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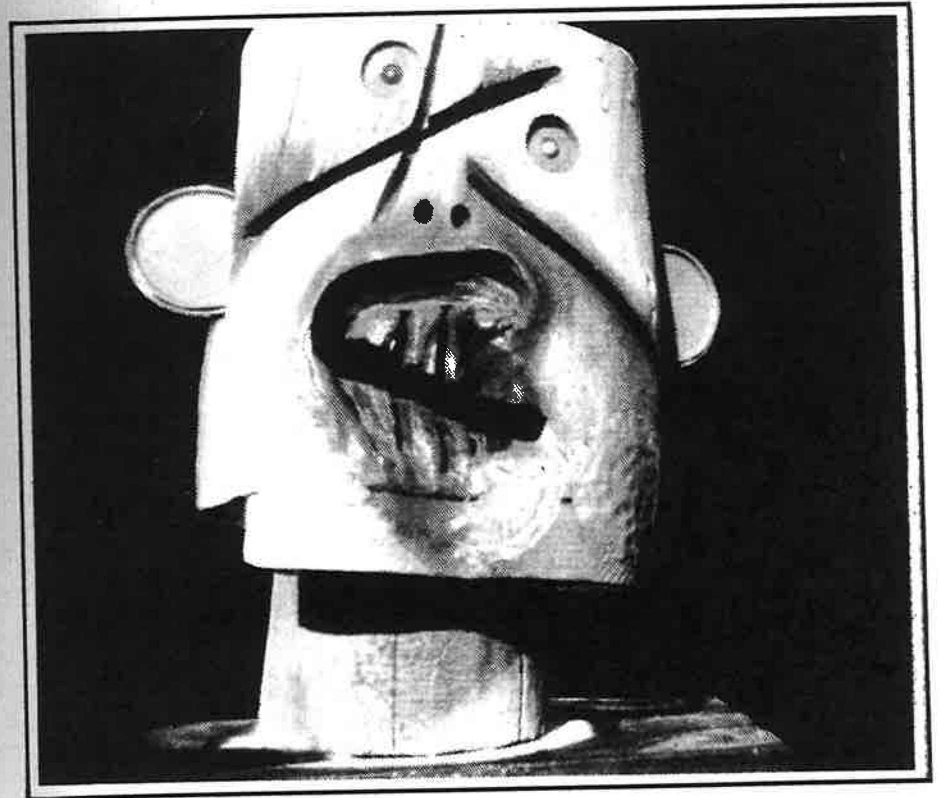

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Extended Forms: One Book & Then Another: The Canadian Long Poem

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> At a certain point you decide to start with what's in front of you. There's no point despairing of a subject, or carrying on some misguided search for a 'great' theme when all you have to do is start with what's in front of you: the blue lines, the ink, the pen, the letters the pen shapes, the words the letters make, the table, the window, those leafless trees, these leaves in this notebook in front of me, you — the stuff of poetry. (Nichol, 1986*a*)

Where to begin, that is always the difficulty. bpNichol is writing about writing poetry, especially writing a long poem, while I am faced with writing a short paper, on the long poem. Though beginnings, as such, may be illusory, I have to start somewhere. Part of what's right in front of me includes some of the writers who were present at ACSANZ '86, such as Daphne Marlatt, George Bowering, and Robert Kroetsch, and in the notes which follow I shall be engaging their work along with the work of such writers as bpNichol.

> I may have been influenced by Scandinavian poetry, which is dominated by a certain form of plain-speaking. The fascination with experiment in language and form that one often finds in modern Canadian poetry is not so evident there. What does amount to an obsession in Scandinavia, and which is woefully absent from Canadian letters, is a concern with global nuclear escalation. (Gunnars, 1985, p.4)

Given the news reports as I write this on the nuclear accident at Chernobyl and the possible fallout in the Scandinavian countries, Kristjana Gunnars' comments seem almost prescient, but what I find interesting in them is the implied criticism of Canadian poets for *not* seeking this '"great" theme'. Yet as bpNichol suggests, the poets who share his poetic start with what's in front of them, and follow the language to its possible (and often multiple) destination[s]. Or, as he puts it in Book 4 of *The Martyrology*,

