



*BOOK 6 BOOKS: ON BECOMING IN AN INCHOATE WOR(L)D*

by

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BOOK 6 BOOKS: ON BECOMING IN AN INCHDATE WOR(L)D

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## Abstract

Since 1966, bpNichol, the poet of the major Canadian long poem, *The Martyrology*, has been fervently questing for the answer to an essential problem for humanity: "How do you grow a human soul?" This is a major focus of the structure of *Book 6 Books* and of the entire *Martyrology*--the uncovering and nurturing of that essential being in the bone-house. The poet's ardent desire to reunite body with soul, to connect self with others and with otherness in the world, is the driving force behind all his questionings and deconstructing techniques.

It is Nichol's sincere empathy with other humans that makes him want to reach out to others, to find some connection with the sacred (which he finds in the act of writing), and to connect with what he has referred to as a "god-energy." For bpNichol, the act of writing is a form of prayer; the poet's holy beads are individual letters of the alphabet. Whereas the lyric voice attempts to will the presence of the god-energy, this poet allows the language to lead him, and in this sense he is an apostle, and a prophet.

Nichol is particularly concerned with individual letters, their shapes, and their sounds. His deconstruction techniques involve punning and other word-play, which make the text at once playful and dense. The poet deconstructs and decenters not only the authorial, authoritative "i," but also the very wor(l)d in which we live. Through this process, a many levelled/lettered self is exposed and the text becomes

receptive to the manifestation of an "other" power within it.

In *The Martyrology: Book 6 Books*, Nichol takes on *The Book*, which is the authoritative text of the Western World. Nichol is a true revolutionary; he does not replace old institutions with new authoritarian, hierarchical systems. Through deconstructing the patriarchal, hierarchical codes of *The Book*, including the violent doctrine and dogma of the Christian Church, the poet uncovers a previously hidden world, an unacknowledged world. It is our world--a world fit for habitation by humans, unbound of the stifling and suffocating codes that have caged our consciousnesses. This wor(l)d is, in some way, only just emerging; it is imperfectly formed; it is surrounded in mystery. It is an inchoate wor(l)d, a world in which we must bear witness to our own becoming and to all that we see. It is a wor(l)d in which the only firm rootedness exists in consciousness, "just behind home plate,"--the lid of the eye. It is here that Nichol finds place, in the endlessness of time and space, and it is here that wor(l)d order begins. It is in this world, this place, that the "soul/self" may begin to grow.

Through its sophisticated signifying systems of puns, *The Martyrology* allows each reader to find her or his unique way to an "inchoate road." The purport of the signs in this text is to nurture and to promote a realization in all participating readers of their place in an inchoate wor(l)d.

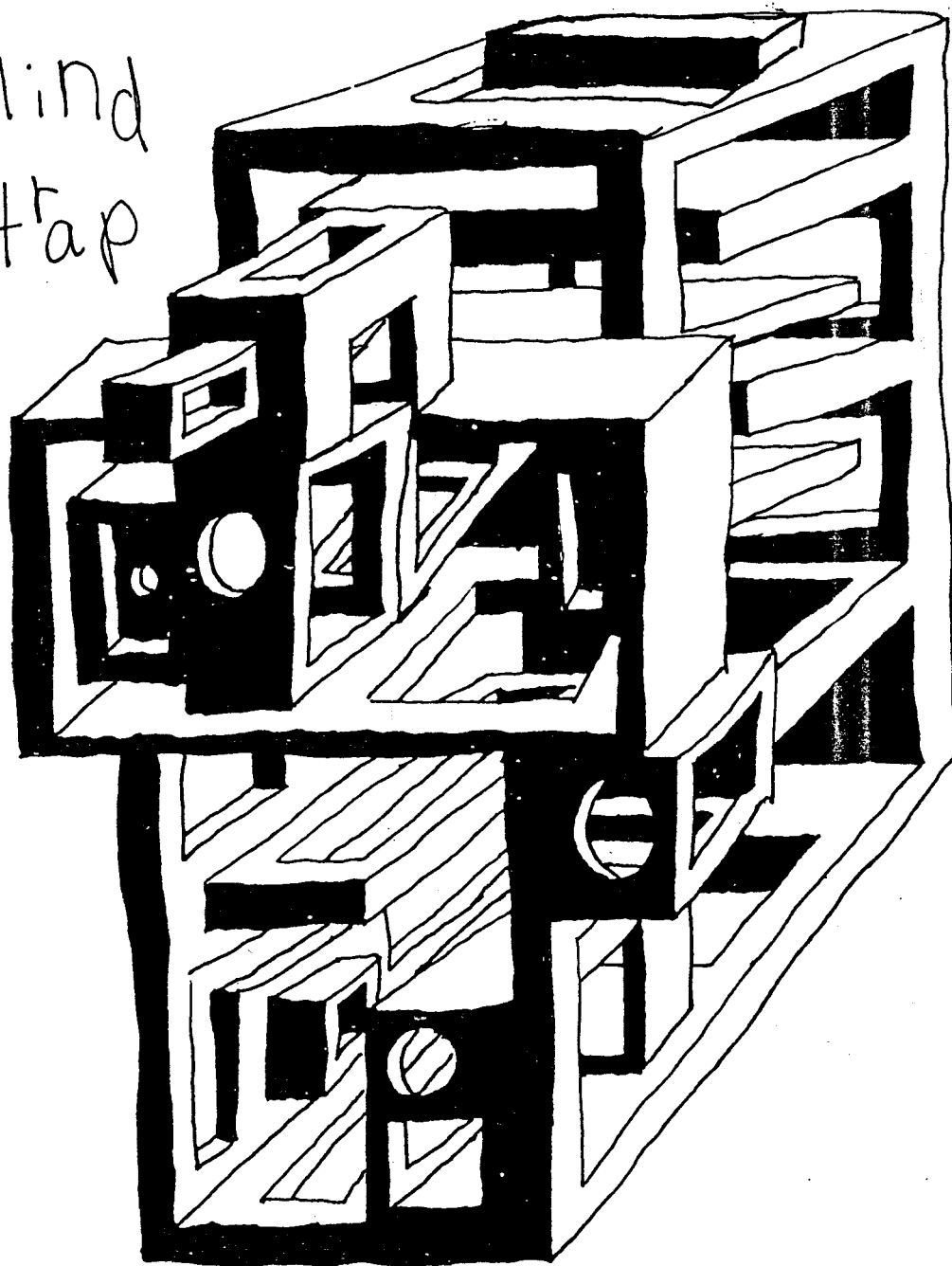
For Angela

what changes the world is  
the world changing  
simple ideas

*(Book 6 Books: "A BOOK OF HOURS," Hour 1)*



Mind  
tap



## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Ann Kipling for her gracious permission to allow me to use Portrait No. 31, "Annette Mosher," as a frontispiece to this work. Also thanks to Ann for her interest in my project and for her conversation. Thanks to the Curatorial Department of The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria for lending me the transparency of Portrait No. 31. Thanks to Trevor Mills of Trevor Mills Studio in Vancouver for an excellent job of photographing Kipling's Portrait. Thanks to Ellie Nichol for her permission to use the "mind t'ap" concrete poem, and for taking the trouble to write and answer what questions she could. Thanks to Irene Niechoda for sharing her research with me and for her correspondence. Thanks to Roy Miki for his advice, editorial suggestions and especially for his support. Thanks to all those friends who supported me and gave of their time and expertise throughout the writing of this work. And most of all, thanks to

bpNichol for his being in the wor(l)d.

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The Frontispiece is a photograph of Portrait No. 31 entitled "Annette Mosher" by the B.C. artist, Ann Kipling.

"Mind t'ap" on page viii is a concrete poem by bpNichol.

The poem appears in *Out-Posts* on page 42.

## Preface

As intimated by the frontispiece which I have chosen for this study, bpNichol's long poem, *The Martyrology*, is focused on human beings. Although Ann Kipling and bpNichol work in different mediums, these two artists show a profound kinship in their vision and insight into humans and their be-ing in the world. Both artists are able to effect a presencing of an intangible spirit, or "otherness," by recreating their imaginative and intuitive visions on paper. "Readers" of either medium are thereby able to recognize, or intuit, some manifestation of "otherness" within themselves. Both works are awe-inspiring, in that they inspire fear and wonder in concert in participating readers.

In Kipling's "Portrait," ego boundaries are not particularly defined in her subject. One cannot specifically ascertain where inner space ends and outer space begins, nor are there precise divisions between negative and positive space as one would expect in such a "Portrait." Nichol and Kipling are kindred spirits in their recognition of the "absolute precision / of fluid definition" (*The Martyrology: Book 4*) in their respective works. One is able to visualize in Kipling's "Portrait" the "little consciousnesses" in the "self" that Nichol describes: "my notion of what the self is...is that there are really a lot of little consciousnesses comprised of...a series of rooms with constantly shifting walls..." (Unpublished IV with Pauline Butling). Both Nichol and Kipling envision consciousness as "the city no enemy / ever took

/ the buildings / rearranging themselves / daily" (*The M: Book 4*).

An understanding of Kipling may point the way to an understanding of Nichol, as the works of both artists are polymorphous. There are more possible readings of *The Martyrology* than there are readers. There will never be *the* definitive reading of bpNichol's long poem, and this is perhaps one of the most delightful aspects of postmodern writing--the multiplicity and fluidity of meaning that allows each reader her or his own personal reading. The signifying systems of puns in *The Martyrology* allow it to elude any "netting" by theories; the sign may be there, but the signifier is always sliding, always evading being caught with a definitive, authoritative meaning. Nichol's work does, however, invite commentary, although individual readings are invariably inconclusive, and the number of possible readings multiplies with each new reading. Nichol feels that all types of knowledge are "Probable Systems" (*The M: Book 6 Books: A BOOK OF HOURS, Hour 4*). We learn this quite profoundly as we interpret signifiers in *The Martyrology* with a new "probable system," or framework, each time we read.

## Part One

### I. Introduction

With the likes of poets such as Walt Whitman, bpNichol may be said to possess that quality called "cosmic consciousness" by Dr. Maurice Bucke. Bucke defines this quality of being:

The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is, as its name implies, a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe....Along with the consciousness of the cosmos there occurs an intellectual enlightenment or illumination which alone would place the individual on a new plane of existence--would make him [or her] almost a member of a new species. To this is added a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense, which is fully as striking and more important both to the individual and to the race than is the enhanced intellectual power. With these comes what may be called, a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, not a conviction that he [or she] shall have this, but the consciousness that he [or she] has it already. (CC 2)

Of individuals possessing cosmic consciousness, Harman notes that there is a union of the usually conceived "opposites" of spirit/body and science/religion [spirituality], and that [hu]man[s] and Nature live in harmony. Dr. Bucke feels that the cosmically conscious individual realizes his or her own soul, or some "other" enlightening power, within: "The cosmic sense (in whatever mind it appears) crushes the serpent's head--destroys sin, shame, the sense of good and evil as contrasted one with the other, and will annihilate labor, though not human activity" (CC 5). The world conceived of is one in which organized, hierarchical institutions are abolished, and one in which humans will exist on another plane that is immanent to the one in which we live. Bucke speaks of the "rising up" within

the possessor of cosmic consciousness of "a Saviour--the Christ." In this "new race," which is humanity, the "Saviour" dwells within each human. Bucke further notes that "[o]n man's [or woman's] self-consciousness is built everything in and about us distinctively human" (CC 2), and that this "reality" is composed of language. Bucke equates an "intuitional mind" to "cosmic consciousness" (CC 15), suggesting that this quality of being may not be reached by language alone. The "other"--with whom a communion is vital to the possessor of cosmic consciousness--can only be "touched," or felt, intuitively through sounds and silences in and between signifiers. bpNichol's lifelong work manifests his own quality of "cosmic consciousness," ranking him among Dr. Bucke's "new race of humans."

"The view [the possessor of cosmic consciousness] takes is that our descendants will sooner or later reach, as a race, the condition of cosmic consciousness, just as, long ago, our ancestors passed from simple to self consciousness" (CC 3). With this in mind, we may wish to heed the words of bpNichol:

there is a new humanism afoot that will one day touch the world to its core.traditional poetry is only one of the means by which to reach out and touch the other.the other is emerging as the necessary prerequisite for dialogues with the self that clarify the soul & heart and deepen the ability to love.i place myself there,with them, whoever they are, wherever they are,who seek to reach themselves and the other thru the poem by as many exits and entrances as are possible. ("Statement")

*The Martyrology: Book 6 Books* is a vehicle for this "new humanism" to touch the world--through those who will listen--"to its core." The contemporary Canadian



poet and critic, Robert Kroetsch, has asked, "How do you grow a poet?" bpNichol takes this question one step further, and since 1966 has been implicitly asking, "How do you grow a human soul?" This is a major focus of the structure of *Book 6 Books*--the uncovering and nurturing of that essential being in the bone-house. The poet's fervid quest to reunite body with soul, to connect self with others and with otherness in the world, is the driving force behind all his questioning and deconstructing techniques.

Nichol sincerely wishes to find some connection with the sacred, which he finds in the act of writing, and with what he has referred to as a "god-energy" ("Talking about the Sacred in Writing" 235):

There's me and there's the moment of the writing and there's the language that's leading me--but in some real sense when it's all working it's one activity. I'm not dividing it up, I'm not stopping and thinking, where does the poem want to go, or whose turn is it to lead in the dance. I'm just doing it, and I'm writing the thing. And that activity has come to me to seem the essence of what I was reaching for as a kid in my religious experience. ("Talking about the Sacred" 234-235)

For Nichol, the act of writing is a form of prayer; the poet's holy beads are individual letters of the alphabet. Whereas the lyric voice attempts to will the presence of the god-energy, bpNichol allows the language to lead him, and in this sense he is a visionary poet.

The poetic process of *The Martyrology* is revealed in a cloud sequence from the "CODA" of *Book 3*:



in vocation  
i am  
a singer

every letter  
invokes a spell  
ing is  
the power  
letters have  
over me

word shaping

addition of the I

Every poem in *The Martyrology* is a prayer, or invocation, and Nichol literally incants, invokes, or spells his presence on the page. However, "spell / ing is / the power / letters have / over [the poet]," so that it is the actual letters that are involved in the invoking process; Nichol gives up the power of ego and allows the letters to lead him, to have power over him. "[I]ng is," signifying perpetual process, or the relentless movement of language down the individual pages of *The Martyrology*. "[A]ddition of the I" to "word shaping" creates wor(l)d shaping, by a "fluid definition." And this is the poetic process of this singer's lifelong work.

