

Poetry beyond Illocution

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

Visual and conceptual poetry became significant practices in Canada in the late 1950s and 1960s as part of a dissatisfaction with what Antony Easthope in 1986 would call a moribund “bourgeois poetic discourse,” “the poetry of the ‘single voice.’” The latter, however, would continue to survive in school anthologies and arts council policies as a protected form, while the new non-discursive poetics found most of their audiences in art galleries, libraries, music clubs, on the internet, and as often through international presentation as Canadian. The result has been a rich accumulation of visual and conceptual poetry, with its own major figures, that is little understood or studied nationally and often better known and appreciated outside of Canada than within.

Poetry beyond Illocution

FRANK DAVEY

[T]he canonical tradition, the poetry of the “single voice,” is now dying of both inward exhaustion and external erosion. . . . Bourgeois poetic discourse now has no real audience. It is kept alive only in a tainted and complicit form. The state promotes it in secondary and higher education as part of the syllabus for public examinations and “English” degrees. In Britain the state also subsidizes such poetry through the Arts Council, which gives money for readings and magazines. Meanwhile, people are much more interested in such genuinely contemporary media as cinema, television and popular song in its many varieties.

— Antony Easthope (*Poetry as Discourse* 161)

IT IS NOW NOT ONLY FORTY YEARS SINCE the founding of *Studies in Canadian Literature* but also twenty-nine years since British literary theorist Antony Easthope pronounced lyric poetry, “the poetry of the ‘single voice,’” to be moribund and fifty-one years since bpNichol pronounced it and all “ordinary” or “regular” poetry to be already “dead.” “Dead but won’t lie down,” my late mother would have said, in a cliché nearly as old as the poetry in question. Easthope’s description of the condition of “bourgeois poetic discourse” in Britain in 1984 — its institutionally maintained audience, the popularity of other “poetic” forms — seems to be as accurate there now, as well as here in Nichol’s Canada, as it was when Easthope wrote it. The persistence of residual literary forms and the misrecognition of them as still dominant, of course, are not problems in themselves, unless they interfere both with the circulation of new work and with the recognition that culturally more relevant forms have already emerged, and thus harm the cultural standing of the genre itself.

In my recent biography of Canadian poet and lay psychotherapist bpNichol, I spend some time on the arguments that the nineteen-year-old Nichol developed around 1964 for writing visual poems. Unaware of the international concrete poem movement then active mostly in Brazil, Britain, and Switzerland, he was calling his proposed new poems

“ideopoems.” These visual poems, almost all constructed out of words, letters, or fragmentary sentences, would help him, he believed, to avoid didacticism and self-pitying emotional expression, which he saw as the main weaknesses of his attempts to write discursive poetry. He also believed that self-pity and narcissism were serious limits both to the Freudian psychotherapy that he was undergoing and to the success of any psychoanalysis (Davey 64-68). He would later call his early visual poetry a means of resisting writing poetry that was “didactic” and “arrogant” (“Interview” with Coupey et al. 154), poetry that was a “type of arrogance” (“Interview” with Norris 237) because it sought to “impos[e] some sort of preconceived notion of wisdom on the occasion of writing” (Bayard and David 19). In these arguments, one can perceive the shadow of earlier modernist arguments (also little appreciated in Canada in their time) against Victorian moralism and sentimentality and in favour of imagism, impersonality, and the collaging of images as in Eliot’s “Preludes” and *The Waste Land*, Pound’s “ideogrammic method” in *The Cantos*, and Woolf’s theory of the novel as a montage of still moments (see Banfield; and Goldman). But, more important for Nichol, one can

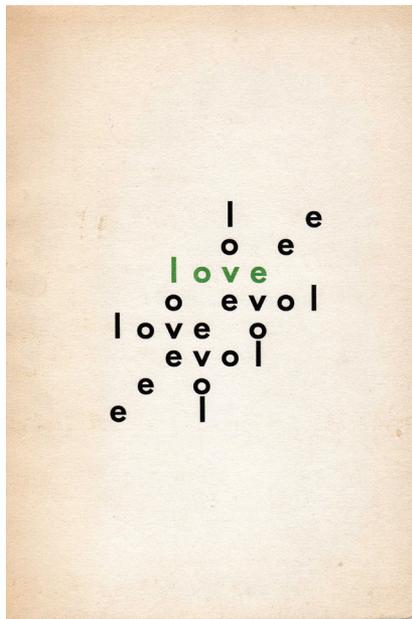


Figure 1. Cover of bpNichol’s *Love: A Book of Remembrances* (Talonbooks, 1974), with his 1967 poem “Blues” serving as the cover “text.”

also see the outlines of his later realization that a renewed, non-narcissistic poetry was useful for general cultural health as well as personal sanity.

