing . . .
 Now I come to the blood, animal! Now I come to the blood, animal! . . .
 Bleeding breathing bleeding breathing bleeding . . .
 Don't come like lambs to slaughter, don't come like lambs to slaughter . . .
 .
 Don't come like lambs, don't come like lambs . . .
 Holding your hearts in your hands, your hands your hands . . .
 Your fathers are holding the knives, your fathers are holding the knives . . .
 .
 Don't come like lambs, don't come like lambs . . .
 Now I come to the blood, animal! Now I come to the blood, animal! . . .
 Bleeding breathing bleeding breathing bleeding . . .

“Beast” ends with Nichol repeating, in a half-whisper, “breathing breeeathing breeeeeeeeathing . . .” and with a return to the song, “I dreamed I saw Hugo Ball . . .”

Taken in the context of Hans Arp’s assertion that Ball’s language is “a magic treasure [that] connects him with the language of light and darkness. Through language man can grow into real life” (“Notes” 224-225), “Beast” is on the one hand Nichol’s attempt to

take on an animating language that is--contrary to convention--very much of this world, of both light and darkness. And on the other hand, this poem is a powerful expression of the continued need for a decisive break from a harmful collective past--the world and the words of "your fathers;" such a break comes about through a rite of passage, a bleeding of the past (a letting go of the blood that carries with it past violence done to the self, to language), a bleeding that makes way for possibility, that bleeds into breath, that breathes in new blood. There is the further implication that such redemption or healing means a return to the "animal," basic impulses which take us away from a maddening intellect gone wild and back to a state of groundedness, to our home which is fundamentally built on blood and breath. As Steve McCaffery writes a few years later in 1977, "the repetition of sound . . . liberates the elemental regions & most primitive impulses of the human self . . . POETRY BECOMES BLOOD when you achieve this state: when poet, poem & audience become one in sound, total containment in the one embracing sound." ("for a poetry of blood" 275) However, if "Beast" is meant as an invocation for the poet and the listener to "become one in sound," then why does Nichol begin and end it with the song to Ball? I should point out that such circularity in the poem makes for a neatness that brings more referentiality to the poem than I think Nichol intended.

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- ANIMATING ANIMISM page 13

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