Nichol is particularly concerned with individual letters, their shapes, and their sounds. His deconstruction techniques involve punning and other word-play, which make the text at once playful and dense. Nichol has commented on this word-play:

When we pun we make marry, wed letter to letter to spell anew.  
When we mean our making we make a meaning. And with the pun  
we have in language the closest effect in poetry to both chording  
and/or playing clusters in music. ("The 'Pata of Letter Feet, or The  
English Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" 94)

The pages of *The Martyrology* provide a textual space for the activity of language. Within this textual space, the signifying systems of puns allow for not only the emergence of new possibilities for meaning and thus, new possibilities for becoming in the wor(l)d, but they also allow for a manifestation of "other" in the text.

Through his quest to uncover his human soul, through his ardent desire for a connection with otherness, and with others--the "me in we," the poet shows us not only what we are, but also where we are. In *Book 6 Books*, there is a radical decentering of both the authorial and the authoritative "i," and there is a decentering of the very wor(l)d in which we live.

In "Book I: IMPERFECTION: A Prophecy," Nichol humorously and, in some ways, horrifyingly, deconstructs the world of Christianity. Through deconstructing the patriarchal, hierarchical codes of *The Book*, the authoritative text of the Christian Church, which not only dictates the mores and morals of our time, but by which we measure our time, and whose influence can be seen in our Western legal, political, religious, and societal institutions, the poet uncovers a previously hidden world, an unacknowledged world. It is our world--a world fit for habitation by humans, un-bound of these stifling and suffocating codes that have caged our consciousnesses. This world is, in some ways, only just emerging. It is imperfectly formed; it is surrounded in mist-ery. This is an inchoate world--a world in which we must bear witness to our own becoming, and to all that we see. It is a world in which the only firm rootedness exists in consciousness, "just

behind home plate"--the lid of the eye (*The Martyrology: Book 3*). It is here that Nichol finds place, in the endlessness of time and space, and it is here that wor(l)d order begins. It is in this wor(l)d, this place, that the "soul/self," referred to in *Book 6 Books*, may begin to grow.

The structure of *Book 6 Books* takes us from a Christian Road to an Inchoate Road, to an inchoate wor(l)d, in which the place in *The Martyrology: Book 4*, "the buildings / rearranging themselves daily / the city no enemy ever took," becomes an activity of consciousness. Nichol has ironically noted that it was St. Paul who said, "Even our prophesies are imperfect" (IV with Butling). "IMPERFECTION: A Prophecy" not only prophesies the imperfections of Christian "lore"--the "myth / legend / rumour / truth" of it, the "real of the region," but it also prophesies the imperfections of an inchoate wor(l)d, in which all knowledge must be viewed as "probable systems," in which "significance itself partakes of [a] conditional state" (*Pata 82*), and which is imbued in mist-ery. Nichol has commented:

What I have tried to show is what my idea is--literally, my point of view--how an attention to words & letters, an attention to the surface details of writing, opens a "pataphysical dimension. It is a dimension filled with short-lived phenomena, phenomena which we tend to think of as 'merely' ephemeral and / or 'on the surface,' the dimension of the coincident, a 'universe supplementary to this one.' (*Pata 94*)

Of course what Nichol uncovers in *Book 6 Books* is not a "universe supplementary to this one"; it is the actual world in which we live, "supplementary" perhaps because our consciousnesses are not chained by the doctrinal and dogmatic codes

that stifle our "thinking / saying / being / singing" in the world ("**Book IV**," *Book 6 Books*).

The cover of *Book 6 Books* is an integral part of the text, surrounding and penetrating as it does the 6 books of *Book 6* of *The Martyrology*. On the front cover, Nichol holds a replica of *Book 6* in front of his face and on the back cover, we see his back, uncovered. The poet is parodying the patriarchal "God" of law--*the* transcendental signifier, as suggested by the following passage of the *Old Testament*:

And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." (Bible: RSV; Exodus 33:21-23)

In a most profound sense, Nichol is holding up his book as a challenge to *The Book*; Nichol's book deconstructs the law in an anti-apocalyptic sense, as this deconstruction is an ongoing process, and in no way implies transcendence.

Nichol does lead the reader to a kind of "promised land"--to an inchoate world, and this world is the very one in which we live. In Nichol's text, the tyrannical God of the Old Testament is embodied in the language that composes patriarchal codes, or laws, which shackle our minds, particularly our imaginations. Through freeing and cleansing language (see "mind t'ap"), Nichol does succeed in freeing himself, and in doing so, allows readers also to free themselves. Bayard and David comment on Nichol's concrete poem:

Is the mind a tap that you can turn on and off? Why has the "r" in

the title apparently been forgotten and added as an afterthought? Is the mind a trap that springs shut at unsuspecting times or places? The real trap, according to Nichol, is language, and the poem is made up of the elements--especially straight lines (which turn in on themselves) and occasional "o"s. Looking like a high rise built when the workers were drunk, "mind trap" is language gone mad with reason. The only way to set it free is to break it up, to smash it into pieces and begin again with the scattered liberated letters. In their old frozen combinations, they cannot approach the emotions; indeed, they prevent any sort of feeling at all. The mind can be a "tap" to the "Other," but first it must be cleansed and prepared.

bp Nichol is the poet/priest who is able to cleanse and prepare language, restoring to it its sacred quality, so that it may become a "tap" to the "Other." The "WRITINGS OF SAINT AND," which begin *The Martyrology: Book I*, were originally typed in red letters, as are the words of Jesus Christ in "Red Letter" editions of the *Bible* (Niechoda, "Addendum" to *A SOURCERY*). The realization that we are our own saviours is a "major note" in *The Martyrology: Book 6 Books*.

Nichol's "new humanism" is of great depth and magnitude. In *Book 6 Books*, the poet comes to a new sense of love and language, and since "we are words and our meanings change," and "consciousness is composition," bp Nichol comes to a more profound realization of what and where he/we is--ensouled beings becoming in an inchoate wor(l)d. In "In The Plunkett Hotel" of *Book 6 Books*, Nichol traces his own genealogical history, and he examines the relationship between language and family trees. In the same book, the poet further investigates the kinship of language and families in "The Grammar Trilogy" of "A BOOK OF HOURS." Love and language are inextricably intertwined in the text of *The*

*Martyrology.* The vast distances crossed in the writing of *The Martyrology* draw us back to its beginnings. Through his fervent "chronicling," bpNichol offers participating readers a "new" home for a "new race" of humans.

## II. Pre-text: The Chronicler of Knarn

Although there is no invocation to a muse or any formal introduction to *The Martyrology*, there is a curious pre-text captioned "from *The Chronicle of Knarn*" (*The M: Book I*). From the title, one would expect that this text had been extrapolated from a larger work, but as one reads, it becomes increasingly apparent that this writing is all that is left, or all that there ever was, of "*The Chronicle of Knarn*." Rather than a detached, chronological ordering of events that one would anticipate in such a document, the "chronicler" weaves the present as he perceives it. This pre-text is a *praetextus* to the entire work of *The Martyrology*, in that the cultural conditions in which bpNichol lives and writes are "woven before" the work (Skeat). In creating these three "rent" pages of the "*Chronicle*," the "chronicler" brings himself and his wor(l)d into being.

The "*Chronicle*" opens with the chronicler searching for an absent, unspecified other: "i've looked across the stars to find your eyes / they aren't there." Without eyes to see him or read the text, this chronicler is invisible. "[Y]our eyes" may be human eyes and they may also denote "otherness"; the chronicler is utterly alone in a universe devoid of any human or spiritual presence. The writer asks, "where do you hide when the sun goes nova?"<sup>1</sup> The "you" may be referring to "your eyes," that is the imagined reader's eyes, but it is also plausible that "you" may be directed to "me"--to the chronicler himself. A

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<sup>1</sup> The poet is here playing with a common science fiction motif of inhabitants fleeing a dying world.



subject/object split manifests itself in this act of writing. The chronicler is left wondering what his fate will be when Knarn dies. However, faithful to the end, this chronicler is compelled to record the final cataclysmic event.

It is implied that the sun can "go nova" more than once on Knarn. Since the chronicler lives in emptiness, questionings, wonderings, he is metaphorically chronicling what one might call a Dark Age. There have been "Dark Ages" on earth more than once where little or nothing is known of the era, and the sun going nova may metaphorically and ironically suggest that the "chronicler" is currently attempting to document such a Dark Age. The other, the "you" who is also the reader, "hides" in Dark Ages of cultural ignorance, ignoring the chronicler and his writing. In the absence of an other and of otherness in his world, this chronicler is presently non-existent--physically, intellectually, spiritually.

Yet the chronicler does exist as a textual entity. Although we are able to read this excerpt from his written chronicle, there is no suggestion of voice; it is the text that is speaking. This signifies not only the loss of the oral tradition, but also the lack of an audience that would hear this chronicler's words, could he but speak. Poetry/writing is an oral/aural/visual medium. In this text, one can also feel the prayer-book texture of the pages, and the chronicler's fervent desire to express himself and to be heard, which would allow him to become in the wor(l)d.

The atmosphere on Knarn is sterile, save for the chronicler and his chronicle/prayer. In this environment, the chronicler's mood is ominous: "i think

it's over / somewhere a poem dies." As shown by the political stance of the lower-case "i," the authoritative lyric "I" is effectively dead in this text. And it may be "over"; there is no new writing to replace lyricism and the sun may go nova; darkness may prevail. However, these "excerpted" pages *are* new writing that would metaphorically stop the sun from going nova and save the planet from the ensuing Dark Age--if the "chronicler" would be heard.

The chronicler has no consciousness of any kind of cultural continuity to report: "inside i hide my fears / like bits of broken china / mother brought from earth / milleniums ago." Living moment by moment, without concepts of past or future--we cannot conceive of milleniums--the chronicler is frightened of the unknown, darkness, nothingness. Our sense of time and space is obscured; all we know is that Knarn is far from earth in terms of the concepts by which we measure "place."

Old bones and stars that have long ago gone nova tell us something about our human and stellar history. Patterns on shards of china that have been deeply embedded in the earth are one way in which archaeologists study movements of people and characteristics of lost or older cultures. For the chronicler, internal shards of shattered and scattered historical data give him continual conscious pain. Too many pieces are missing; there are shards of history amidst vast blanks, and the source is so far removed as to be considered untraceable on the evolutionary scale. The lack of cultural continuity is a crisis-forming situation for a chronicler, and this lack is definitive of a Dark Age. Of course it was "mother" who thought

to carry with her the traditional china from mother earth when she left or fled "milleniums ago." And now even mother--biological mother, m/othermuse, mother earth--is gone, just as the other/others are absent. An epigraph to *The Martyrology* makes the chronicler's condition acutely apparent: "Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches" (Gertrude Stein). The chronicler is wanting of a past that could help him to understand his current condition. Without memory, a muse, or cultural continuity, he has no way of knowing what or where he is. This being is alone, lonely and confused, m/otherless. His fear is as deeply embedded in his consciousness and as painful as are the metaphorical shards of history.

The chronicler cannot find the threshold that he so desperately seeks: "i don't know where the rim ends / to look over / into the great rift." The science fiction writer, A. Bertram Chandler, wrote a series of stories about "rim worlds,"<sup>2</sup> which are located at the edge of the galaxy, and beyond which lies the unknown, or nothingness. Knam itself appears to be a rim world, and the chronicler, a most profound "pioneer," is actively seeking the "rift"--the unknown or nothingness. He is in darkness, and the precipice between rim and rift would appear to be the "momentary" edge between past and future, from which he is constantly being pushed forward into the unknown.

Rim worlds are thought to be "psionic amplifiers" (*The Visual Encyclopedia*

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<sup>2</sup> "[Chandler] began writing extensively...in the later 1950s [when] he began to concentrate on novels, most of which have dealt, directly or indirectly, with his central venue, the RIMWORLDS at the edge of the galaxy, during a period of human expansion....[H]is vision of the Rim Worlds -- cold, poor, antipodean, at the edge of intergalactic darkness, are full of all the pioneer virtues." (*The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* 110)

of *Science Fiction* 204). Even so, as one of Chandler's characters remarks to her comrades: "You're scared of the Rim. From your minds I get the impression of the edge of darkness, and the fear that you will fall over that edge" ("Wet Paint" 39). If rim worlds promote psionic (mental/intuitive) amplification, is it knowledge, which always involves going beyond or altering the "known," that is so frightening? Referring to the rim, another of Chandler's characters says: "There's that feeling that all the time that you're on the very edge of *something*--or *nothing*" ("Wet Paint" 36). The chronicler is on the verge of something; he is on the edge of nothing. There is a confluence in this writer's consciousness--in his very condition--of somethingness and nothingness, of being and nonbeing. This chronicler cannot determine where the edge ends and the rift begins. Situated in darkness on an undefinable precipice, the chronicler is on a threshold of coming into the wor(l)d, if only he could find the m/other that would allow this birth.

The chronicler is drifting; he cannot define either himself or his whereabouts in space and time. In a phenomenological sense, he is in a state of nonbeing, or "death." The sun has gone nova, there is darkness, the sky is not visible ("not there"), even though he has "looked across the stars." It is as if he can see through to positive space ("become"), or to the field of being, only at intervals, and then he cannot see clearly, or he can see only nothingness. The chronicler is a flickering presence in his text, suggesting an interdependence of "being" and "nonbeing."

The chronicler exists only in the memory of the other--"in the memory of



part of the "*Chronicle*" are not present here. Five uses of the definite article give the reader a clearly defined picture of an other-worldly island in inter-galactic space. These suns have not gone nova; they cause "the city," which suggests a populace, community, and culture, to gleam. The "stellar bank" must be a solar connector at this city/station. The chronicler either cannot connect with this antipodean place to collect power to sustain him elsewhere when his planet dies, or he may feel compelled to observe and to document this "thriving" city and its inhabitants, who seem less human than the lone observer on Knarn. Structures in this city are made of aluminum, which is native to the earth, suggesting that we humans have caught, colonized, and come to inhabit a bank of stars. However, since this city shows nature, humanness, otherness and spirituality only by their absence, it is quite possible that the poet, in his "chronicler guise," is warning us of what we may become once the earth is no longer habitable; we will colonize the stars and harness the power of the sun for our own greed, committing the same mistakes again. The gleaming of the suns' light on aluminum walls gives no evidence of culture or of community; this is a sterile, inhuman place, much like many of the institutions that exist on earth at the time the "chronicler" writes. In fact, this city seems to be a place of business for these "inter-galactic crowds." Are they also caught somewhere between being and nonbeing, in a kind of science-fictional warp in time and space? The "faces" are not of Knarn, and they appear "strange" and "distorted," as if the chronicler's vision were blurred, or as if these were not human faces, but faces of strangers, of aliens, or of what humans have

become. The chronicler can see them, but he himself is alone and ignored, invisible.