> what's immediate is
> the word in front of me
> the one beyond that that i'm reaching for
> no muse at all really
> simply this canadian foot
> following a tentative line   forward
> taking the time to tell you everything

This is, in fact, as plainly spoken as one could imagine, but Gunnars is correct to

identify a specifically Canadian 'fascination with experiment in language and form', of which bpNichol is one of Canada's leading exemplars. The reasons for such experimentation include 'taking the time to tell you everything', walking far on that 'Canadian foot', and then digging through layers of simultaneously apprehended material, timed space; and we can walk very far to each 'archeological dig'[1] because Canada is so vast (as is Australia — but there, as Russell McDougall has suggested [McDougall and Whitlock, 1987, p.205], the method tends to be one of 'sprawl', rather than digging). Yet, as Nichol says elsewhere (1985, p.25), 'what one is often/mostly wrestling with in writing is the present tense, trying to find alternatives to the larger narratives [say a singleminded 'reading' of the politics of the atom] within which writing seems to exist, the political / national / historical / psychological (& so on) frames in which it is (will be?) read'. This seems to imply that a writing which inscribes its own coming into being will engage the political, etc., anyway.

> [W]e are half spooked and half at home here; . . . we cannot master the space we have been thrown in, yet are claimed by it and will be at home nowhere else; . . . we cannot return in time to Europe, yet have learned from it the vocabulary of being human and can at most speak partial sentences of our own in that language.
>
> (Lee, 1972, p.14)

English Canadian poets may be fascinated by language because they live in the shadows of the two major literatures and ideolects of English: those of Britain and the United States. Culturally defined *between* the old country and the new, never having revolted against the European parents yet definitely out on its own in North America, Canada seems a likely ground for writers whose interest is specifically that language by which they might come to recognise and understand their space and selves, yet which is so obviously a collage of other tongues, including other 'english' ones. Although open to some regional criticism, especially from those later immigrants who learned english as a second language, Dennis Lee's statement is especially suggestive here. Although Canadians may have left Europe, they have not chosen to emulate the American way of conquering and domineering the land (at least not completely). Marginalised in the best sense, their language, and the literature grounded in it, entertains a wholly open sense of ambiguity, relativity, and refusal of closure on any level. The ongoing poem, the long poem which, in its continual openness to transformation and change, resists closure, is one expression of this attitude.

1965: Phyllis Webb, *Naked Poems*.[2]

> A kind of hesitation even to write the long poem. Two possibilities: the short long poem, the book-long poem. Webb, insisting on that hesitation. On that delay. On nakedness and lyric and yet on a way out, perhaps a way out of the ending of lyric too, with its ferocious principles of closure, a being compelled out of lyric by lyric:
>
> (Kroetsch, 1983, p.92)

One possible myth of origin, here, not only in Kroetsch's allusive critique, but in the homages so many poets pay to *Naked Poems*, that book which taught among

other things a very Canadian distrust of large gestures yet refused to stay trapped in the structures of pure lyric discourse. *Naked Poems* insists on being read as a book, yet it is a disjunctive sequence which continually deconstructs its own ground, even in the pure and passionate 'lyric' cry of its first two 'suites'. The 'voice' of this poem is tenuous in the extreme, a dissipation of the traditional lyric ego. Listen:

> AND
> here
> and here and
> here
> and over   and
> over   your mouth   (p.66)

What is inscribed here? A conjunction; an adverb of place(meant); an adverb of temporal repetition, which also signifies height, and 'in excess' or 'beyond what has been said'; a possessive pronoun (strangely *un*focused because the second person is nowhere identified any further) expressing by this point in the poem an extreme possession — but on whose behalf; and one noun, very physical, yet implying speech, especially that of love/making. However, even that noun becomes abstracted in the music of the poem. Like all the others it tends to float free of signification, to become pure signifier-in-action. We have enunciation here, not enounced, and the narrated event exists only in this intensely physical fragment of broken song which is not simply song but dance.

The poem announces polysemous possibilities other writers soon began to explore in their own ways, among them Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt, and bpNichol.