Within months, Nichol became aware of international concrete poetry, including the work of other early practitioners in Canada such as Earle Birney, Lionel Kearns, bill bissett, and Judith Copithorne. He published his first book, all visual poems, with a British publisher, poet Bob Cobbing’s Writer’s Forum Press, in early 1967. With a micropress that he had founded himself, he published in 1969 a large envelope of mostly visual poetry by Birney, *Pnomes*, *Jukollages*, and



Figure 2. Cover of bpNichol's box-bound book *Still Water* (Talonbooks, 1970).

The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid, his first significant publication in Dadaist 'pataphysics — another mode that avoided explicit self-expression.

Nichol continued writing discursive first-person poetry, though increasingly throughout the 1970s introducing 'pataphysical elements — science fiction histories, fictionalized saints' lives — and elements from his visual poetry into it, the latter usually as a kind of visual poetry in process, in which the visual elements would develop as part of the syntactic argument of the poem (Figure 3). His 1971 view of lyric poetry was similar to Easthope's later one: "[P]oetry being at a dead end" was "dead," he would write in *ABC: The Aleph Beth Book*, a visual poetry suite with a repetitive manifesto running variously across, up, and down its margins; accepting that "fact" could leave us "free to live the poem" into new forms (passim).¹ That the lyric's unconsciously arrogant narcissism and individualism were part of a general cultural affliction, in which citizens and leaders alike made decisions and evaluations oblivious both to history and to the fate of humanity's "we," became the major implication of his continuing multivolume long poem *The Martyrology*. Why is a post-dead poetry necessary? For cultural sanity.²

But while nearly all of Nichol's ostensibly first-person discursive poetry³ was published and responded to critically only in Canada, notably *The Martyrology*, much of his visual and 'pataphysical poetry was published in Britain and the United States, where *The Martyrology* is still largely unknown. The reverse happened to his frequent collab-

Other Stunzas. This envelope contained, among other things, the first publication of Birney's visual poem "Canada Council." Among the three books for which Nichol co-won the 1971 Governor General's Literary Award were two boxed, unbound collections of visual poetry, his own *Still Water* — its reflective silver "cover" itself a visual poem — and his anthology *The Cosmic Chef*. The third was the prose poem sequence

orator, Steve McCaffery, with whom Nichol co-authored the Toronto Research Group (TRG) publications and the travel poems of *In England Now that Spring*. McCaffery, who has created mostly visual and conceptual poems, is little known in Canada but widely praised in the United States.⁴ The split was especially unfortunate for Nichol, who had written all of his various kinds of poetry to be read as interlocking, a single work, and had struggled to find ways to reorganize it so that its interrelationships and cultural implications would be clearer to his readers (Davey 180-81, 205, 215-16). I suspect that he

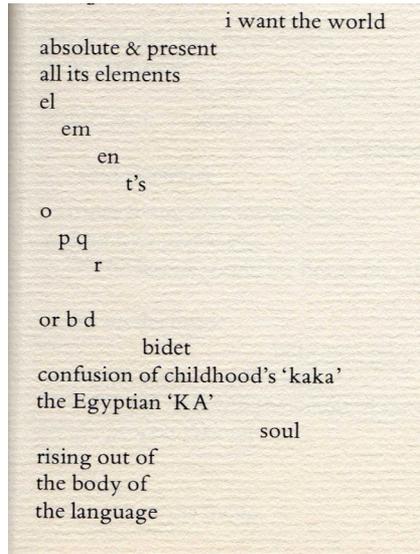


Figure 3. A page from bpNichol's *The Martyrology*, Books 3 and 4 (Coach House, 1976).

would have been appalled by the binary critical views of his writing — as dated lyricism versus avant-garde visual poetry and 'pataphysics — that have developed since his death in 1988 (see Bök; and Wershler) and possibly see them as similar to the sadly psychotic hallucinations of *The Martyrology's* saints.

Regrettably, most contemporary readers seem to have interpreted his 1971 "poetry is dead" declaration as a mere literary figure; there is no evidence that any took it as a serious observation, one that the young poet had hoped would inspire action or response. His 1964-71 notebooks, however, show that the limited communication value that Nichol perceived in the conventions of established poetry was part of a personal crisis in which his self-disgust at often being willing to live superficially blended with his dismay that so much conventional poetry was being written to such little effect. When he wrote of the dominant discursive first-person poem as "ordinary," he was calling it both banal and futile — much as he sometimes suicidally feared his own life might be becoming. The "poetry is dead" assertion of *ABC* therefore should also have been read as related to another 1971 poetics salvo: his satiric attack in *The Captain Poetry Poems* on Al Purdy, Milton Acorn, and "the *courier de bois*