Abruptly, the chronicler's tone changes and he becomes earnest and humble, as he stands at an old shrine somewhere on this seemingly fragmented place called Knarn: "i'm holding my hat in my hand / standing awkwardly at the entrance to their shrine / wishing i were near you." Here, the chronicler assumes a respectful, humble posture. He stands at the entrance to "their shrine" but he does not go in, perhaps because he knows it to be empty. Perhaps he is awkward because humans have been complicit in emptying this obviously once-sacred shrine, indicating that he does have some memory of the sacred. "They" are probably the saints, who are language, whom Nichol has written of in previous texts.<sup>3</sup> With the sacred otherness of language now absent, this memory creates a hellish emptiness in the mind of the chronicler, who epitomizes Eliot's "...notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing." Once again, the chronicler wishes to be near "you," m/otherness--a m/other, a mothermuse and a sacred spiritual presence, yet he remains utterly alone as he longs his way through this writing.

However, this chronicler is curious, and he wonders about the "saints":  
"were they like us? i don't know. / how did they die & how did the legend grow?"

---

<sup>3</sup> Nichol has written various accounts of the emergence of, and attributes of, the saints in *The Plunkett Papers* and in other writings. These writings are housed within the Special Collections Department of the W. A. C. Bennett Library at Simon Fraser University. Throughout his career, Nichol has treated individual letters of the alphabet as though they were sacred.

In the absence of an oral and a written tradition, in the absence of memory, in the absence of cultural continuity, this chronicle has no way of knowing even how the legend of the saints unfolded in the minds of humans. These absences would also account for the brevity of "*The Chronicle of Knarn*." All has been lost, save this fragmented fragment. However, this chronicler does recognize the importance of the "legendary." Without stories, there can be no re-membering of history or of the sacred; there can be no comparison between "the saints" and "us," between ourselves and language.

In a parenthetical moment, the "i" who has been constructing the text in the guise of the chronicler reveals himself to be a desperate poet existing on a dying planet:

(a long time ago i thot i knew how this poem would go, how the figures of the saints would emerge. now it's covered over by my urge to write you what lines i can. the sun is dying. i've heard them say it will go nova before the year's end.i wanted to send you this letter (this poem) but now it's too late to say anything, too early to have anything to send.)

The poet has a vague memory of the saints, but "their shrine" is empty. He is in despair; his words are both too late (he speaks in a language that is "no longer spoken" and traditional lyric poetry is dead) and too early (he does not know how the "figures of the saints would emerge"; it is too early for him to know how it would be possible to restore to language its sacred quality). It seems that this parenthetical writing comes from earth, and strangely, we seem to be fast approaching a Dark Age when the sun will metaphorically go nova, as it has on Knarn. Is this poem an urgent warning? If it is, it is "too late and too early" to be



heeded by others, who ignore the writing of the poet, just as the chronicle is not read. This poet is desperate in his endeavour to write something meaningful, and although this seems impossible, he *is* a poet and he *must* write. As another of Chandler's characters remarks, "A man who comes out to the Rim to make his living...would go to Hell for a pastime" ("Forbidden Planet" 28). The chronicler/poet is compelled to make his living at "the Rim"; Knarn is his "Hell."

Without voice and an other--articulation and response--communication is impossible. An urgent, strangled voice pierces the silence: "i wish i could scream your name & you could hear me / out there somewhere where our lives are." The trinity of consciousness, corporeality and spirituality is shattered, "our lives" being somewhere "out there." This is the silent scream of bpNichol, wishing to connect--with himself, with others, with the "other." The poet does include himself with others--"our lives"--but Nichol's sense that "we is a human community" (TWO WORDS:A WEDDING) is absent in this poem. The entire "*Chronicle*," including the parenthetical poem, feels like a fervent prayer; it is a longing for others and for m/otherness.

Humans have lost faith and they now live in a meaningless age ("moon"), devoid of culture, community, and spirituality: "we have moved beyond belief / into a moon that is no longer there." The invisible, mute poet who writes in a dead language is "beyond belief," once again suggesting that he is in a state of utter despair. The moon, the age in which he lives--or the values in which he believes, exists, yet is in some essential way "no longer there," just as the sky/eye

appears not to be there. It seems now that the earth and Knarn have much in common. The moon is an ineluctable presence that influences the tides of the ocean and the minds of humans; the absent sky/eye signifies a lack of spiritual otherness, further suggesting a lack--a vast emptiness--both within and without. One recalls Stéphane Mallarmé's poem, "*L'Azure*:" "*--Le Ciel est mort.... / Où fuir dans la révolte inutile et perverse? / Je suis hanté. l'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur l'Azur!*" The poet/chronicler has fled to an imaginary rim world called Knarn, from which he expresses the conditions of his own existence. The horror and the haunting of Mallarmé's lines reverberate throughout the chronicler's document.

Reflecting his lack and consequent despair, the chronicler has no more faith in love or in his own activity, that of writing: "i used to love you (i think) / used to believe in the things i do / now all is useless repetition / my arms ache from not holding you." The chronicler/poet is in agony, aching from not holding the lover/m/other. The negative phrase, "not holding you," reinforces this absence. The phrase "useless repetition" runs counter to the aforementioned epigraph to *The Martyrology*. For Stein, repetition involves tonal variations, affirmation, and deviations in meaning/reading, so that it is anything but "useless." But to this despairing soul, it seems that everything he does, and even everything he feels, is futile. He can vaguely remember a time when this was not so, and this memory causes him greater agony. A sense of purposefulness is lacking in this writer, as is any sense of sacredness in the mundane, and love itself is a dubious thing--these conditions are devastating

for humans. Yet in the very act of thinking and writing, this chronicler/poet is seen to be desperately struggling to recover all that has been lost. From the rim world of Knarn, this being strives to save himself, and, through this striving, to save others.

At this point, however, the sky/eye that could bring the chronicler/poet into being remains absent or inaccessible: "the winds blow unfeelingly across your face / & the space between us / is as long as my arm is not." The winds may be his own breath, which is unable to feel or touch the "face" of the other. Paradoxically, while the writer perceives the existence of the m/other, he also acknowledges that he is unable to consciously recognize this presence. We see most clearly in this passage the recursive confluence of "something" and "nothing," how something defines nothing defines something defines nothing, *ad infinitum*. "[Y]our face" may also be the blank sheet of paper on which the chronicler/poet writes, "the winds" being the discontinuous breath-lines that are written dispassionately. As Stephen Scobie writes, "The sign is empty; we are all orphaned in language" (*What History Teaches 17*). And as Nichol says, "we are words and our meanings change" ("TWO WORDS:A WEDDING"). If we are words, and if we are in some essential way separate from our being in the world, then we are not only orphaned in language but we are also riven from our very selves and from the world in which we live. Since the reader makes the connections that make meaning in this text, the reader, like the poet, is orphaned in the poem.

Such an orphaned, orphic creature could fall into intense self-reflexion and

egoism, but this chronicler does not. He vaguely remembers love, the sacred, and otherness, and he desperately--and heroically--searches for these things. It is his inability to fall into a state of solipsism that causes his intense loneliness and suffering. A terse statement reveals the dire situation of the chronicler/poet: "the language i write is no longer spoken." He is the invisible *scop*; his song is unsung, unbegun. Poets "chronicle" history, spirituality, culture, and this poet writes in a dead language--dead because it is not read, is not understood. The pioneer/chronicler of Knarn embodies A.M. Klein's phosphorescent poet "[a]t the bottom of the sea" (170).

This poet/chronicler is bpNichol, rendering the cultural conditions of the sixties into this science fictional text. While the pluralistic "i" of the "chronicler" rejects authority, the authoritative and sometimes fascistic lyric "I" attempts to control the minds of its readers. Curiously doctrinal and dogmatic, it is related to organized religion in its desire to erect monuments to itself. Living in such conditions, it is not inconceivable that certain sensitive and wounded beings would flee to another world--perhaps a rim world of the imagination. Mother came, and others came, but now all are gone, and the poet is alone. He has not even his memories to comfort him, not even his voice to sing himself a lullaby. In this condition, feeling alienated from his very being, with what must be great courage, tenacity, and vision, bpNichol makes a beginning, and his sacred tool is language: "my hands turn the words clumsily."

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## Part Two

### I. Deconstruction/decentering of "i"

In the pre-text to *The Martyrology*, Nichol not only destabilizes the reader's position in the wor(l)d, but he also destabilizes the reader's grounding in the text. The flickering presence of the writer amidst the various voices of the "chronicler," and the obscurity of the whereabouts of Knarn, cause one to wonder whence the place/page emerged. From the title, the reader is encouraged to imagine that the pages of the "*Chronicle*" are actually rent from a larger text/consciousness. This larger language of text/self is deconstructed and decentered in the pages of *The Martyrology*.

Deconstruction of "i," manifesting a many-layered/lettered self, occurs through the discovery of the saints, who are language, and who are all aspects of the writer's consciousness. *The Martyrology: Book I* begins, like the pre-text, with a piece of writing taken "from" a larger text. From his fragmented memory of language, the poet constructs a connector--st and, a figure of the artist who has the capacity to create a place on which to stand, that is to say, and creates understanding and a certain rootedness in consciousness through connecting things. As a manifestation of the "writing consciousness" of Nichol, it is saint and's composition that continues the work of the chronicler and oversees the birth of the

poem/world of *The Martyrology*.

The purposelessness and despair of the chronicler of Knarn is reflected in the writings of the "chronicler" of saint and: "*As to what auguries attended his birth nothing is said. Perhaps it was simply that nothing of importance happened.*" It is profoundly ironic that something essential to being happened with the birth of and: communication and expression were born.

The created persona of saint and manifests the figure of the poet:

i've looked out your eyes years now saint and

how  
i tell you  
no

things  
cannot  
measure thee

motion

All of the textualized personae of the poet create a pluralized notion of "self," a "self" that can only be known through a plurality of frames. This unveiling of a many-layered self is originated by a subject/object split in the writer, which allows a dialoguing between aspects or personae of the subjective and objective "selves." Static things cannot measure a being, whose "ing" signifies perpetual process. Nichol conveys a sense of respect and a sacred quality to saint and in calling and "thee," manifesting his realization of the "god-energy" working through himself through the "sacred activity of language."

The iconography of and depicts the condition of the poet, as Niechoda

comments:

St And's face gradually takes on that of a clown -- his beard turning up into a painted smile, and his already starry eyes becoming diamond-shaped mime-eyes. As the clown mask breaks up, the eye make-up, melting, looks more like tears than sparkles; the fragmented outlines become scattered; even the halo seems to render into beads of nervous perspiration. The final frame shows the saint recomposed, at least outwardly. His eyes, however, betray a certain spaced-out disbelief, and the disjointed outline now suggests perforations more than assembled tesserae. (Niechoda 69-9)

The fact that there is no (recorded) record of the birth of and, the image of the solitary sad-eyed clown, the fragmented outlines, the perforations, and the look of spaced-out disbelief all evoke an image of the chronicler of Knarn. st and is a transformation of the chronicler, and like the chronicler he comes into the wor(l)d in fragments of himself. Perhaps this is because and, a construct of language, is continuing the poet's task of (re)creating the wor(l)d.

The "i" is not at the centre of the universe, nor is the writer at the centre, or place of control, in this text. In "from THE WRITINGS OF SAINT AND," "flies on the surface of reality" are letters on the surface of the page:

To the man who lives without saints all this must appear like flies on the surface of reality. And are we necessary? we who have achieved immortality in name only?

and is vital to our communication with others and to our expression or articulation of ourselves. The body of "we" is composed of saints, letters, texts. Christian saints achieve "immortality" through death and canonization by the pope, *the* Christian patriarchal authority. Saints also become "immortal" through their biographies. Interestingly, texts that have survived the oral tradition, particularly

those that have been canonized, are perceived by humans to be "immortal." So it is their "naming" by patriarchal authorities that grants "saints" their immortality.

The first sentence of *Book I* is ironic to those who are able to see and hear the language as saints. Since "we are words," we *are* our bodies, and if saints are language, then no "[hu]man" can exist without them. We create a "known" reality through language. In this text particularly, letters are "like flies"; the puns cause signifiers to "buzz" about the page/reality/text. As previously stated, Nichol strives to allow language--which is fundamental to our beings--its own freedom, to allow for flux in ourselves and in our wor(l)d.

Since consciousness creates one's reality, a deconstruction of the wor(l)d occurs simultaneously with a deconstruction of the self. Nichol deconstructs his particular "i" by allowing many aspects of it to appear in the figures of the saints. For example, st iff dies in *The Martyrology: Book III*, when the poet is losing hope, but iff is resurrected in the same Book, in "Mid-Initial Sequence." This saint of potential and possibility is textualized, as the word itself, which "tensions a / polarity":

within the difference

if exists

tensions a  
polarity

who is moved or moves  
a distinction a disparity

"[W]ho" may refer to "if" or to a single letter or word, which "is moved" by a composer "or moves" by its own "volition." There would be "a disparity" if iff

moved after death, and "if" does. "If" is a component of conditional sentences, which creates both tension and possibility. In conditional utterances, "if" provides the possibility for movement, which, in turn, creates significance through distinction or disparity. In a discussion regarding the visual and auditory deconstructive possibilities of the word "significance," Nichol concludes that "[s]ignificance itself partakes of that conditional state," of which "if" is a component (IV with C. Bayard 28). The resurrection and redemption of "if" from the desert where it lay is a significant gesture in that it reopens the path to Dilmun, the original city, which is conflated in the poem with Cloudbottom, the paradisaical world from which the saints tumbled to earth, following the rainbow. The resurrection of "if" generates a possibility of "discovering" an original source language at the site of the original city, engendering a potential for a communion with the "other."

saint and demystifies death and mortality: "he knew death / when death / was just / a man," and "death is simply a way of giving up." Death is "just a man," who is a construct of signs that includes spaces and silences. These visual and auditory aspects of language may embody the intangible spiritual part of being that is "given up" to some "other" power; this is the aspect of being that so fascinates the poet. On perceiving and his knowledge, Nichol himself (poet/human) has an experience of a "cosmic consciousness"-like realization of his immortality:

death is simply energy recycled another state  
realize that moment's joy it could be  
fulfill my energy potential here on earth  
ready to leave this plane behind

(*The M*: Book 2. "sons & divinations," *fasting* *sequence*," 4)

The i's task is to "fulfill [its] energy potential here on earth" (emphasis mine).

Beyond this plane is an other plane that can only be experienced after realizing the word, "death."

Nichol compares life to a circus: "it is a freakshow / of improbable changes." Just as the chronicler of Knarn says "i used to love you, i think," now "(saint and measures the levels of the moon/his spoon is full)." In a Prufrockian fashion, the chronicler of Knarn "thinks" he loves, and saint and measures "levels" of cyclical movement. It would seem that "thinking" and "science" may be obstructions to a more profound, intuitive knowing. The "tents & signs," structures and signifiers of the "carnival of change," are "torn and useless." This circus is a grotesque inversion of a carnival:

...carnival celebrated liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (Bakhtin)

The poet, through the persona of and, is desperately trying to effect this "feast of becoming, change and renewal" within the poem, but his efforts are still clumsy and frustrated. In the circus, "the bear / (caged) / cannot cross" over the hills to "another world / vaguely seen." The "uselessness" of the circus and the frustrated desire of the bear concretely (by the parentheses) suggest "caged nature," embodying the pain of disconnectedness of humans from nature and from their selves caused by the hierarchical constraints of patriarchy. What is carnivalesque

about this scene, what does overcome hierarchy, is the fact that saint and is mortal, and in Christian myth a "saint" would be immortalized.