> I want to point to what I think the most interesting thing about Whitman's approach: to what poets can learn, technically, most of all from him: the generative, visualizing effect of content upon language. I want to invoke Whitman's example against a language-centred, 'aspiring to the condition of music' type of poetry.
>
> (Gray, 1982, pp.122-123)

'Language-centred poetry' is a term often applied to the poetry of such writers as Bowering, Kroetsch, Marlatt, Nichol, and others; yet they are not seeking to escape the real, as Robert Gray's comment could be read to imply (he is writing in a wholly Australian context, and I read his comment in Russell McDougall's essay, but like so much else there, it has tempted me to a response). In *Poetry and the Body*, John Vernon argues that there are two major streams in Modernist poetry, one descending from Mallarmé, the other from Whitman, Mallarmé's contemporary. In the Mallarméan tradition, 'the act of writing has become primary — has in a sense dissolved the subject — and language has become an end in itself (Vernon, 1979, p.4).' But in the Whitmanesque tradition 'the primacy of speech over writing, . . . the importance of language as a bodily act', (Vernon, 1979, p.4) is paramount. In this situation, I see Canadian poets once again *between*: as any quick glance at, say, Nichol's *The Martyrology*, Marlatt's *Steveston*, *Touch to My Tongue*, or other books, or Kroetsch's *Field*

Notes and *Advice to My Friends* will show, they are writings which invoke and invite deconstructive readings; yet they are also powerfully enunciatory texts, re/presenting 'language as a bodily act', and, moreover, as an act of perception. They all do this differently, of course, which further reflects how each writer, no matter how carefully he or she 'displaces the ego' (to quote bpNichol (1986*b*) when he found himself giving a reading of Robert Kroetsch's poems), speaks *and writes* from the body. What strikes me as important here is the Canadian writer's ability to write both ways simultaneously. A poem like George Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* is intertextual in the extreme (after all it is a translation into Bowering of one of the great elegies of modern literature), yet it is also firmly grounded in the material presence of its author in the living world of its titular place. Daphne Marlatt's *Touch to My Tongue* not only re/inscribes etymologies which preludically refuse phallogocentrism but also sings a body song of woman's love, felt in the smallest movements of her syntax. Perhaps this literary doubleness is, in Bakhtinian terms, a carnivalesque gesture, embracing the viscerality of the spoken tongue (as Kroetsch does in his play of the vernacular) even as it insists upon its purely textual aspects. Not a simple displacement of language, then, but a continual re/displacement which we must read as both speech and writing always interacting.

> generative, language as matrix surrounds us (hands up, fingering those synaptic points where word transmits word, phrase, a whole idea rooted in a syllable, phoneme, even a *a*), a tissue of poetic words, say, each of them 'polyvalent and multi-determined' (Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', *Desire in Language*, p.65). these words constantly touch on each other, touch each other in sound(ing) reaches of meaning beyond the narrative line as such. if the narrative line is plumb, then what it plumbs stretches beyond it in every direction. the horizon line of language extends always beyond each individual speaker/writer, no matter how you turn. (Marlatt, 1986)

Where Gray seems to imply that only by beginning with content can the poet generate a 'visceral language', Daphne Marlatt would put it somewhat differently, finding the generation in language itself. Or as bpNichol has it (1985, p.132), 'it's a good idea, at least from time to time, to let the language speak', because in its 'polyvalent and multi-determined' presence it may say more than we know. Again, the refusal these writers inscribe is one of predetermined narrative direction, but not of polysemous possibility, a content/meant beyond what they might have thought they knew. Before.

> What's interesting then is not simply to tell the story but rather to find the story that's out there in the midst of all that flickering, let it reveal itself. You already know the story you set out to tell, there's no hurry with that one, so really why not start by listening? This sounds paradoxical but isn't. When I set out to tell a story I begin by listening. When I set out to write one I begin by reading. (Nichol, 1986*a*)

bpNichol isn't alone in this: George Bowering began what is perhaps his finest long poem by reading Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, his story, the one about Kerrisdale, he already 'knew'. But he didn't 'know' it in translation, and in translation it became a far richer story than it might otherwise have been, set in Canada yet