[sic] image of the [Canadian] poet: ‘you go into a bar, slam your poems on the table, and order a brew for all the guys’ (“Interview” with Norris 241). Macho self-display, Nichol believed, had become a Canadian sub-genre of the dominant lyric ordinary. His objections here were not a posture or an attempt at scandal; they were part of a serious attempt to liberate himself through alternative poetics from mere competence in an earlier period’s verse forms. He was not the only prominent Canadian poet to perceive the narrowly self-perpetuating field that “ordinary” poetry was at risk of becoming. The period 1964-71 was also when Leonard Cohen created and left behind a brilliant series of lyric poetry collections in favour of Easthope’s “popular song” and when George Bowering published *Genève*, the first of several major procedural poems.⁵ For Nichol, as for Cohen and Bowering, the problem of writing a new, and more relevant, kind of poetry was not a problem of content but a problem of form — a problem of genre, language, and medium. Nichol saw a “need to free up form — to unarmour the poem,” as “[s]yntax and the way you structure the sentence limits the content you can put out” (Bayard and David 28). As a collective problem, it was not going to be solved by enlarging the variety of ethnicities, races, or sexualities that wrote and published poetry, as desirably democratic a social goal as that was, because an interest in writing a poem does not necessarily imply an interest in freeing up the forms that limit what a poem can “say.” It was a problem that would be enacted vividly two decades later by Marlene NourbeSe Philip in her amazing “Discourse on the Logic of Language” (55-60) — a poem that, again, would unfortunately be read most often as a “mere” poem rather than a serious manifesto on poetics.

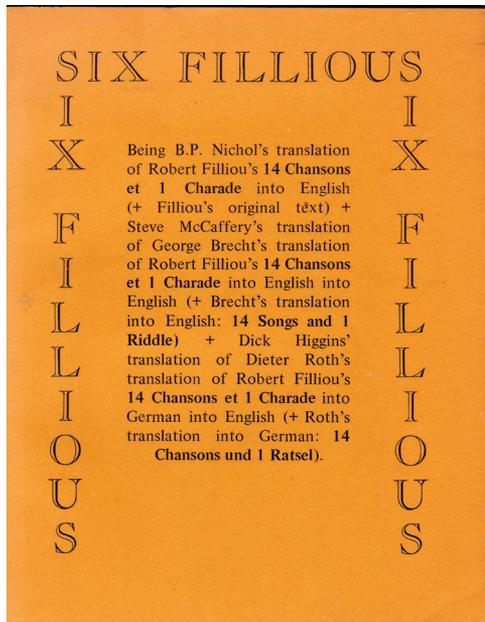


Figure 4. Cover of bpNichol’s *Six Fillious* (Membrane, 1978).

Nichol's initial visual, sound, and conceptual work overlapped not only with the emergence in the early 1960s of international visual poetry but also with that of the multinational art group FLUXUS (initially called Neo-Dada by its organizer George Maciunas) in Wiesbaden and New York, though there is no evidence that Nichol was aware of the group or its members until 1966, when FLUXUS participant Emmett Williams invited him to contribute to the anthology of concrete poetry that he was editing for poet Dick Higgins's Something Else Press. Nichol would eventually, in 1978, edit a book of Robert Filliou translations with contributions by Filliou's fellow FLUXUS members Higgins and Dieter Roth and develop a friendship with FLUXUS sound poet Bernard Heidsieck. FLUXUS' interest in boxed rather than bound collections of artwork (the "Fluxkit," promoted by Maciunas from 1964 to 1973) was echoed in Nichol's first Canadian book, the boxed *bp* from Coach House Press in 1967, in the award-winning *The Cosmic Chef* and *Still Water* of 1970, and in several later books produced by artist Barbara Caruso,⁶ but again there is no evidence that he knew of the Fluxkit⁷ — though he did likely know by then of Marcel Duchamp's late-1930s *Boîte en valise*.

This somewhat indirect connection to Dada and "Neo-Dada" is similar to that of another major twentieth-century Canadian practitioner of alphabetic visual art, Greg Curnoe, who met and learned from Dada historian Michel Sanouillet in 1958 while Sanouillet was teaching at the University of Toronto (Elder 255). Curnoe's interest in painting words



Figure 5. Various bpNichol box-bound books.

and sentences might have come from Dada's preference for non-artistic materials or developed from his creation of collages from ephemeral printed texts such as cigarette packages and bus transfers. Lettered text work made with stencils was among the first work that Curnoe created after abandoning art school in 1960. He would soon go on to produce rubber stamp and water-colour letterings of lists, words overheard, words encountered, or things he had seen or done.

Both Nichol and Curnoe here were creating layers of non-lexical meaning by their acts of visually citing or reproducing the words and word clusters of these works.

The words were displayed rather than said, avoiding the locutory act of the lyric poet — that is, avoiding any illusion of the artist having been the enunciator of the words written or cited.⁸ The enunciator of the text appears to be prior, elsewhere, other; in some of Nichol's visual poems, enunciation, if understood as pronunciation, might seem difficult or unlikely. In the work of each artist, words have a scribe or painter but not necessarily a speaker — as in Curnoe's list of local workers ("Westing House Workers," 1962), his list of comic strip characters ("Dessin Animé," 1987), or his cryptic citation in a 1962 painting (*O Let's Twist Again*) of the opening line of Chubby Checker's 1961 hit song "Let's Twist Again."⁹ The materiality of imprinting words on paper, backgrounded or effaced in most poetry, is — especially in Curnoe — dramatically foregrounded. The possibility of a non-lettered painting or paintings or a discursive poem is evoked but left for the viewer to imagine. As US critic John Noel Chandler observed in 1973, Curnoe was "doing conceptual art and process art since before these terms were coined" (23). His replacing of realist painting with language was also in advance of US Language painters Lawrence Weiner, Edward