"[B]irds call[ing] over the sea" evoke the first "natural" language in the poem; the bird song suggests a connectedness with nature that Christianity had cut off. Also, a gesture of the poet creates a connection between "blue air"--the heavens, and "the colour of saint and's hair," investing the poem with a kind of freedom with the evocation of eternity in and through the temporal nature of saint and. As birds call over the sea

moving towards the hills  
the major notes are lost in minor movements  
fading away in trees  
& the man knows only the leaves  
or the ghost  
of saint and's mourning

The aging and, who "is living / without understanding," fails to recognize the major notes of the bird song (although the poet obviously makes this recognition; here he laments the limitations of his seeing/knowing). and mourns his lack of connection, as does Nichol: "& the man knows only the leaves"--leaves of music, leaves of trees (family and language), leaves of poetry. There is no intuitive insight into a larger reality that the poet longs for; there are only "leaves" of "cosmic consciousness" here.

However, a major subjunctive note enters the poem that will eventually create the condition of Bahktin's "carnival" within its pages:

& the hills?

the hills turn red

if you ever cross over

The hills, a hindrance to passion, speech, and creativity, "turn red" *if* you can overcome obstructions by creating exits from the self and entrances for the "other." One may then "cross over" into "another world / vaguely seen." This world is clearly seen in *The Martyrology: Book 4*, when the poet experiences "the absolute precision / of fluid definition / the saints learned long ago," and we come to a place within the process of the poem where we see

the buildings rearranging themselves daily  
the city no enemy ever took  
because the streets shift even as you walk them  
doorways change

This other world, which was once only vaguely seen and obstructed by hills, does come to exist within the body of the poem. One is reminded of Nichol's comments in "some afterwords" to *The Cosmic Chef*, which affirm his deep trust in the language to effect communication and transformation, of "possible directions that language and your mind could take in the years ahead."

Like Nichol, and wonders about origins and an "other." The possibility of an otherness in the world is both wonderful and bewildering to the artist: "saint and does not amaze / but is a statue / a corner lost." A corner of a three-dimensional structure cannot be lost, suggesting that there is another dimension of the "real," and it is lost to and lost in the artist himself. The word "amaze" takes its root from the Anglo-Saxon *amàsian*, which means "to astound," and which is derived from *à* + *màsian*, which can be interpreted as "not to perplex" (*Webster's*). Thus, "amaze" may mean to unravel, to make clear (a mystery); however, this



persona of the figure of the poet has lost a dimension of the "real" that would allow the unveiling to occur.

The artist echoes the chronicler of Knarn's lament for the lack of a cultural community, where there is no good poetry in "a landscape without hearing." This landscape (cultural community) is "without hearing" because "where the ears were / a numbness grows." The despair of both the chronicler of Knarn and the chronicler of *The Martyrology* is felt here, since the poet's quest, as expressed in his "Statement" of 1966, seems quite futile in the face of this "numbness": "i place myself there, with them, whoever they are, who seek to reach themselves and the other thru the poem by as many exits and entrances as are possible." Nichol is alienated like the chronicler of Knarn. At this place in the poem, the "them" in his "Statement" seem as "strange and distorted," or alien, as the faces of the intergalactic crowds on Knarn.

That and is the manifestation of the Christ figure in the writer is apparent in *Book I* in the allusions to the sea of Galilee and to the cross of martyrdom:

despair  
is not an ocean

it is a sea you walk upon till your feet are  
sore...

to saint and every gesture of his hand  
is another nail that has failed  
to hold

Martyrdom for saint and does not result in his going back to God the Father in "heaven," but it consists of walking upon a sea of despair, questioning the

existence of an "other": "& the cold wind from the sea / is a mockery / or a joke / that should not be told." The Christian God is disempowered. Rather than the "Spirit of God...moving over the face of the waters" (*Genesis* 1:22), and feels only a "cold wind from the sea." Nichol is fascinated and bewildered by the possibility of the presence of otherness, or of the "other," in the world. There can be no certainty of the existence of this Presence, and the artist must breath life into his wor(l)d in the midst of a continuing conflict of faith and doubt. This is a hard struggle, and and "...los[es] all hope / & cannot walk or swim there / anymore." The allusion to Christ continues as "it becomes maudlin," the word "maudlin" being intimately conected with Mary Magdalene, "shedding tears of penitence" (*Webster's*). Although one feels no forgiveness or redemption in this part of the poem, it is apparent that the poet is striving to effect this condition here. The savior is not dead; he continues to "turn the words clumsily" in an effort to redeem himself and all human beings who will hear him through language.

Caged in a patriarchal system, which the poem is trying to transform, the poet, in the figure of saint and, longs for a strong and gentle womanly presence in the world, and when saint and finds this presence in Book 2, he is so filled with feeling that he can only cry:

he was there with his lady  
so soft and so pretty  
she was strong & she loved him  
you started to cry  
you started to cry  
you started to cry  
you started to cry  
you started to cry

you started to cry  
you started to cry  
you started to cry  
you started to cry  
you started to cry  
ou started to cry  
you started to cry  
you started to cry

The thirteen repetitions of crying are a kind of magic talisman, as emotion and feeling cleanse the senses and free his spirit. What makes us truly human--and what can never be encompassed by words--is finally released into the poem.

"[H]e" would appear to be the construct of and; however, "you" strongly suggests the presence of the poet himself. Nichol is plotting his own development through the persona of and, and a conflation of the personae of "i" and the poet himself begins to occur through this release of emotion.

Nichol is striving to know all of himself, this word, this human being: "look in the mirror / knowing you have found the beast." This may be an allusion to many things, fairy tales and Revelation among them. It also may be an allusion to "The Second Coming," although the image in W.B. Yeats' poem is transformed: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born." The "beast" may be a kind of Jungian shadow or a Grendel-figure; Bethlehem, symbolic place of birth. The poet has been struggling to create a place where he can bear to be born, and it seems that the saviour in him will be born along with the beast. Both the instinctual (the beast) and the divine (the saviour) are essential to the activity of language, and thus to the activity of living; the poet needs "rage to lead / drive [his] hand / tenderness / carry it to the end." The

"beast" is not a devil but a primal (and essential) source of energy. Similarly, the "tenderness" is not that of a lamb (a blind follower) but more that of a "goat," who in this case "casts out" or "wards off" the Christian "God," rather than being "outcast" by "Him."

Individual readers begin to deconstruct their own many-layered selves as they experience this text. With the poet, readers recognize their own feelings of love, hate, bitterness and unworthiness or failure towards the father(s):

drunk with grief i slap my face  
all grace gone in that instant's knowing  
i am the son the sum total of my anger's turning  
inwards coming out in words

The language of the poem is the turning outward of the poet's anger. In turning his inside outside in true carnivalesque fashion, Nichol comes to trust himself, and he is graced with a conscious illumination:

i know the saints were real & lived on earth  
as I [sic] saw in a flash  
the entire work as i have written it illuminated  
given from the dream world half remembered

Nichol's vision of a purified language and of a paradisaical reality is affirmed in this fleeting cosmic constellation.

\*

Saint Reat is another persona of the poet who has a very human longing for companionship and love, and he also bears a strange resemblance to the chronicler of Knarn, as both personae are lonely and long for the love of an other. Just as the chronicler's "arms ache from not holding you," Reat laments: "it's such a long

night to lie awake in / & the flesh does ache / & the night is lonely to belong in."

\*

Nichol does not judge himself with the Christian concepts of "bad" or "evil" for his destructive aspect, which manifests itself in the persona of Saint Ranglehold:

*Superimpose the sea against his whole life. Only then does the randomness & cruelty of Saint Ranglehold become apparent. Much of his life was spent studying under Saint Orm & were there such a thing as "the good" or "the bad" saints where would we place him? We know nothing of him so how can we judge him?*  
(The M: Book 1)

Like Nichol, all humans have a senseless, destructive, cruel aspect, so how can we judge them/us? Nichol questions the concepts of "judgment" and "justice" in our patriarchal, hierarchical society. At the time of "the end of the law," the persona of St Ranglehold would be transformed in an inchoate consciousness/wor(l)d.

The poet's fascination with Dick Tracy, Sam Spade and Emma Peel, created characters who embody the good in the dichotomy of good and evil in the world, reflects the writer's attraction to a Zoroastrian universe, which can never exist within him or in the world in which he lives: "sam & dick & emma peel / oh how the real world gets lost in you." This desire for a simple black and white dichotomous world is manifest when Nichol feels uninspired and longs for a muse: "please / such fits of longing / fascination with the worst and best." This may be another allusion to "The Second Coming":

The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The poet, like the chronicler of Knarn, does not portend good news. This allusion feels like another urgent warning. However, in this text the "Second Coming" suggests the presence of a saviour in all humans, and the "revelation" is indeed at hand. The saints followed the rainbow, symbol of hope and promise, to earth, and it is the body of saints who will lead the poet and his readers to an "inchoate wor(l)d," to an earthly "promised land," in *Book 6 Books*.

\*

Saint Orm would appear to be a figure carried in Nichol's imagination from his youthful experience with organized religion. There is a strong sense of the concept of *peregrination* here--that life is death and death is life, where earth is seen as a kind of waiting room in which humans exist hoping to be delivered into heavenly bliss (life) at the time of their deaths:

you were THE DARK WALKER  
stood by my side as a kid

i barely remember

except the heaven i dreamt of  
was a land of clouds  
you moved at your whim

knowing i walked  
the bottom of a sea

that heaven was up there  
on that world in the sky

that this was death  
that i would go there

when i came to life

St Orm is a construct who teaches Nichol that he is among the living dead on this earth. "Earth" is at "the bottom of the sea," as far away from "heaven," a transcendental place "over" the sky, as one could possibly get. However, the sea is also primal source/m/other, and the poet is perhaps beginning unconsciously to transform the teachings of Orm. This is further suggested by the fact that Orm is seen to be very human in *Book 3* when his lover, rain, dies, and Orm has "nothing to live for," "hid[es] two years," and "talk[s] to noone." Perhaps most importantly, the persona of St Orm allows Nichol to intuit his affinity with the cosmos: "i thot i heard your sails creak SAINT ORM / i thot the clouds were you." Despite his kinship with st and and St Reat in their desire for love, their vulnerability, and their generation of potential and possibility, Nichol says of St Orm: "It's...that notion of the large figure who's ambiguously protective, and at the same time has that portative death to it, and guardianship" (Niechoda 92). Orm would seem to be a figure of the father and of the Father, to whom Nichol mouths the prayer: "saint orm i need the rage to lead drive my hand / tenderness / carry it to the end." The poet is striving to write himself out of his seemingly hopeless condition on "Knarn," and he needs to be impelled/propelled by a will that he feels is embodied in St Orm. At this point in the poem, Nichol prays to an impotent "power." He does not realize that the will he seeks is the will of the "other" working in and through himself. Praying to St Orm, the poet finds that his will is not willing, and he experiences a rift between mind and body and mind and spirit that will not

allow him to speak or write, yet he is writing; some "other" will propels him  
despite himself:

i speak lip tongue  
no throat

the whole thing

never learned to dance to  
my voice

sing  
praises

rejoice

Here the poet laments his seeming lack of ability to use the "i" properly, that is, in  
sing-ing his song/poem, in prais-ing the Creator, and in rejoic-ing in his be-ing.

\*

The dedications of *The Martyrology: Book I* are about connections that the  
"i" makes--to humans and to an otherness in the wor(l)d. The dedications  
themselves are a manifestation of how to use the "i," each of them demanding a  
tremendous faith in process. Lea [Hindley- Smith], Nichol's therapist, literally  
saved him from destroying himself. There is a destructive/constructive energy  
dichotomy here that is resolved through the poem as deconstruction always allows  
a reconstruction, or regeneration, to occur, and this happens in Nichol's therapy  
relationship. Humans exist with and need to have "friends"; there can be no "i"  
without "we." The second dedication is to Palongahoya, who "made the whole  
world an instrument of sound, and sound an instrument for carrying messages,  
resounding praise to the Creator of all" (Niechoda 4-5) The poet of *The*



*Martyrology* believes that the "i" is not to be used for praising of the self, but is to be used "for carrying messages" and for praising an unnamable "other." Of course this praise can be made manifest by the fullest possible expression of one's be-ing in the wor(l)d.

The saints as personae of the figure of the poet dissolve into the text by the end of *Book 4*, but this does not occur before Nichol has seriously contemplated the relationship of the "i" to the "we." He comments:

...along with the central themes of '*The Martyrology*' which are themes around what is the place of i in the collective we--'cause my basic belief is that the i, in a certain sense, is useless--the we is everything. It's the collective activity that makes the difference in the long run...Balanced against the realization that that recognition of the we cannot mean an erasure of the i--'cause if you erase the i you have no we. So how do you make that balance? (*As Elected*)

In the "last take" section of *Book 3* the only words in which final "e" has phonetic value are "me," "we," and "three," suggesting that "E" is the unifier that joins "me" and "we" to form a third level of the self, integrated and many-layered. Three is the number of completion in the Cabala, and also in the Christian godhead. Since there is no capital authority, the poet is obviously rejoicing in his own personal integrity and in his affinity with the integrity of the "other" in these lines.

\*

The sequence "last take" ends:

the emblems were there when i began  
seven years to understand  
the first letter/level of  
martyrdom

It is apparent that the process of knowing himself is far from complete; the poet is

a being who will never be encompassed. In this first level of martyrdom, the letter "m" of individual male or me or masculine authority is martyred to the many-levelled/lettered self that is a part of the "we." This knowledge of the self involves a recognition of the woman in the man:

saints in between		
	the world of men	<b>ME</b>
women		<b>WE</b>
	the sign complete	

The sign/language/saints of human consciousness embody both male and female qualities in their completeness. Nichol discovers the feminine and masculine aspects of his being, refounding the male/female principle, the yin/yang motion of the "god-energy" that inspires us all and that inspires all things. "[O]r the two fold vision / H to I / the saints returned to this plane." The relationship of H to I suggests the relationship of self to language, of word to wor(l)d, which is evoked by all that lies between H and I, which may be infinite as well as intimate, in the "fractions" of whole letters.<sup>4</sup>

The "plane" that the saints "returned" to is that of **ME**  
**WE**, and interestingly, is also the plane of the body of humans on earth. This prompts one to wonder whence the saints originated, and where Cloudtown was actually located. The words reflect themselves. **ME**  
**WE** now evokes man-ma-me-we-womb-woman, the

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<sup>4</sup> cf. bpNichol, "probable systems 9," in *As Elected*:

the concept of the whole letter is itself an interesting one which will be gone into a greater detail in a future system since if you have H & if you have I what are the fractional letters in between them & what do they express (111-112)

many selves in the one connected by the E. It has taken the poet seven suffering years to achieve this level of understanding of his multi-lettered changing self.