with angels from Duino Castle hovering almost within hearing. Robert Kroetsch once wrote a poem about a stone hammer. *Field Notes*, comprising the book of that title and *Advice to My Friends*, and perhaps many more books to come,[3] is the eventual result: a narrative in language, or as he has put it (Kroetsch, 1983, p.81), 'the continuing poem: not the having written but the *writing*. The poem as long as a life. The lifelost poem.' In *The Martyrology*, which now comprises eight books, of which five have been published in three volumes, bpNichol continues a writing whose 'secret narrative' (Nichol, 1985, p.308) is the compositional process itself. 'When I write as I write I am telling the story of how I see the world, how it's been given to me, what I take from it', he writes (Nichol, 1986*a*), and his long poem shows he has been given to see the world in terms of radically alternative *textures*. Like Kroetsch, he has consistently transformed the structures of his narration, of his notation. As Kroetsch says (1983, p.94), 'In Nichol we have, supremely, against the grammar of inherited story, the foregrounding of language.' And as that language goes through transformations, so too does the structure of the poem. If *The Martyrology* began with stories of the 'saints', (whose names are mostly based on 'st' words like 'stand' — 'saint and') it quickly engaged the life of the poet as he wrote, continually interrogating structural possibilities, which in their self-reflexivity turn and turn again upon themselves, continually re/writing the poem as 'an accumulation / cumulous' (Nichol, 1976). What happens in *The Martyrology*, Nichol has said (Miki, 1985, p.24), 'is a constant formal interruption; that is to say, I'm dealing with form this way, then I'm dealing with form that way'. Some of the formal changes include: the reading/writing of letters and syllables as words within sentences made up of larger words, begun in the 'CODA: Mid-Initial Sequence' at the end of Book 3, the 'chain' structure of Book 5, where twelve numbered sections, connected internally at points in the text where Nichol realised he could write in two directions and chose to follow both, give each reader a separate possible narrative route through the text; the six simultaneous narratives of Book 6; the 'shuffle text' of Book 7 which will also contain the nevertheless separate Book 8. Kroetsch, too, has written a series of books which alter each other and therefore keep demanding further alternations-in-additions. For Kroetsch, one of the central questions involves what can be termed 'poetic discourse'. So he has, in a Bakhtinian sense (1981, pp.xxxii; 259-422), 'novelistically' transformed letters, postcards, footnotes, dictionary entries, seed catalogues, ledgers, the conventional poetic forms of elegy, lament, sonnet, epithalamium, post-surreal lyric, and much else into parts of the notational text of 'the continuing poem' as he continually redefines it. Fred Wah, Daphne Marlatt, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Robin Blaser, Christopher Dewdney, Roy Kiyooka, Sharon Thesen, and many others, also write *books* in which multiple perspectives, heteroglossia, techniques of fragmentation and collage, intertextuality and discontinuity, dis/play the open field of discourse as transformative ground of being.

> Sprawl occurs in art. The fifteenth to twenty-first
> lines in a sonnet, for example.

....
It is loose-limbed in its mind.
Reprimanded and dismissed
it listens with a grin and one boot up on the rail
of possibility. (Murray, 1983, pp.28-29)

In 'Sprawl and the Vertical', Russell McDougall builds a convincing argument of cultural difference based on the Australian gift for sprawl as opposed to the Canadian gift for what Kroetsch would call the archeological, and vertical, dig, the positive benefits of the incomplete. McDougall's argument is complex, and on the whole I agree with it. Still, I keep wanting to say, 'But surely there are elements of sprawl in Canadian long poems?' I find it in the rich diversification of forms throughout Kroetsch's 'poem as long as a life', and obviously in the eighteen-line 'sonnets' in *Advice to My Friends*. It's there in Nichol's realisation that 'the lines had disappeared between the forms, the novel and the poem were marginally finally, a clarity, freedom to move as i choose', which immediately leads to:

(desire becomes stronger to stretch out, explain myself, which
makes the plain ex, no longer clear, i want a different ear, a he like me, a
she where the s is (in correct relation to)
he/i/she
(why is the s the
feminizer? makes the i is, births it, gives it its being, carries the he in
the body of its word, the men inside women, the me in both of them)

EQUATIONAL DEVELOMENT; HE/IS/HE

such minimal movements to seek truth in (steve said 'you'll be accused of
shallowness' (hallowness feminzed?))) (Nichol, 1976)