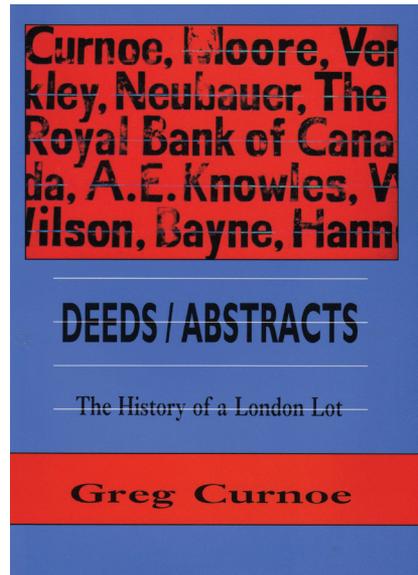


Figure 6. Cover of Greg Curnoe's *Deeds/Abstracts* (Brick, 1995), with the cover image of his 1991 rubber stamp, gouache, and pencil painting *Deeds no. 2* (106 x 168 cm).

Ruscha, and Joseph Kosuth and the British Art and Language group.¹⁰ Influenced by Curnoe rather than by Dada, Canadian poet-painter Dennis Tourbin created language work in the 1970s that similarly foregrounded materiality and obscured enunciation and, in a 1981 Art Gallery of Peterborough catalogue, referred to his paintings as “visual poetry.”¹¹

The fact that Nichol, Curnoe, McCaffery, and Tourbin were displaying text rather than communicating linguistically/discursively through it expanded into visual and conceptual art that divide between “dead” poetry and poetry that could “live again,” and clarified it as a divide between artists who produce text to be viewed or, like Nichol in *The Martyrology*, to be viewed and experienced as a language event, and those who produce it mainly to be read as an encryption of a prior meaning. Displayed text links all of them to Vancouver visual and performance artist Michael Morris who in 1967-69 was creating single-



Figure 7. Page from Derek Beaulieu's book *Kern* (Les Figues, 2015).

copy concrete poems for gallery presentation as a form of visual art (Watson 78-79) and to contemporary conceptual poets such as Lisa Robertson, Peter Jaeger, and Christian Bök, who work with found or constrained text, and to the visual poetry of Derek Beaulieu.

In 2013, Toronto's Power Plant Gallery presented the exhibition "Postscript: Writing after Conceptual Art," which featured "paintings, sculpture, installation, video and works on paper from the 1960s to the present by over fifty artists and writers exploring the artistic possibilities of language," curated by Nora Burnett Abrams and Andrea Andersson. Curiously, no work by Curnoe, Tourbin, Nichol, bissett, or McCaffery was included. The show's title reflected the error often currently made that conceptual writing followed and was a response to conceptual art, when in fact it was part of the intermedia, visual poetry, sound poetry, Neo-Dada, FLUXUS, and performance milieu from which the concept of conceptual art emerged. The omission of 1960s Canadian visual artists appears to have contributed to the following observation by the curators:

The contemporary conceptual writing filling the [Power Plant] galleries includes paintings, drawings, prints, 16mm films, digital video, photographs, mixed-media sculpture, sound installations, and iPad applications; the historical works on view are distinguished by their increasingly obsolete bound structure. For an exhibition full of copies — of found and reproduced texts, of visual and literary art that mimic one another and echo works from preceding generations — the book binding introduces questions about the role of disciplinary specificity in contemporary reading and writing practices. (Power Plant Gallery)

Book binding did not restrain the work of Curnoe, though he was happy to produce between 1964 and 1972, in addition to his framed rubber stamp work, his "blue book" series of seven unique rubber-stamped book objects and an eighth published in bound facsimile by Toronto's Art Metropole in 1989. Nor did it restrain Nichol, who distributed his visual text work as single-sheet pamphlets, quilted wall hangings, boxes of unnumbered, unbound pages, LP recordings, and in 1984 computer code on an Apple II floppy disk, as well as in the "increasingly obsolete bound structure" of the book. But however inaccurate the curators' statement about the history of Canadian conceptual art and writing,