In "CODA: *Mid-Initial Sequence*," which closes *Book 3*, Nichol comes to a more profound understanding of himself and of his wor(l)d. The mind that was, earlier in *Book 3*, "needing peace / to sleep in language years or weeks" has now seemed to fulfill its need:

faint edge of sleep  
a literal fuzzing in the mind  
as tho the edge of  
what was held clearly  
became less defined

The "edge of sleep" seems to bring us to that realm that Nichol has described as borderblur, to "that point where language &/or the image blur together into the inbetween" ("some afterwords"), to that "inbetween" mind where myth and history are fused in a "fuzzing in the mind," in what may be called a cosmic illumination. This creates a kind of "dreamtime" in the poem, where the borders, "the edge of / what was held clearly," are fuzzed, and begin to lose their power to limit, or impose form or definition. This allows for a more various content to enter into the poem, perhaps even for that content for which "we cannot grasp the signified." The penalty paid, the "lung wage" for this "dreamtime" borderblur, is the fall of the figure of the father into the text. With the father falls the authority of grammar and all historical, biblical, mythical, patriarchal authority. The father is recognized for "what," not "who," he is:

the penalty paid &  
your father recognized

for what he is

The payment and recognition are intimately connected by the ampersand on the concreteness of the faint purple and fading frame of the page, suggesting a fading out of Christian hierarchy and its constraints. The father is finally addressed "as is his due," "for what he is." The words are freed on the page, and now begin to deconstruct themselves and recompose the text with a single letter or syllable. "the," definite article with no semantic, but only a grammatical function, "is." "the is," by virtue of its being on the page, so that being itself replaces the old authority of grammar. When the authority of "the father," a construct of language, falls, the authority of grammar also falls into the text and language becomes anarchic, moving according to its own innate power.

"[H]ome plate," just behind the lid of the eye, is a personal place for the poet as the mind moves into a poetic landscape, without the previous authority of the self:

the late P  
    destroyed  
leaving only b  
& n

beginning again

b & n are connected by the ampersand that connected "penalty paid" and "your father recognized"; the mid-initial of barrie nichol is brought down in its capital sense of being the authority of the self, and we see it in its "decentered" sense in "penalty paid"--as the poet bears witness to these changes and to this newfound freedom. Once authority is abolished, there is a sense that "we's home free / if

we goes where we wants to be" (*Book 3*), as both poet and poem are freed to dance through this deconstruction that moves fluidly into composition as "b / & n / beginning again" becomes "b n a," which suggests the Canadian Constitution--our wor(l)d--anarchic and re-formed. "b n a" also suggests bn at a, barrie nichol at the beginning of the alphabet, or at the genesis of self or wor(l)d. A re-constitution of the self/wor(l)d does occur, as the poem recognizes "all history there / t here." "t here" suggests that all history is here in the poem at once, on this page, as a kind of liquid presence. "There" becomes "here," behind the lid of the eye, the cross of "t" evoking the struggle to bear witness to the present moment, momentarily--"history here," "opposed against the suffering / we have yet to bear." The need to bear witness to our own changing pluralistic selves and to the changing wor(l)d is an ongoing one; the present moment is always "opposed" in some way to the future, which never arrives; it is always "now." The "we" of the poetic self must continue to evoke the "here" from within the presentness of the poetic process. The pronoun "we" also implies that the reader is complicit in this poetic process, further implying a responsibility to take seriously what is also a playful movement of language.

Nichol states his desire for "cosmic consciousness," or an intuitive glimpse of the whole/the "other," in a passage from *Book 4*. The poet recognizes that this illumination will occur through "the sacred activity of language," or of letters, "the little ones":

(imp art i always wanted to attain  
a dance among the litte ones)

wanted to be part of  
the whole  
flows thru  
into the universe

The poet's desire is clarified through his comments on "pataphysics, which disclose his fluid, forward notion/ motion of self and wor(l)d:

[T]hat phenomenon is one of the identifying features of the "pataphysical, that even as you say it exists you know it doesn't exist and even as you know it doesn't exist you see that it exists and so on. Thus one is led thru chains of "pataphysical logic where each step coheres only for the length of the transition and then disintegrates, disappears behind you even as a new, unexpected step appears in front of you. And, of course, if you linger too long trying to decide whether or not to take that next step it too disappears & you never make it. (*Pata* 80)

Nichol's final comment largely describes the poetic process of *The Martyrology*.

The entire passage may be a description of a consciousness of the "other" and of self in an inchoate wor(l)d.

At the end of *Book 3*, Nichol deals with the issue of Christian authority and its denouncement and disincorporation of a previous pagan consciousness. A.D., anno Domini, "in the year of our Lord," is the (inexact) measure of our Christian time. However, Nichol notes that language, or letters, are the "measure of our kind":

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

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

man's time

The lower case of "a.d." renounces the authority of Christian measure. The statement, "history's spoken in / the first four letters" is both factual and fatuous; we foolishly recount history according to the Christian eras, b.c. and a.d., as if humans did not embody a saviour-figure before the time, a.d., and as if "true" spirituality were unknown before "the time of our Lord." To Nichol, these divisions and this thinking are narrow-minded and pompous. We are so far removed from the source that it is doubtful that we will ever learn life's beginnings on earth, let alone larger universal beginnings, and the "other" remains unnamable, ineffable. The poet is hopeful though; he points to a wonderful possibility that there is still all e to z to evoke in history, in the "epic" (<Gr. *epikos* < *epos* word, speech, poem) of human time. This possibility is still "outside the head's / measure of our kind," but as this chronicler continues to turn the words, he opens the way to a vast potential of an "inchoate wor(l)d" that will be revealed in *Book 6 Books*.

The language of *The Martyrology* affirms that "all history is here," and that nothing is lost, as evidenced by the chance finding of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which had been "lost" for centuries, and which "antedate[s] Homeric epic by at least one and a half thousand years" (N.K. Sandars). "Unknown" history, then, is merely uninvoked:

whatever dies  
the secrets do not die with you  
the lore we all seek (l or e)  
choices are not disinterested

The poet is speaking to H.D., whose "soft consonantal breath" speaks a kind of language after death, and who investigated Egyptian, Greek, and other pagan lore. Like "word"--"w" or "d," "lore" is "l" or "e," which may bring to mind "life" or "eternity." One also thinks of the liquid "l" in wor(l)d, of the voiceless "e" of noise edging into silence, and of the long vowel "e" vibrating on the vocal chords of Palongawhoya, "making the whole world an instrument of sound," so that "l" or "e" may speak liquid lore. The poet of *The Martyrology* speaks fluid silences and vibrations; he has "pray[ed] god let the consonance lead [him]" in his choice of words, which create lore. By this place in the poem, the saints have become individual letters, and the poet prays not to a construct of an aspect of himself (Orm), but to an "other" power.

Nichol notices that not all choices are disinterested, and the poem implies that we should be wary of lore, and especially of biblical lore:

d is in t  
it is the old story HE lived thru  
HIS death & suffering  
33 years into HIS time  
22 letters left to pass thru  
what birth will herald the change

Christ, the word made flesh and human to redeem humans, who are words, heralded the change from the Old World to the New. The incarnation and resurrection of Christ was to heal the rift between body and spirit, form and content. However, the birth of Christ prompted a voice to emanate from the sea lamenting the death of the great god Pan, and this was brought about by "not disinterested" authorities of the Christian religion, and especially by "authoritative



texts," which repressed the regeneration, renewal and vision symbolized by Pan and the old lore, while at the same time "canonizing" the new lore. "d is in t" thus implies a discorporation of old knowledge and a disembodiment of the spirit, which was unfortunately what happened through the Passion of Christ. The "birth [that] will herald the change" is in this text the birth of the saviour in each human being, which will result in a consciousness of an inchoate wor(l)d.

The poet alludes to a time of the "end of the law," although there is no suggestion of a Christian millenium and there are no signs of transcendence:

B.C. is embedded in A.D., F.G. in E.H.:

if the formula remains the same  
the era F.G. to follow A.D.  
E.H. is the next to bear HIS name  
reversed

E.H. reversed is HE, HIS name, the true significance of which has already been stated and which, according to the poem, will be reinstated in the era E.H., "his reign of peace," implying a time when the redemption of language (humans/wor(l)d) will be complete and the "time of law," or authority, will be done.

"d," "a gluttony of shape," discorporates the era B.C., "which it ends." As well as being violent, dogma is both authoritative and definitive, is "not disinterested," and is not fluid. Since we read from left to right, we encounter the discorporating "d" of dogma first, and are thus led "into the devil's works / by our very view," emphasizing the conditional state of significance.

In *Book 3, VIII*, the poet has a cosmic illumination:

it is all here father  
as it has always been  
all language names you  
all description as i make it clear  
the nine billion names of god  
writ out in tongues no longer spoke these billion  
billion years

This passage implies the measureless, ineffable quality of "other," whom "all language names" since the beginning of time, or of being. The "other" is source, and may embody a "source" or original language. "The Nine Billion Names Of God" is a science fiction story by that collates all "the nine billion names of god" in a universal language. As the computer starts to churn out the names, the stars begin to go out.... Nichol is obviously familiar with this story, and he gives it a twist in his contention that the "nine billion names of god" have already been "writ out in tongues" over history--the names have never been written or computed. All language names and praises the "other," as the poet frequently affirms, and it is possible that he is also suggesting that if the "other" were ever named, or encompassed, then the wor(l)d would end--the stars would go out. Nichol, like the chronicler of Knarn, intuitively knows the "other," while at the same time he realizes that he cannot consciously know the "other"; this intuitive knowledge can only be felt by an "inchoate" mind. The poet thus exposes the naming of the ineffable power by various organized religions to be a megalomaniacal act.

The CODA "asserts the balance" that will eventually be realized in an inchoate wor(l)d:

god asserts the balance  
the cypher for our cyclic ages

the g that will dominate at the end of F.G.  
leading on into E.H.  
His reign of peace

The poem has created linguistic eras analagous to the second coming and the final judgment, "F.G.," and to the apocalypse when the end of all law and authority will literally and figuratively fall into the text to allow for the emergence of a "reign of peace," "E.H." E.H. suggests a kind of purified language that would lead to peace in a purified place (see *mind t'ap*). The statement that "god asserts the balance / the cypher for our cyclic ages" gives up the authority of self entirely to an "other" power. It is suggested that if humans would give up their wills (egos) to this power, then a "balance," or "a reign of peace," would ensue. "Cypher" takes its root from the Arabic word *sifr*, meaning empty, cypher, or zero (*Webster's*). In this "*Mid-Initial Sequence*," in which capital P is "destroyed" and lower case p "edges / into the sea," the word "em ty" may be of significance if we follow the pattern of dropping the "p." "Cypher" may then imply a way through to "other," which would lead to the "reign of peace" in E.H. "Cypher" also brings to mind the "empty, zero, nothingness" rim world of the chronicler of Knarn, from which *The Martyrology* was made and through which humans may find a way to sacred place.

"*CODA: Mid-Initial Sequence*" concludes with a warning against the misuse of language:

'dogma i am god'  
heresy  
    hearsay  
in the worst sense

false pride  
who thinks to bestride the world  
because he feels crushed by it

The "gluttonous," "discorporating" d leads this palindrome of which either element-"dogma" or "i am god"--will effect discorporation and preclude the desired union of self and "other." This is heresy in terms of sacredness of source, and "hearsay / in the worst sense" in terms of the poetic process, which continually strives to seek the "other" through "finding as many exits as possible from the self...in order to form as many entrances as possible for the other." The passage reminds us that the invoking power of language does not effect creation, but a re-creation, an evocation of what is already present. The one who attempts to "bestride the world" is actually fearful or even terrified of the unknown and is unable to develop that quality that Keats has called "negative capability." Words do not create, but invoke, and the poet is "in vocation... / a singer," whose quest is for a song that would reach "other," whose vehicle and medium is language that may reconnect "we" to sacred place. This quest will be realized when the poet finally finds his way, "just in time," "right in time" in his dance to Inchoate Road.

          In deconstructing and decentering the "i" through the constructs of the saints, Nichol uncovers a many-levelled/lettered self. The poet is then free to explore the relationship of "i" to "we" and to "wor(l)d." This exploration results in a further deconstruction and decentering of language/self/wor(l)d into individual letters with an innate power of their own. Nichol makes discoveries through "the sacred activity of writing," and

he comes to realize both an intuitive and a linguistic "other" will working in and through him. Perhaps it is his realization of and faith in the presence of an unnamable "other" that prompts the poet to begin a deconstruction and decentering of Christianity, the ruling "authoritative" patriarchal myth of our time.

## II. Deconstruction/decentering of the wor(l)d

Since there is "all history left to live, e to z," after the historical reign of Christ and Christianity as signified in the letters, A,D,B,C, the Christ-figure must now take its place as metaphor in the text. *The Martyrology* is anti-apocalyptic in a biblical, transcendent sense, since the "end of the law" and a "reign of peace" occur as a natural progression of "all e to z" left to live out in history with the fall of the meaning of the father into the text. There is no Last Judgment, no biblical millenium, and evil is not destroyed by a transcendent God. Although *The Chronicle of Knarn* may be seen as "A Book of the Dead," this is certainly not the book referred to in *Revelation*. In fact, the chronicler is a kind of "god" who breathes life into the wor(l)d of *The Martyrology* out of the nothingness in which he exists. "Apocalypse" takes its root from the Greek *ἀποκάλυψις*, meaning "to uncover, reveal" (Skeat). In this sense *The Martyrology* is apocalyptic in that it uncovers and reveals patriarchal codes and symbols that chain our consciousnesses, stifle our souls, and strangulate our voices, alienating consciousness from body and soul. These are crimes to our beings, and Nichol's long poem does seek justice in that it strives to unlock, or neutralize, the damaging codes by freeing language from the constraints of patriarchy so that it may move by its own innate power.

In *Book 3*, the transcendental signifier, God the Father, falls into the text and is shown for "what," not "who," he is. This God is not "God," but a puppet that seems to pull its own strings; it is a human fabrication speaking with a human

voice and manipulated with human hands. The unnamable, ineffable, "other" spiritual power in the universe is walled out by the defining doctrine and dogma of Christianity. A "benevolent" Christian "God" does not exist for Nichol, who desires what he deems a "no-gimmees relationship to the godhead....[He doesn't] want anything for his belief" ("Talking About the Sacred in Writing" 235), nor does he expect anything for this belief. The poet feels that the "other" works in and through humans as a function of the loosening and widening of boundaries that occurs in *The Martyrology* and elsewhere. bpNichol ascribes to the "other" only its "otherness" status; he attributes to it neither a name nor a will.