Perhaps the 'minimal movements' within these long lines are what differentiate this writing from that of 'sprawl'. I don't know. But I do know I feel a quality of sprawl (and much else) in it, as in Daphne Marlatt's long-line and prose poems, in which syntactic and rhythmic nuances simultaneously register the most minute changes of linguistic direction and follow the line as far as it can go.[4]

Perhaps there's more to it than that: Marlatt, like many other women writing today, is challenging phallogocentric writing: not only does she deconstruct that given discourse, but she also insists that by wandering on its margins she will dis/cover new centres of possibility. McDougall admits that Murray's version/vision of sprawl 'is a male posture', but Daphne Marlatt, Betsy Warland, Nicole Brossard, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Sharon Thesen, and other writers of 'the feminine insurgence',[5] in their determined attack on the structures of masculinist discourse are finding what I would call 'a female posture of sprawl' which 'listens with' its own 'grin' to very different possibilities.

Of course, it seems obvious that the continuing poem, which shifts through every kind of notation and ranges in line length from the single letter to the

widest page, is sprawling, whatever else it may also be doing. I don't disagree with McDougall's major points about Australian and Canadian culture, but I would argue that Canada's more innovative writers are breaking out into something like sprawl in their writing, something very different from the predetermined form and content of a Pratt, for example, the narrative line of whose poems is far too controlled and repressed to ever be said to sprawl.

to teach them
the stupidity
of rigid category

i want the absolute precision
of fluid definition

(Nichol, 1976)

envoi (to begin with)

There is no real
world, my friends.
Why not, then,
let the stars
shine in our bones?
(Kroetsch, 1985)

Beginnings *and* endings. Even if illusory, both are difficult, and should be tentative, should they not. 'The writing the writing the writing. Fundamentally, I mean. The having written excludes the reader. We are left with ourselves as critics. We want to be readers. The continuing poem makes us readers.' Thus Robert Kroetsch. His and Nichol's works are Canada's most obvious examples of what he speaks of, but there are others, like Christopher Dewdney's *A Natural History of Southwestern Ontario*, and Jon Whyte's *The Fells of Brightness*. Moreover, as Fred Wah's *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, with its excerpts from *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* and its various 'books', shows, writing a life into a number of books calls into question the concept of the separateness of each book in that life. Wah's and Marlatt's various books can certainly be read as continuing poems, and they are not the only writers whose works accumulate thus.

It seems fitting that bpNichol should have asked Robert Kroetsch to write about notation in *Field Notes* and that Kroetsch's response should become a section of that ongoing poem. Among the many statements on notation that he offers (for there can't be just one, can there), the following (1985, p.123) seems to offer a good place to stop for the time being:

Notation is a set
of instructions for
reading (in) the
future

The reader Kroetsch wishes for/to be is invoked and involved here. *We* will be reading the writing as it continues. And it keeps happening: the reading; the writing. I have a no[ta]tion it will keep happening as long as we are willing to be reading (and writing).

Notes

1. Robert Kroetsch's term, in Neuman & Wilson, 1982, p.8.
2. References to Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems* are from her 1982 collection, *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems*.
3. At a recent conference on literary theory in Ottawa, Kroetsch stunned his audience by telling them that his latest book, *Excerpts from the Real World*, is not a part of the ongoing poem, *Field Notes*, and that perhaps his 'life long' poem is over. Some of us, at least, refused to believe him, and argued vociferously that *Excerpts* would eventually fit into that poem of accumulation as well as all the other 'books' in it did.
4. *An addendum*: during the question period, both Daphne Marlatt and George Bowering queried me on this, referring to Charles Olson's negative reference to 'sprawl' in 'Projective Verse'. Olson's sentence is: 'If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself' (1967 *Human Universe*. New York: Grove Press, p.60.) Insofar as they agree with Olson, writers will find the term 'sprawl' anathema; nevertheless, I do not believe Olson's 'sprawl' is identical with Murray's. Moreover, my desire to apply the term to Nichol and others is based on the *formal* qualities of their writings, which I discover ends up supporting McDougall's argument: the Canadian poets' *lines* may spread out across the field of the page, but the intensity of their formal engagement with their materials is, on the whole, very different from that of their Australian contemporaries. What I called 'a quality of sprawl' is present in the form, but not in the thematics.
5. Sharon Thesen used this term at Correction Line, Regina, Saskatchewan, April 12, 1986.

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