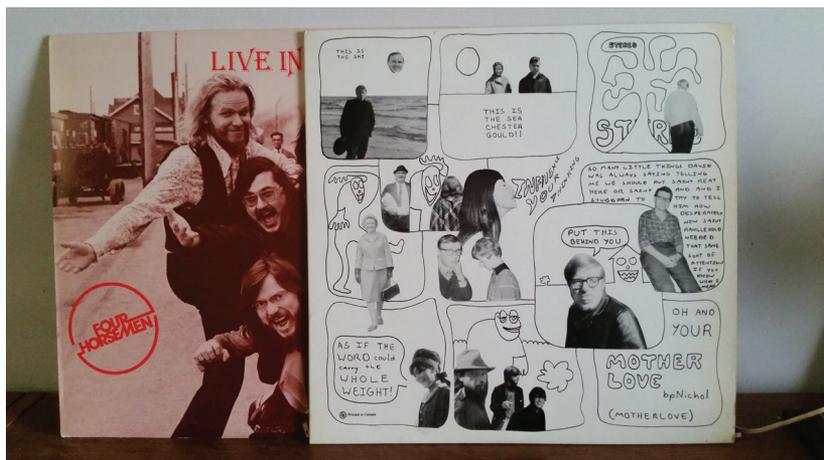


Figure 8. bpNichol's LP *Mother Love* (1968) and the Four Horsemen LP *Live in the West* (1977), with horseman Nichol at the far left of the jacket photo.

it did point to how easily text distributed in non-bound or non-print media can be invisible to scholarly or curatorial scrutiny, whether in galleries, conference rooms, bound books, or bound scholarly journals. It also pointed to that current divide between the work of poets who continue older bound-book modes and those who work in intermedia or multimedia modes pioneered by artists such as Nichol, Curnoe, bissett, Birney, Morris, Tourbin, Copithorne, and Kearns.

The Power Plant Gallery show with its strange implication that visual work created with language began in Canada in the 1990s with Darren Wershler, Christian Bök, and Michelle Gay, while beginning internationally in the 1970s with Marcel Broodthaers, Andy Warhol, and Sol Lewitt, also suggested how out of touch the Canadian visual art community might be not only with artwork such as Curnoe's, or that of his contemporaries Morris, Tourbin and John Boyle, but also with the history of visual and conceptual poetry in the Canadian writing community. I do not believe that any major Canadian art gallery holds visual work by Nichol, McCaffery, Birney, or Copithorne except perhaps the University of British Columbia's Belkin Art Gallery through its 1992 acquisition of the Image Bank archive of Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov. On the textual side, editor Gary Geddes famously removed concrete poetry from his *15 Canadian Poets* anthology series in 1988 and from his *20th Century Poetry and Poetics* anthology in 1985 (see Butling and Rudy 73-74).

Geddes's slighting of visual and conceptual poetry in favour of perpetuating Nichol's "ordinary" poetry was at least a somewhat informed gesture; in his recent memoir "Confessions of an Unrepentant Anthologist," Geddes portrays himself as both conservative yet eclectic and knowledgeable enough to make token representations of Nichol, Lisa Robertson, and Erin Mouré in his latest anthology (*70 Canadian Poets*) to the extent that budget and conservatism permit. The Power Plant Gallery curators' exclusion, even of mention, of Nichol, Curnoe, Morris, McCaffery, bissett, and Tourbin suggests only ignorance. Both exclusions, however, have serious consequences. Both obscure at least a fifty-five-year Canadian history of non-ordinary alternative poetics — a history of image-text, sound poetry, procedural poetry, mail art, collaborative art, and digital art at least as long as that of "conceptual art" in the United States and running parallel to the residual "ordinary" poetics that constitute the majority of the contents of Canadian secondary and postsecondary school anthologies. It is a history that has had its own multigenerational audiences in galleries, libraries, and music clubs rather than the largely captive undergraduate academic audiences that the anthologized "ordinary" poetics have enjoyed.

The Power Plant Gallery exclusions render both the included and the excluded Canadian artists as anomalies, concealing Bök's and Wershler's relationships, for example, with Nichol and McCaffery and instead presenting them as sidebars to the evolution of US conceptualism. The ultimate risk here is of portraying any innovative non-lyric Canadian poetics as an outgrowth of "Americanism" or "globalism" and depicting the authentic Canadian, as Geddes portrays himself, as marked by "the ingrained conservatism of the poor, or the poorly educated," a "bias" that he hopes "has had the beneficial effect of making me concentrate on the poem itself rather than on theory or literary criticism" (211). The poem, Nichol would have argued, is never just "the poem itself," existing outside time, but a text shaped by all those changing and "genuinely contemporary" cultural circumstances that Easthope (161) saw established poetic discourse straining to ignore. "Theory or literary criticism," Nichol would have argued, is not antithetical to poetry but, as it has been to Philip, part of the field in which it is composed. It would be anti-intellectual to assert otherwise.

Poetry to be viewed more than to be read as discourse has appeared in divergent forms in Canada in recent decades. In 1996 Bök published

CHAPTER 0

for Yoko Ono

Thinking within strict limits is stifling. Whilst Viking knights fight griffins, I skirmish with this riddling sphinx (this sigil – I). I print lists, filing things (kin with kin, ilk with ilk), inscribing this distinct sign, listing things in which its imprint is intrinsic. I find its missing links, divining its implicit tricks. I find it whilst skindiving in Fiji; I find it whilst picnicking in Linz. I find it in Inniskillin; I find it in Mississippi. I find it whilst skiing in Minsk. (Is this intimism civilizing if Kliimt limns it, if Liszt lits it?) I sigh; I lisp. I finish writing this writ, signing it, kind sir: NIHIL DICIT, FINI.