In "**Book I**" of *Book 6 Books*, Nichol deconstructs Christianity while simultaneously allowing a generation of older/other knowledge, possibility, and potentiality to occur within the pages of *The Martyrology*. Through this process, the poet strives to refound within our consciousnesses a paradisaical vision. He is fascinated by Arthur, the myth of Avalon (and similar myths), and the legend of the Holy Grail, which in pre-Christian times was a "magical vessel....a source of life, not only spiritual but physical" (Ashe. *Camelot and the Vision of Albion* 100).<sup>5</sup> Through a conflation of Celtic and Christian myths and other stories, Nichol creates a possibility of unearthing a kind of living "Avalon":

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<sup>5</sup> Nichol's library houses at least five books on the topic of Arthur and Albion in his library at his home in Toronto: Geoffrey Ashe, *Camelot and the Vision of Albion* (London: Heinemann, 1971); G. Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1985); G. Ashe, *The Quest for Arthur's Britain* (N.Y.: Frederik A. Praeger, 1968); Richard Barber, *Arthur of Albion* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1961); R. Barber, *King Arthur* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1986).

The point of the Grail in its developed Christian form is that it is lost, yet may be found again. Once, the holy mystery was established in Britain openly. Its recovery, like Arthur's prophesied second advent, would be the re-instatement of a long-lost glory; or at any rate, of a long-lost promise. The dormant Grail-keeper would come back to life, the afflicted country would blossom with a new spring, the vanished vision would be recovered. Both [Christian and Celtic] legends express the same idea, that the lost is not lost. (Ashe, *Camelot* 101)

So "the lost is not lost." Since the Grail is a vessel, both vessel and keeper may be any human who is able to hear this/these stories; "the afflicted country" is surely not only the earth, but also the humans who dwell t/here. For those who are able to "ear," the "holy mystery" that was lost in Christianity reappears in bpNichol's Book.

The first three pages of *Book 6 Books* introduce Nichol's deconstruction and decentering of the Christian wor(1)d. On the first page, there are two quotations, the first one of unknown origin as "quoted in C.C. Bombaugh's *Oddities and Curiosities of Words and Literature*":

'One's pestered in these days by so many 'ologies  
We thought we would fain see the tale of our foes;  
A niche of your own in the new Martyrologies  
You'd earn if you'd only go halves in our woes.'

We are pestered and pressured with so many language/ knowledge networks that this writer, like Nichol, wishes to examine the "tale of our foes," which in the case of *Book 6 Books* is the story of Christianity. The "new Martyrologies" suggests *The Martyrology: Books 1 - Book 6 Books*, in which we may have "[a] niche of our own" if we'd "only go halves in our woes," that is, if we'd only meet the poet half-way in bearing witness to the news in the "new Martyrologies." This



suggestion by the writer of *The Martyrology* is heretical according to the Christian Church, and the next quotation reflects this fact: "If I don't learn to shut my mouth I'll soon go to hell" (Christopher Okigbo). The voice that the chronicler of Knarn so urgently desired is humorously and horrifyingly damned by this quotation. The present chronicler, who is now blessed with the gift of song, makes it ironically clear that it is the "shut...mouth" that exists in hell.

The following two pages of this "introduction" suggest that "these books are" geomantic christ sections, cross sections and inter[hear "burial"]sections of Toronto streets. The naming of these various "ways" portends the finding of an inchoate road through the deconstruction of a Christian road:

Christ (i.e.St.)  
sections  
inter  
pretations  
at the corner of  
mundane & sacred  
snow in my shoe &  
dreams of  
Who?  
of some other, higher, life

A reading of the text of the six Books of *Book 6 Books* is seen as a kind of divination by signs that may take us from a Christian Road to an inchoate road to an inchoate wor(l)d, in which the poet dreams that a communion with the "other" may occur. Christ is textualized (St.,saint), and the metaphor of christ is seen as a way (St.,street) to reach "other," "at the corner of / mundane & sacred," that is, here on this earth through the dailiness of living, rather than in a transcendent heaven. Embedded in "IMPERFECTION: A Prophecy" is the legend of Arthur and

Camelot. Arthur, as a "giant" saviour-figure,<sup>3</sup> sleeps a kind of magical sleep from which he is waiting to be awakened, or reborn in those who would live within the body of the saviour, thus creating a kind of mundane/sacred, inchoate yet earthly Camelot.

The title of **Book I**, "IMPERFECTION: A Prophecy" is ironic in that it alludes to Paul's statement in Corinthians that "even our prophecies are imperfect" (IV with Butling). This throws the *Bible*, particularly the "prophetic" book of Revelation, into doubt, as it simultaneously casts a shadow on oracular and prophetic elements in myth. The early Christians were persecuted in Rome, and Paul reflects on this fact in a passage that introduces Andronicus and Junias, fellow Jews who were converted to Christianity before Paul:

'Salute Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen, and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.'  
(Romans 16:7)

In **part 1**, Nichol deals with the failings, frustration and confusion resulting from the intermingled faith and doubt in the apostles, even as they are "in" the metaphorical body of the saviour. In this book, as opposed to *the Book*, the wanderings of the apostles are more numerous than their works.

A period followed by a silence/whiteness/

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<sup>3</sup> Giraldus Cambrensis writes of the great size of Arthur's bones: The thigh bone, when placed next to the tallest man present, as the abbot showed us, and fastened to the ground by his foot, reached three inches above his knee. And the skull was of a great, indeed prodigious, capacity, to the extent that the space between the brows and between the eyes was a palm's breadth. (Quoted by Barber 57)

potentiality of the page begins **part 1** of **Book I**. This section starts with the sign of an "ending," putting into flux the notion of beginnings and endings, particularly of eras such as the Christian one and the time of the reign of the saviour. These periods are interspersed throughout the sections of **Book I**, the whiteness of the page following the punctuation mark always signifying a potential uninvoked "other" history.

Christ has "died" and his disciples appear to have no faith that the saviour lives on within themselves, since they travel over the sea "in madness" and "in grief." These "wanderers" would seem to be from Great Britain--perhaps they are even from the hill of Glastonbury, or the Isle of Avalon, an Arthurian place where the savior-figure is waiting to be resurrected.<sup>4</sup> Leather "corricles" were used by the ancient Celts or Britons (*Webster's*), and the apostles travel "in a corricle over the sea in madness / in a corricle over the sea in grief." "[F]orgive us" occurs eight times on the first page of **part 1**; these apostles are guilty in their humanness; they seem also to be guilty of their humanness. Their muteness is framed with pleas for forgiveness: "'forgive us our tongues of dust our lips of stone forgive us.'" In their failure to have faith in the saviour, the word made flesh, the apostles fail to have faith in themselves, who are also "words" made flesh, and they desperately seek outside themselves for that which lies within.

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<sup>4</sup> "What is now called Glastonbury was in former times called the Isle of Avalon, for it is almost an island, being entirely surrounded by marshes, whence it is named in British Inis Avallon, that is the apple-bearing island, because apples (in British aval) used to abound in that place." (Barber 56-7)

They strive to save themselves by obtaining forgiveness from "Him," whom they "loved...silently." These apostles--these words--fail to use their voices as Palongawhoya did in praise of the Creator, and they thus fail to "set the vibratory axis of [their wor(l)d] in motion." "Failure" is a motif of **part 1**.

The disciples continue to wander: "so that this way we went & this / that way & back / this way & that / following Joseph." They are following Joseph of Arimathea, and their quest becomes a quest for the Holy Grail, which, in Celtic custom, "unlocks some mystery of divine action in the world" if the question, "Whom does the Grail serve?" is answered correctly (Ashe. *Camelot* 99). The answering of the question and the resulting cosmic insight would occur simultaneously, in a kind of constellation of meanings not unlike those that Nichol has in places throughout *The Martyrology*. The mentioning of Joseph in the poem mingles pagan and Christian myth. In the Celtic cult, the Grail "may have been a cauldron of inspiration and enlightenment kept by a Celtic goddess, or by a synod of goddesses"; in the cult of Christianity, "Mary replaced the pagan goddess behind the enchanted vessel" (Ashe. *Camelot* 97,99). The Grail is as intimately connected with Arthur as it is with Christ. Joseph is said to have collected Christ's blood in the Grail and then fled with it to England, perhaps to the Abbey at Glastonbury or Avalon, after sealing Christ's tomb:

[I]n a book on the symbolism of the Mass, by Honorius of Autun, [t]he priest laying the paten on the chalice is said to represent Joseph closing the tomb of Christ with a stone. Possibly someone's imagination took a hint, and linked Joseph with Christ's original chalice....The Grail became 'holy,' drawing in a medley of speculations about the Mass, and the doctrine of the Real Presence on which it centres -- yet still with a trail of pre-Christian

imagery and ideas. (Ashe. *Camelot* 98)

In their pursuit of Joseph, the disciples are really pursuing spiritual enlightenment and the (internal) Presence of the saviour. Nichol's text tells us that "in time" the apostles are successful in their quest; however, this does not occur in **part 1** or in any manner that one might expect. "Quest" becomes the second motif of **part 1** that would transform "failure" into success.

The "mist/boat/wave" concrete poem brings about some forgiveness and compassion in the text in that in the mist-ery of the sea of life, faith and doubt are seen to be inextricably bound in boats/vessels/humans, and human vessels are thereby recognized as creatures living within this often perplexing mist-ery. Judas, the betrayer, speaks of his failure to love, his lack of understanding, his "dreadful fear," and his "cringing smallness." Judas is portrayed more as a self-perceived "failure" and as a wounded and crippled human than as the cold-hearted deceiver who marked the saviour for death, who "cashed" spirituality, who sought to make tangible the intangible mist-ery. Paul and Judas are both seen as very human beings who are filled with fear and doubt. In the "rain/mist/boat" concrete poem, human vessels are seen to travel through the mist-ery of nature, the rain creating the sea creating the rain. Without a firm faith, the apostles' quest is confusing and frightening. The poem suggests that there may be infinite combinations of this "journey" under the sky, on the "sea," in the rain (poor visibility) in a boat/human vessel in the mist-ery of be-ing in the wor(l)d. Also, we hear a flickering of the poet/chronicler's voice in the final strain, "mismiboatin." It becomes clear that

not only the apostles, but also the poet, have "missed the boat" in that they have not received the message of the saviour that they are questing after.

Once again in **part 1** there is no forgiveness, only guilt and self-hatred, which conditions were effected by the Passion of Christ:

we have left Thee behind Lord, left ourselves  
in that leaving, far from the truth from being  
true to Thee, fled, in our fear, over the sea,  
forever, i can never forgive me, we can never  
forgive us, the day we fled that last chance to                      serve Thee

we left us behind Lord, with Thy body, on a cross,  
saw them hammer the nails in, with the others, so  
many before You we had watched bleed to death, so  
many deaths we have spoke against in silence, as we  
did again, railed against them with downcast eyes &  
turned backs, railed against them & abandoned Thee

The apostles have been silenced by their fear and their resulting anger turned inward of which the effect is self-hatred. They could not love themselves and accept the saviour into themselves; they in fact abandon themselves in that they alienate body from soul: "we have left Thee behind Lord, left ourselves in that leaving." The nails that hammer Christ into stasis and silence (sleep) become metaphorical nails that have the same effect on the apostles and on all humans. For saint and, the figure of the artist who makes meaning by connecting things, "every gesture of his hand / is a nail that refuse[es] to hold." *The Martyrology* is bpNichol's apostolic quest. That so many others have bled to death surrounded by silence suggests unjust sacrifice and the shedding of blood by the saviour on the cross; the tone of this passage intimates fear that inspires a death wish rather than a desire for life. The apostles, particularly Judas, are silenced by their fear of going

against the multitudes in their materialistic world. The saviour is dead, and the message here is clearly that "fear kills." However, Judas does come to "face...the fear & littleness within [himself]" and this facing of himself may be the beginning of the end of silence for him.

"[T]he waves / against the boat" concrete poem has a hypnotic, lullaby-like effect as we hear the waves gently lapping against the boat/human vessel, and we are pacified and protected like babies from the harshness of the previous passage. This poem suggests a continual possibility for rebirth. In the previous concrete poem, we are "asleep / in a boat / above the deep / waters / waters / waters / waters / waters." The word, "waters," descends the page, physically suggesting "the deep," and readers are lulled and "kept afloat" by this deeper mystery.

However, the poem must question what became of the apostles:

so where did you go?

this way  
& that

&  
only ourselves  
crazy in the vast blue of  
the sky  
the sea

The apostles crossed the sea to find Christ "in madness" and now they are "crazy" with no Christ in them. They are alone as they wander aimlessly in the "vast blue" of the world.

In the penultimate passage of **part 1**, we realize that the apostles, like the "saints" before them, are all aspects of the poet. Nichol speaks of the destroyer in

him ("the man in black") and of the stubbornness, lack, silence, despair and desire that impel/propel him in his quest:

sometimes in the night frightened by  
my own cowardice things I should've  
said or done dreams the man in black  
walking towards me the buildings  
falling i am powerless to stop him  
tho his face is mine his eyes are  
mine i am watching it all happen  
wordless

sometimes in the morning waking the  
boat is rocking he is watching me & i  
say nothing i say less and less think  
more & more my lips dry yes as much  
from stubbornness as lack

of desire set sail in despair into the midst of

at night the dreams of daytime & my silence my                      inabilities my

Despite all of his human fears and frailties, the poet has "set sail...into the midst of," and **part 1** ends with primal images of possibility: "gulls / gills / (& in the distance hills)" "Gills" are a symbol of primal life source, the sea. "Gulls" signify not only sky, but also a natural language; "birds calling over the sea" was the first natural language heard in the poem. The "distant hills" were an obstruction for saint and to passion and creativity; the poem now invokes this possibility with the evocation of "distance" and "hills." Together, gulls, gills and distant hills evoke an image of "otherness" and of vast potentiality in the wor(l)d.