Loops on bold fonts now form lots of words for books. Books form cocoons of comfort – tombs to hold book-worms. Profs from Oxford show frosh who do post-docs how to gloss works of Wordsworth. Dons who work for proctors or provosts do not fob off school to work on crosswords, nor do dons go off to dorm rooms to loll on cots. Dons go crosstown to look for bookshops known to stock lots of top-notch goods: cookbooks, workbooks – room on room of how-to books for jocks (how to jog, how to box), books on pro sports: golf or polo. Old colophons on school-books from schoolrooms sport two sorts of logo: ob-long whorls, rococo scrolls – both on worn morocco.

Figure 9. Two pages from Christian Bök's *Eunoia* (Coach House, 2001).

interviewer Kai Fierle-Hedrick that the lines of her highly praised 2001 poetry book *The Weather* were “all lifted” — but apparently not by computer-assisted lifting. Because of Canada Council confidentiality practices, whether any other books, such as Robertson's or my 2011 flarf collection, the hard-to-mistake *Bardy Google*, have been withheld from Governor General's Literary Awards jurors is difficult to know;¹² certainly, the council's initial intervention accorded with Easthope's view of the state's support of traditional understandings of what constitutes poetry. That intervention was also arguably anti-intellectual.

Meanwhile, Peter Jaeger published *Rapid Eye Movement* (2009), a one-hundred-page collage of found sentences half of which are from dream accounts and half which contain the word *dream*, and *The Persons* (2011), a fifty-page exercise in life writing in which the “persons” are each given no more than two found sentences, no two sentences consecutively. Each sentence begins with a name followed immediately by a verb and is appropriated from an existing source, whether emails, lyric poetry, travel literature, newspapers, psychoanalytical literature, diaries, religious literature, and so on, and arranged in an apparently random order. The book was published by the British visual art press Information as Material. Jaeger has commented that he feels particularly drawn to the visual arts: “It never ceases to surprise me how far the ‘high-street’ poetries lag behind visual art discourses in their con-

before. They took me by gunpoint to a girl standing in the middle of a round table covered with books. The sled had rubber runners. I started to socialize and chat with people, but also had to keep my eye on my crocodile, which kept wandering off. He was the most horrible sight, it seemed, that I had ever seen. I literally threw him into the sink then. I tilted back her

Here I should merely like to cite a dream, yet without analyzing it more closely, which would lead us too far afield. He woke, after a disturbed and dreamful sleep, in full daylight. The half-awake trees are up to their knees in mist—a dream of Japan. In 1904, English novelist H. Rider Haggard dreamed he saw his daughter's black retriever lying among brushwood by water. By

Figure 10. Page from Peter Jaeger's *Rapid Eye Movement* (Reality Street, 2009).

ceptual development,” he told interviewer rob mclennan. “As [US poet] Ron Silliman said, ‘they write like the 20th century never happened.’” Jaeger is one of a handful of contemporary British residents included

in Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith's 2011 *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* but in the company of eight other Canadians: McCaffery, Beaulieu, Bök, Kennedy, Wershler, Donato Mancini, Philip, and Dan Farrell. Bök himself published last year (2015) book one of a new poetry project, *The Xenotext*, designed to encrypt in the DNA of a nearly indestructible bacterium a short poem that will preserve our humanity long after mammalian extinction. Many of its pages present scientific formulas to be viewed and — once again — textual performances to be admired. The bacterium-encrypted poem is unlikely ever to be anthologized by Geddes, but it has been designed to blithely survive all those poems that have been. Bök, not surprisingly, is a notable absentee from Geddes's *70 Canadian Poets*.

Robertson's latest book, *Cinema of the Present*, is a kind of recursive cinema of language, displaying various types of sentences and pronoun functions for roughly a hundred pages, alternating italic and roman fonts, and mixing impersonal and personal statements, with the latter changing from a majority in the first person to a minority in the second. Some sentences, usually pages apart, contradict one another but in almost identical syntax and vocabulary. What the book "says" — if such a question can be asked about a book with such recalcitrant, non-explicit thematics — concerns language and poetic form and to some extent theories of conceptual poetry. *Publishers Weekly* reviewer Alex Crowley called the book "self-reflexive" — which it is, I suppose, if we understand Pope's *Essay on Criticism* as self-reflexive. His "self-reflexive" seems to refer to the fact that numerous lines are systematically repeated in the poem rather than to the claim that there are instances when the poem discusses itself — which it doesn't do. But Robertson's poem does indirectly comment on its own poetics by discussing poetics, much the way that Pope's *Essay on Criticism* also functions as a work of criticism. Her work, together with Bök's, Jaeger's, and Beaulieu's, is a poetry that largely defies paraphrase, a poetry whose creators often perceive themselves as writing not only "against expression" but also against poetry that invites paraphrase. It is a poetry that is not an attempt at meaning, as in that staple of the undergraduate essay, "the poet is trying to say"; in McCaffery's words, it is "prior to meaning."¹³

Neither Nichol nor Curnoe was ideologically "against expression," but both were committed to, among other things, textual art in which words appear to resonate and communicate on their own rather than

You simply set aside the fantasy of the all-responsible subject.

Perhaps you are the memory of her senses.

You sing to remember.

You take shelter in a figural sensation.

You seek a coat for intellectual amplexness.

Then you are the memory of her dress.

You suddenly recognized that for a long time you had been thinking the wrong materiality, that you had inadequately differentiated.

You decorate time with sprigs and scraps of mortal stuff.

You swam into splendor.

To whom do you speak?

You take shelter in a figural sensation.

You never agreed with disambiguation.

You think that houses seem to be built entirely of sorrow.

As for the scrappy parking-lot trees, you are full of tenderness for the feminine in them.

You think this place could be worldless.

You want a politics of incompleteness.

Figure 11. Page from Lisa Robertson's *Cinema of the Present* (Coach House, 2015).

as person-specific utterances. Much the same can be said of Birney, Tourbin, Kearns, Bissett, and Copithorne. It can also be said of current poets such as Gary Barwin and Kathryn Mockler, who have followed the 'paraphysical poetics pioneered in Canada by Nichol in *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* and *Truth: A Book of Fictions*. Many contemporary visual and conceptual practitioners indeed tend to be "against" thematic or issue-based poetics and — like McCaffery — to divorce themselves from discursive poetics. Beaulieu writes in a recent manifesto that "poetry has become ruefully ensconced in the traditional. . . . [T]he vast majority of poets are trapped in the 20th (if not the 19th) century hopelessly reiterating tired tropes" ([3]). The echoes of Nichol's 1971 visual poem manifesto — "poetry being at a dead end poetry is dead. . . . The poem will live again when we accept finally the fact of the poem's death" (*ABC passim*) — here become bitter and contemptuous.¹⁴

Perhaps readers, historians, and anthologists should have taken more seriously Nichol's puzzlement that poets continued to want to write a "dead" style of poetry, one that, as Easthope would soon observe, by the late twentieth century had little audience beyond that captive one of undergraduates. New art forms, after all, are much more than new fashions with which to make previous ones appear embarrassingly out-moded; they are the means by which art retains its cultural relevance and leverage and are — at least indirectly — of benefit to all who write. In that 1983 passage that I began this essay by quoting, Easthope declared that the poetry of the "single voice" was a residual phenomenon proper to Western bourgeois cultures of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and that non-discursive poetics would emerge as the canonical texts of our own periods. Perhaps that will become evident in the next forty years of *Studies in Canadian Literature*. At present, almost all of Easthope's new poetry is confined in the United Kingdom to popular music, art gallery exhibitions, festival performances, and non-academic presses. Yet concurrently Christian Bök's *Eunoia* was the top-selling book of poetry there for 2008 and on the *Times* list of that year's top-10 books. Since 1997 three of Robertson's books have been published there, publications which have led to her holding residencies at three British universities, including Cambridge. She has also had two poetry books published in the United States, one with the prestigious University of California Press, and another in French translation in France. Her books

have been reviewed — like Bök’s and McCaffery’s — by major media such as the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Jacket*, and *Chicago Review*. Some of Bök’s, Beaulieu’s, and McCaffery’s books have also been published by significant US presses (see notes 4 and 13). But it would be difficult to discover that such places consider these writers among Canada’s leading contemporary poets by looking through the past decade of Canadian academic publications.

NOTES

¹ Easthope’s comment that while official poetry had become culturally irrelevant, people had become “much more interested in such genuinely contemporary media as cinema, television and popular song” was not a suggestion that these media should be regarded as the new poetry. Both Nichol and Easthope preferred a poetry that was also a “genuinely contemporary” medium.

² Nichol had attempted a satiric attack on heavily masculine lyric poetry in *The Captain Poetry Poems* (1971), but his readers — including Michael Ondaatje, who later made the film *Sons of Captain Poetry* — usually mistook the figure as a positive one.

³ I write “ostensibly” because the numerous destabilizing elements that Nichol introduces to this work — phonemic and syllabic play, optional reading “chains” in Book V, the time constraints in “The Book of Hours” — appear often to subvert the intentionality of an “author” and to make him merely one of the poem’s many characters.

⁴ Three collections of McCaffery’s literary theory essays have been published in the United States, two of them only there. The most intelligent commentary on his work has been by the influential US critic Marjorie Perloff in her studies *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991), *Poetry on and off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (1998), *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (2002), and *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (2012).