**part 2** introduces the character of the giant Buamundus, who teams up with the disciples Andronicus and Junias, composing a rather motley crew. Curiously, the only known reference to Buamundus exists in a "lost" text (*The Lost Literature*



of *Medieval England* by R.M. Wilson). Yet this text exists; as Nichol would say, nothing is lost but it is merely uninvoked. It is also unknown whether Buamundus was a giant, although this is assumed throughout the rest of **Book I**. The "giant" was "jestingly called...by [a] giant's name" by another chronicler-figure, Ordericus Vitalis, whose name suggests a phallogocentric wor(l)d:

...the phallus is the symbol of sure, self-identical truth and is not to be challenged. Modern society, as the post-structuralists would say, is 'phallogocentric'; it is also... 'logocentric', believing that its discourses can yield us immediate access to the full truth and presence of things. Jacques Derrida has conflated these two terms to the compound 'phallogocentric', which we might roughly translate as 'cocksure.' (Eagleton 189)

This "cocksure," "vital order" of patriarchy is deconstructed on the first page of this section where Buamundus is spelled vertically, being supported by "US." As Pauline Butling puts it,

Using the letters of Buamundus' name as building blocks (foregrounding the letteral, as McCaffery calls it),<sup>5</sup> he forms the figure of a giant on the page, held up by the two letters, "US," creating a visual representation of the narrative situation in which Buamundus must be largely invented by "us" (the writer and reader). It is also a concrete poem presenting the essential of all narrative--a "mundus" (world) invented by "us"; that is, all narrative (including history) has its basis in human invention.

And as Alan R. Knight comments, "The work that shatters a myth creates, in doing so, its own myth" ("The Toronto Research Group Reports: The Myth of Textuality" 90). As Nichol "shatters" the myth of the Christian phallogocentric

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<sup>5</sup> "This might be considered as a displacement from the *literal* (which would bind writing to an order of mimesis) to the *letteral* that opens up writing to the productional processes inherent in the words themselves...." ( McCaffery 61)

wor(l)d, he constructs what Knight calls a "necessary myth that invites demystification" ("TRG: Myth" 91). In other words, the text becomes an activity that must be actively demystified/translated by the reader, who then becomes the writer of another text, which consists of a personal translation of the original text.

The figure of Buamundus is created to be "more than most": large, vociferously vocal, possessing a voracious appetite/desire, and much personal pride. He is the exact opposite of the apostles. The giant persona "set a scare / AMONG US." Humans are afraid of this creation, who is capable of celebrating his own be-ing in the wor(l)d without guilt or remorse. In making the word flesh, and in having "US" hold up the wor(l)d, Nichol's text suggests that Buamundus is the opposite of a patriarchal Atlas-figure, thus literally and letterally upsetting the "vital order" of the patriarchal chronicler, Ordericus Vitalis.

The apostles are part fiction, Buamundus is fictitious (we think), and Nichol playfully and ironically calls into question our notions of "history" and "reality":

1)myth

2)legend                      simply no way of knowing

3)rumour

4)truth

The letters of Buamundus' name are constructed into a mountain; it seems that the obstruction to passion and creativity becomes, in the figure of the giant, a symbol of passion and creativity. Buamundus brings to mind the Titans, an older order of beings, and also the giants who existed in Celtic myth before it was transformed

into Christian myth. There may also be an allusion to the hill ("mountain") where Cadbury Castle is situated; this hill is presumed to have once been Camelot (Ashe. *Camelot* 1). It may thereby be suggested that Buamundus is Arthur, an embodiment of the saviour, reborn. Geoffrey Ashe has these words to say about Camelot and Avalon:

If you stand on [the hill on which lies Cadbury Castle's] crest, looking out from the ghostly walls of King Arthur's palace, you can see Glastonbury Tor rising far away above Avalon....Yet if you traverse the space between and stand on the Tor, looking back over the same Somerset levels, Cadbury Castle will escape you. It is there, but from that angle it blends expertly into the hills behind it. To start out from Camelot to Avalon -- the way, perhaps, of Arthur's passing -- is no more than following your eye. To start out from Avalon to Camelot -- the way (one presumes) of his return -- is an act of faith. (Ashe. *Camelot* 1)

We do not know Buamundus' origins, he is a giant among ordinary folk, his spirituality consists of a conflation of paganism and Christianity, and it may well be that this construct of the poet is the "sleeping savior," who already embodies Camelot but this fact is not recognized, not even by the questing giant. King Arthur may be buried on the isle of Avalon, or he may be buried in a cave in Cadbury Hill, or these places may in some essential sense be one (Ashe. *Camelot* 1). Arthur's presence is deeply embedded within the body of Buamundus. This body may be metaphorically reached either by traversing water or by entering a cave, symbolic of the womb/tomb aspect of all being. And as Ashe notes, the body of the saviour may be entered only by an act of faith.

What is "known" is that Christianity came to England "circa 65 a.d." and that "among the saints the disciples the crowds that gathered / Andronicus / Junias

/ Buamundus." Buamundus' presence here challenges "information." Our history is "remembered / forgotten / all at once & / together / the absence inseparable from the presence / gone so much longer Lord than You were with us." All of history is here and present all at once; the absences are uninvoked. History extends far beyond "the time of our Lord," suggesting that it is time for a new "time" or era. Perhaps it is even time for the "sleeping giant/saviour" to awaken and to restore "Camelot" on earth. More evidence that Buamundus may be an Arthurian-figure is given in the Welsh triads, "mnemonic summaries of popular themes," one of which is called the "Three Exalted Prisoners":

Not only is Arthur the outstanding hero, occurring in more triads than anybody else, he is the only one so important that several triads are expanded to tetrads to fit him in. Thus, after the Three Exalted Prisoners, comes the addition. 'And there was another prisoner even more famous, and this was Arthur'.... (Ashe. *Camelot* 83)

On the first page of **part 1**, Andronicus and Junias are introduced as fellow prisoners of Paul. On the first page of **part 2**, Buamundus is added to the triad and he is certainly more famous, like Arthur, and has more exploits than do the other three.

In a possible allusion to Gulliver's putting out a house fire in the land of the Lilliputians, Buamundus gets drunk one night, pisses in a stream, and floods the entire town. Here, two already exaggerated stories are conflated to make an even more ridiculous tale. In Nichol's story, however, superstition reigns as the townspeople all fear that they have wet their beds and bedwetting is "known" by witches to be a sign of "inconstancy." Superstitious knowledge here occurs out of

a ridiculous mis-spelling of "incontinence," the slight variation of letters marking the significance. Although the fear of flooding an entire town by wetting one's bed is utterly unfounded, such is the power of superstition and the fear of being embarrassed in the face of the "multitudes." The mention of "witches" brings to mind Christian misogyny and "witch-burnings." Nichol's little story is clearly invective in that it reflects his disdain of superstition, ignorance, a sheeplike fear of "the multitudes," and misogyny.

The poet enjoys poking fun at the machismo of patriarchal society. First, it is pointed out that "[Buamundus] was / small for his size," and readers will assume that "size" refers to the size of the penis. Nichol humorously ridicules critics who constantly question, "Who holds the phallus?"--the answer in this case is ironically "a fabrication jokingly created at a (probably fictitious) drunken feast." Although the macho giant is "ashamed" of his "small" penis, there are no other giants' to compare it to, and this makes the situation ridiculous--how does he know it is small? Nichol makes a mockery of patriarchal society's obsession with the phallic symbol, while at the same time he asserts that the virility and fertility of the Arthur/Christ/Buamundus figure is spiritual as well as physical; the order is semiotic rather than symbolic:

[T]he symbolic order of which Lacan writes is in reality the patriarchal sexual and social order of modern class-society, structured around the 'transcendental signifier' of the phallus, dominated by the Law which the father embodies....Kristeva... opposes to the symbolic...what she terms the 'semiotic'. She means by this a pattern or play of forces which we can detect inside language and which represents a sort of residue of the pre-Oedipal phase. (Eagleton 187-88)

In the jesting gesture of Nichol's Book, the "transcendental signifier" is revealed to be insignificant and the "vital order" of the father is overthrown.

In another attack on patriarchal phallogentrism, Buamundus is humorously depicted in a type of locker-room story as a shy stud: there is a "rumour" that Buamundus, although "shy," "impregnated / all the women in one village / at their request." Although Buamundus "longed for / the company of / ordinary folks," signifying that he desired companionship with "ordinary-sized" men and women who were not concerned with his sexual prowess/giantness, rumour has it that he certainly was not selective or shy with women. Perhaps "giant" men can never be "ordinary." These men are the product of a patriarchal system that will never allow them to be truly human. Alternatively, the impregnated women may be associated with the nine maidens or the Goddess or even Mary herself who guards the Holy Grail. This would then be a metaphorical rumour of a union of the male and female aspects of the saviour.

An acrostic ends **part 2**, surprisingly stating that it is not Christ's story, but the story of Andronicus, Junias, and Buamundus that comprises *the Story*:

Briefly:  
Unhappy  
And  
Misunderstood  
Until  
Near  
Disciples.  
Ultimately (& this stands outside the known pattern) it  
is their  
Story

In decentering the Christian story, Nichol's story definitely "stands outside the

known pattern." It is the story of a quest for the true meaning of the "word made flesh" and for a restored paradisaical wor(l)d by three lonely and seemingly dis/mis/placed persons. However, these figures/words are textually exactly in place in the text.

**part 3** examines the confluences of Christianity/ paganism and of faith/doubt. The opening quotation deals with chance and constancy, or faith in which doubt is inherent:

'Esperance in the worlde nay.  
The world variethe every day.  
Esperance in dieu in hym is all,  
For he is above fortunes fall.'

(Anonymous 'in the rooffe of the hiest chawmbre in the gardynge' at the Duke of Northumberland's house at Leconfield, as quoted in J.G. Russell's *The Field of Cloth of Gold* (London 1969))

These lines are spiritual, in that "[s]he [who] is above fortunes fall" may withstand the variances of the wheel of fortune or chance through a deeply felt faith in the "other." This piece from *The Field of Cloth of Gold* signifies Nichol's deep faith in process; the poet's experience of chance and his faith in the "other" weave his own precious cloth of be-ing.

**part 3** opens with Andronicus, Junias, and Buamundus sleeping under the stars. Notably, they are not following a star, as did the three wise men, nor do any members of the trio pretend to be "wise." Rather, this company is depicted in various positions amidst a shadow/stone or a mystery/concreteness aspect of the wor(l)d. A stone cross is deconstructed into its elements of circle, stone and cross, the circle connecting the intersecting parts of the cross and the stone being the

stuff of the structure.<sup>6</sup> Stone is conspicuously concrete, just as shadow, circle and cross are symbolic; all elements are composed of language. Spiritual and tangible aspects of reality are thus made concrete in the deconstruction of the cross within the text/texture of the page. The disciples may also be sleeping amidst the circles and stones of the ancient structure, Stonehenge, which, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, "was called the Giant's Ring, or Dance, and was built of stones imported from Africa by giants who once lived in the British Isles" (Ashe. *Camelot* 22). The religion of the circle of standing stones is not known. Here, crosses of Christianity may be introduced into the pagan ritual elements, signifying a mingling of old and new religions. Certainly the "other" has been t/here since humans have been t/here; only our names for "it" have changed.

Between two periods (signifying endings or beginnings), the potential of a trinity of two apostles and a giant is brought into being:

three

one + ONE + one

equals

This trio "equal" the silent space on the page, from which endless possibilities for meaning may be evoked in this factual/fictional account of their Story. Finally, their voices resound and echo in Nature with praises of the Creator: "our voices echo over the rocks & trees & in our echoing Lord we praise Thee." Although

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<sup>6</sup> Two such crosses are depicted in a book in Nichol's library in Toronto; Ashe, G. et al., *The Quest For Arthur's Britain*. N.Y.: F.A. Praeger, 1968. 230.



Christ had been seen on the mount and in the hills of Galilee, this motley medley/holy host of Andronicus, Junius and Buamundus are not seen in the mountains "or in the hills of Albion"; the location of the story has changed. It is the Story of these three disciples that the poet is attempting to tell, yet they are not seen or heard, even though it is suggested that the godhead dwells within them. They are shadows, spirit-shapes, "fallen upon this distant shore among other shadows." Like the chronicler of Knarn, their story is unsung, unbegun, except for the musings of this "chonicler" of *The Martyrology*.

The trio coalesces into a figure of the poet when they are able to hear Nature and the shifting of the earth:

in our prayers

listening

the wind

the leaves

bird songs  
among the shifting, creaking

"[T]he wind"/breath-lines, "the leaves"/pages, "bird songs"/poems are all heard and felt by the poet, an apostle and a prophet in his own right. Nichol's "poems are prayers" (*The M: Book 2*). Like his created characters, he quests for the "other" and for salvation "among the shifting, creaking," unstable, changing nature of "reality." It is as though the seaworthiness of the vessel were constantly in question and the vessel/poet/ quester ever in peril.

The text suggests that layer upon layer of fiction composes "reality."

Within "the Story," Andronicus makes another story about Buamundus, "depicting Buamundus as / a convert from / the ranks of / the Green Man / who now declared / Christ & Jehovah / greater than / the deities & godlings of / these parts." The giant is related to the Green Man, a figure who is not only intimately associated with the Druids and their sacred oak groves, and with fertility in crops and women, but he is also connected with Christ and his death on the sacred tree, suggesting that it is Buamundus who must be "resurrected" in this story.<sup>7</sup>

In the Christian religion, there is a dearth of spirituality, and "God" is anthropomorphosized; He is asked for special favors and the Logos takes hold:

tho many questioned the effectiveness of  
one prayer one God  
whether He could  
possibly answer them all  
(most having come from large families)  
the idea  
took hold

So Christianity gained a firm hold even though it was both curious and

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<sup>7</sup> cf. Henry Treece, *The Green Man*:

The King of the Wood is a relic of that tree worship known throughout Europe since ancient Greek times, and associated with the sacred oak groves of the Druids among others. The King was Diana's priest at Nemi originally, then later became a sacrificial king who died when his period of rule was over. Such a King would be thought of as a tree spirit as well as being human. Often his death took place on the sacred tree itself--as in the case of Odin, and also of Christ.

The Green Man is a less serious version of the King of the Wood; a youth who is decked in green at springtime festivities and leads the revels which were thought to bring fertility to crops and cattle and, of course, women. *In a way, the Green Man is the King of the Wood in a more human guise.* (Italics mine.)

questionable whether one God could answer the prayers of an entire family.

Nichol is being sarcastic as he points up the ludicrousness of people requesting favors and expecting them to be fulfilled by an anthropomorphic "God." As with the "Phallus" earlier, the "Logos" in this sense is a joke.

Nichol continues to build fiction upon fiction, using letters of the alphabet as his building blocks. There are "rumours" of Buamundus' dancing naked in a field with "three equally naked / girls," suggesting that the giant has reverted to a natural pagan religion and further associating the giant with the Green Man. However, the fictional Buamundus contrives a story accusing another giant of this heretical act, "tho none were known in / those parts"; the giant's story is thus revealed to be a confabulation. The entire story of the conversion from paganism to Christianity, of the development of the sect of Christianity into the religion, of the birth of Christ to his crucifixion, is made murky by this multi-layered fiction; that is, truth and confabulation coalesce in this text/wor(l)d quite naturally.