⁵ Bowering’s procedural poems are arguably also among the earliest major Canadian conceptual poems in that they are based on the removal of the overall structuring of a long or book-length poem from the author’s conscious control. They are related to his studies with Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, both of whom distrusted lyric poetry and sought ways — Olson through “composition by field” and Duncan through chance operations — to avoid intentional discourse. Olson’s sardonic characterization of the lyric poem in his 1950 manifesto “Projective Verse” as “the private-soul-at-any-public wall” (*Human Universe* 51) is one of the earliest North American signs of the lyric’s limitations. The importance of Bowering as a conceptual poet, however, has been obscured by the numerous impressive lyric poems that he has become known by — much the way in which the achievements of Canadian visual and conceptual poetics themselves have been concealed by the persistence of discursive poetics generally.

⁶ Caruso acted as both publisher and collaborator in her work with Nichol. Through her Seripress, she published limited, often boxed editions of his visual work, including *Aleph Unit* (1973), *Unit of Four* (1974), *ALPHABET/ILPHABET* (1978), *From My Window* (1978), *Absolute Statement for My Mother* (1979), *Love Affair* (1979), *Movies* (1979), and *Door to*

Oz (1979), and two boxed editions of works that owed much conceptually to Nichol but in which most of the artwork was by Caruso: *The Adventures of Milt the Morph in Colour* (1972) and *H: An Excursion: A Collaboration* (1976).

⁷ No FLUXUS member appears in Nichol's *grOnk* and Ganglia Press publications of 1965-72, though numerous members of the British visual poetry and French *spatialiste* avant-garde scenes do, nor is any mentioned in Nichol's essays, notebooks, and correspondence before 1966.

⁸ See Easthope (43-45) for a longer discussion of enunciation. In Nichol's *The Martyrology*, the narrative of a destroyed planet and the stories of the mostly unfortunate lives of fictional saints also often lack an identifiable enunciator.

⁹ Curnoe's "Westing House Workers" can be viewed on the Concordia University Canadian art website at http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/image.html?languagePref=en&url=/c/images/big/c/curnoe/cur056.jpg&crigh=Greg+Curnoe&mkey=53921&link_id=1176; "Dessin Animée" can be viewed at http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/work_detail.html?languagePref=en&mkey=53889&ctitle=Dessin+Anim%C3%A9&artist=Greg+Curnoe&link_id=1176; and *O Let's Twist Again* can be viewed at <http://www.gibsongallery.com/exhibitions/greg-curnoe-text/photos/o-lets-twist-again>.

¹⁰ Andrew Wilson in his 2016 Tate Britain exhibition catalog, *Conceptual Art in Britain 1964-1979*, attributes the first use of the term "conceptual art" to an early essay by Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (*Artforum* 5.10 [Summer 1967]: 79-83), and its first occurrence in Britain to the subtitle of the journal *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art*, founded in Coventry in May 1969 by artists Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, and Harold Hurrell (9, 38). The lead-off article in the first issue of *Art-Language* was "Sentences on Conceptual Art" by LeWitt. In her appendix to Wilson's Tate Britain catalog, "Selected Group Exhibitions," Louisa Lee lists as the first conceptual art exhibition anywhere the Institute of Contemporary Arts' "Between Poetry and Painting," London, 22 October - 27 November 1965, curated by Jasia Reichardt (148). In the expanded spring 1966 iteration of this exhibition, then at Arlington Mill, Gloucester (not mentioned by Lee), Reichardt had added work by bpNichol (Davey 81) — effectively placing him among conceptual artists a year before the term "conceptual art" would appear in print.

¹¹ In this essay, Tourbin also linked his language paintings to earlier attempts to write "concrete poetry" and to his childhood scrapbooking of articles torn from newspapers.

¹² The major problem with the Canada Council's withholding of *Apostrophe* from award jurors — apart from the claim it makes that the council is able to define what is poetry — is that the council is unlikely to recognize every book of poetry constructed of "lifted" text and thus very likely to enforce such withholding inconsistently. I recently (2015) asked Bök, the whistle-blowing juror in the 2006 case of *Apostrophe*, whether he believed that the Canada Council embargo of such poetry was continuing, and he replied that he had not been told, despite assurances from the council that he would be consulted no later than 2007 about drafting formal awards policies ("Politics" 127). Bök's understanding is that the council has never had a formal definition of "poetry," or any written "rules" or "protocols" to govern the poetry award, and feels that this lack has been "unconscionable" (126).

¹³ Two of McCaffery's early collections of essays, *North of Intention* (1986) and *Prior to Meaning* (2001), explored writing that was non-referential or "protosemantic": that is, writing not "intended" to be anything but itself and above all not intended to be a text in which the writer "tries" to convey a theme or represent a meaning. *North of Intention* was co-published by the Canadian and US small presses Nightwood Editions and Roof Books; *Prior to Meaning* was published in Illinois by Northwestern University Press.

¹⁴ What does not echo from Nichol to Beaulieu is the latter's evident scorn for "trapped" poets "hopelessly reiterating tired tropes." Psychotherapist/poet Nichol saw himself as sympathetic to poets who could work only in obsolete forms; because of blind spots in Canadian poetry historiography, he had once been such a poet himself. His *Martyrology* deals gently with the similarly trapped saints of his adolescent "Cloudbottom" imagination and laments when they become necessarily dead at the end of the poem's Book 2.

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