The last page of **part 3** demonstrates the uncertainty of history, as nothing is known of the later lives and deaths of Andronicus, Junias, and Buamundus. The poet comments: "a description then, some listing of their last years, their deaths / from here [there is an arrow pointing upwards] of these / this [there is an arrow pointing downwards]" to the blank silence of the page. We may fill the silence only by "making it up."

**part 4** opens with the naming of similar species of black birds: "*bran*, crow / *bran vras*, raven / *bran dre*, rook," which will have considerable

significance in this part of the Story,<sup>8</sup> where the quest motif and the sleeping giant/saviour figure prominently. Bran is called "the giant Bran 'the Blessed'" among the Britons (Ashe. *Camelot* 65) and the bones of Arthur's body were likened to a giant's (Barber 57):

The theme of a mysterious voyage recalls Bran. If we turn to Arthur specifically as king and immortal, we find the Celtic past coming to rest on him more precisely. Like Bran, 'the Blessed', Arthur embodies the glory of the Island of Britain, and presides over a noble era which he is, so to speak, the spirit of. Like Bran, he leads British forces overseas; and his Annwn quest has likenesses to Bran's invasion of Ireland which are beyond coincidence. Like Bran, he is mortally wounded yet still mysteriously alive....Bran is The Raven; and according to a folklore belief, the ever-living Arthur revisits Britain in that guise. (Ashe. *Camelot* 87-8)

[Bran's] British and Irish guises are separate, but both almost certainly derive from a Celtic god of the Druidical heyday, the same whom Robert Graves [57.1] believes to be the Titan [Cronus] in the Atlantic island (Ashe. *Camelot* 65)

Most importantly, Bran, in one of his guises, is the original Fisher King:

More arresting still, indeed crucial, is the rebirth of the ubiquitous Bran in a new guise. When the Grail is Christianized, a character called Bron or Brons, certainly the same as the Celtic hero, enters the tale as Joseph's brother-in-law. He is the Grail's custodian after Joseph himself, and the original Fisher King, though others succeed him in that role....Thus the wounding of the Fisher King, and the desolation of the land, may echo the wounding of Bran and the wasting of Britain that ensues....A Welsh tradition which may not be very ancient, but is more than a modern fancy, moves Bran into apostolic times and makes him preach Christianity in Britain (Ashe. *Camelot* 100-101)

It is interesting that Bran's "wound" is beheading, Arthur's is a crushed skull, and

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<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, there is an error in the documentation here, which may or may not be intentional. A *CORNISH-ENGLISH DICTIONARY* is edited by Robert Morton Nance.

Christ's is castration, suggesting that the semiotic, fluid nature of the Logos as language/consciousness and the Phallus as symbol of fertility both spiritual and physical were lost when these giant, saviour figures were mortally wounded. Nichol seeks to reinvest the "Logos" and the "Phallus" with its older, "other" power.

So "*bran*" denotes something more than different species of black birds, just as all of the names in the acrostic in ".(some history sketched)" denote more than simply aspects of the history and development of Christianity. Here we discover the signs, "A.D., B.C., LAW, GOD, HERE, LUST, SIN, SON, GODS, JOY, SAVIOUR, JOB, HAGIOGRAPHY, AGE, O, NO, A, WORLD, DEITIES, DEUS, IS, CHRIST, HE." This acrostic describes vital aspects of the pagan, Christian, patriarchal wor(l)d. Underlined are IS IS, and RA IS, underscoring deities of an earlier time, perhaps also emphasizing the possibility of male and female aspects in a godhead that humans can only ever know as the "other."

In ".(a sermon: fragments)," the poet preaches the evocation of the sacred in the mundane: "you must renounce your claim on heaven to enter it you must enter into this world to claim heaven." This sermon suggests a way to an inchoate wor(l)d, and a "reign of peace" is prophesied in the next section:

we will not see it in our lifetime nor in our children's lifetime nor in the lifetimes of their children's children but in the time of all their children this loving & this forgiveness will be everywhere until we will have founded the peaceful Kingdom God intended for us in this world

"God" has been transformed; there is no transcendent millenium. The conditions

of forgiveness and loving are effected within this passage of the poem.

In a "geography," the poet notes that the west, where the sun sets, was once thought to be the region of "death and the afterlife." Canada is situated in this region. This "New World," where "the streets were paved with gold" (*Revelation*: 20), was actually found to be a wild and harsh place, contrary to the idyllic rumour/ prophesy. English and European notions of medieval, Norse, and Christian afterlives become "trace memory" with the progression of history. Andronicus and Junias, who later become "the owl & / the pussycat..." of nursery-rhyme, set out on a journey with Buamundus because they are lost and they cannot "know peace": "no maps / under a yellow sun / in a green boat / on a blue sea." There is no peace because there is no relief from the condition of the coalescence of faith and doubt in human consciousness; there are no maps because the trio travel through mist-ery; they are always charting the unknown. When Andronicus gives a last sermon, the crowd jokes about how Buamundus "might / sink the ship": "the theme / Andronicus chose: 'how / faith / keeps us afloat.'" This faith is a major theme of *The Martyrology*.

There are "theories" as to what happened to Buamundus, but nothing is certain. The myth / legend / rumour / truth of history and of "reality" is poignantly portrayed in this section. "Brendan" is introduced as someone who aided a sleeping giant in the North Atlantic and it is "unknown" whether the giant in question was Buamundus:

known (sort of): a giant  
slept on

an island in  
the North Atlantic  
Brendan  
discovered  
awoke &  
lent him a hand  
circa 500 a.d.  
unknown (really): whether  
he was  
Buamundus

This may be the Isle of Avalon, where Arthur, the figure of the saviour, sleeps. Glastonbury may not have become "Avalon" until the twelfth century, but it was "Celtic enchanted ground" long before then (Ashe. *Camelot* 89). Significantly, an Irish monk, Saint Brendan (c.489-c.570 or 583), may have sailed a leather boat (a corricle) across the Atlantic to North America before the Norsemen, and several centuries before Columbus (Severin). In yet another conflation of fact and fiction, of which stuff it is now apparent that history is made, legend has it that Saint Brendan may have discovered the sleeping giant in the North Atlantic (Ashe. *Camelot* 68), and it may have also been Saint Brendan who discovered "the Sleeping Giant, Thunder Bay, Lake Superior, Ontario, Canada / (visible from the porch of [Nichol's] childhood home)":

How far Brendan himself went, nobody can now say. To Iona, certainly; to somewhat more remote regions, probably. But legend credits him with a vast exploration of the Atlantic in quest of the Earthly Paradise, or the 'Land Promised to the Saints.' (Ashe. *Camelot* 67)

Brendan is yet another quester, and the last epithet is significant if we remember that "we are words" and saints are language. There is also a book called *The Voyage of Bran*, "a romance composed toward the year 700, probably in the

monastery of Bangor near Belfast Lough (Ashe. *Camelot* 65). As in Brendan's legendary voyage, Bran reaches the Island of Joy, then departs west and is seen no more (Ashe. *Camelot* 66). Ashe notes the similarities of a voyage to rebirth by water: "Here we find the Celtic imagination continuing to play round sunset Isles of the Blest and an equivalent of Cronus's kingdom....[T]he myth....is coupled with the motif, always important among the island Celts, of an Otherworld Quest by water -- a plunge, psychologically speaking, into depths, into a womb of rebirth" (*Camelot* 67). Ashe further links Bran and Brendan with Arthur:

[T]he bard Taliesin discourses of Atlantic geography....In [a] poem Taliesin....adapts a description of the Fortunate Isles, and says Avalon is ruled by nine sister enchantresses, probably the same as the nine maidens who guard the cauldron [Grail] sought for by Arthur in *The Spoils of Annwn*. They also remind us of the women in one of the islands visited by Bran. Taliesin continues, still talking of Avalon: "Thither after the battle of Camlann we took the wounded Arthur, guided by Barinthus to whom the waters and the stars of heaven were well known." Barinthus clinches the connection with the Irish Atlantic mythos. He is St Brendan's guide as well as Arthur's. (Ashe *Camelot* 90)

Like *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Voyage of Brendan* is a text containing knowledge previously unknown only because it was uninvoked. Of knowledge, Nichol notes that "variants exist / (the same information / juggled differently)." And new information is constantly being invoked even as old knowledge is lost and forgotten.

The "truth" about the "sleeping giant" is theorized, the first theory being that Buamundus quarreled with his companions and "survived on / that island / 400 years & / more...." The second theory is that Buamundus simply requested to be



let out of the "green boat" and now "assist[s] Christian travellers on / their quests."

Saint Brendan was assisted in his quest by Barinthus, "a pagan sea-spirit, Finnbar, in clerical disguise" (Ashe. *Camelot* 67). One might postulate that Buamundus is really a pagan in clerical guise, given his fertile qualities. The poet is fascinated by this sleeping giant, and he conflates giants of several different names in a complex word play composed of "myth / legend / rumour / truth."

"[T]heory 3" is perhaps the most interesting:

an old giant  
Chronos  
slept there  
Buamundus knew this &  
avoided the island  
having heard the legend as  
a child  
a century or more  
before

In all of these theories, Buamundus is now companionless. The elements in the "stone/circle/cross" configuration would suggest that Buamundus may be a pagan in the guise of a Christian, or the other way round--he seems to be a conflation of the two. Buamundus is a "Green Man"/Christ-figure, he is a giant/Titan like Atlas, and now it would appear that he is avoiding Cronus, whom Buamundus in some way embodies, and who ruled during a golden age:

The golden age was an epoch of idyllic equality. [Humans] lived effortlessly on the fruits of the earth. They laughed and danced and never grew old. Death had no terrors for them. They thought of it as merely falling asleep; with an assurance, one gathers, of waking up. Certainly their spirits still linger on earth as rustic genii, givers of good luck, and unseen champions of justice. Iron Age humanity under Zeus is far baser....When Roman mythology digested Greek, and equated Cronus with its own Saturn, it developed the

same nostalgia for a vanished Saturnian kingdom. The benign aura gathering round the arch-Titan was doubtless a reason for the shift in his Atlantic exile from the gloomy sub-arctic to a kindly Fortunate Isle farther south. (Ashe. *Camelot* 29)

Perhaps there is some other aspect of this older giant that made the child giant/artist afraid of him. Certainly the golden age that Ashe describes is the Avalon or inchoate wor(l)d that the poet seeks. Here Cronus is associated with the Titans, "the gods before the gods" (Ashe. *Camelot* 105). In Greek mythology, Cronus later became Chronos ("time"), a Titan who turned his father, Uranus, off the throne and wed his mother, Gaea in a typical Oedipal, phallogentric gesture. This later Chronos swallowed his children as soon as they were born, acting out of a fear that they would supplant him (*Larousse World Mythology*). Perhaps it is this fear of being devoured by the father that causes the child to fear Cronus so. Perhaps this is an inevitable and chronic fear in a patriarchal society. Any child in the pre-Oedipal phase would fear Chronos:

The child in the pre-Oedipal phase does not yet have access to language ('infant' means 'speechless') [re-member the Chronicker of Knarn], but we can imagine its body as criss-crossed by a flow of 'pulsions' or drives which are at this point relatively unorganized. This rhythmic pattern can be seen as a form of language, though it is not yet meaningful. For language as such to happen, this heterogeneous flow must be as it were chopped up, articulated into stable terms, so that in entering the symbolic order this 'semiotic' process is repressed. The repression, however, is not total: for the semiotic can still be discerned as a kind of pulsional pressure within language itself, in tone, rhythm, the bodily and material qualities of language, but also in contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, silence and absence. The semiotic is the 'other' of language which is nonetheless intimately entwined with it. Because it stems from the pre-Oedipal phase, it is bound up with the child's contact with the mother's body, whereas the symbolic...is associated with the Law of the father. The semiotic is thus closely connected with

femininity: but it is by no means a language exclusive to women, for it arises from a pre-Oedipal period which recognizes no distinctions of gender. (Eagleton 188)

The child's fear of the symbolic order, which involves the loss of his special childhood language/knowledge, and the young man's experience of phallogocentric society, create a great poet who is able to undermine both of these patriarchal ailments through his wonderful imagination and his play with language/saints, which includes silences, blanks, emptiness, and loss. Nichol acknowledges the castration of the Fisher King. He exemplifies the postmodern person, who, in Eagleton's words, "accept[s] the reality of castration, the ineluctability of loss, absence and difference in human life" (186). Nevertheless, Nichol does use his language/voice to overthrow the symbolic order so that he becomes like Palongawhoya, in that he uses his voice to carry messages and to praise the Creator. This creates the wonderful possibility of becoming in an inchoate wor(l)d.

The section called ".maps" alludes once again to Brendan's legendary/historical voyage. "[T]he boat" travels north to go west, from "BRITAIN (then)" to "CANADA (now)," both names printed vertically, perhaps indicating a change in location of the sleeping giant/saviour figure. As Roy Miki points out, since this "map" is both left and right justified, it may also indicate, or establish, limits. Our human sense of direction includes variations on left, right, up and down, and perhaps Nichol is suggesting that we need to think beyond, or through, these limits if we are to discover the sleeping giant, or the saviour aspect

within ourselves.

The next section links Bron, Bran, Brendan, Chronos, and Christ to "the sleeping giant" in Lake Superior at Thunder Bay, which the poet remembers seeing from his childhood home. Through language, Nichol has transformed the frightening figure of Chronos to the enchanted or sleeping saviour figure. Bron is "the castrate fisher king / who sleeps / & guards the grail." These lines link Bron, Christ, and Arthur as saviour-figures who could awake and restore the "Promised Land." Ashe comments:

The custodian of the Grail is the 'Fisher King', who lies wounded and immobile, neither living nor dead. The land became wasted when he sustained his wound. Should [the questing knight...ask a certain question] without prompting, the Fisher King will be healed and the waste land will revive....Jessie Weston...maintained that the romancers were transmitting glimpses of an initiation ritual blending Christian and pagan ideas, which was actually performed by an occult sect....parallels can be found in apocryphal early Christian books. One, *The Questions of Bartholomew*, contains possible hints at the Grail theme. It is not known whether this book was among those which Celtic Christians continued to read after their banning elsewhere. But an undoubted apocryphal source of Grail romance, *The Acts of Pilate*, was available in Ireland. The motif of a questing Christianity recurs in St Brendan's Voyage. Recently Dr Valerie Lagorio has shown that the account of Joseph of Arimathea and his followers, and their British descendants, is moulded throughout by Celtic ideas of sainthood and saintly families....The Holy Grail is still, intermittently, a pre-Christian magical vessel. It is a source of life, not only spiritual but physical. (*Camelot* 99-100)

The guardian of the Grail guards the "Land Promised to the Saints." Bran is described as "the hero" and "the Raven"; the Irish (as opposed to the British) Bran "crosses the western ocean and is absent for ages in a magical archipelago -- not sleeping like the Titan in Plutarch, but definitely under a spell" (Ashe. *Camelot*

65), bringing to mind Nichol's own "Continental Trance." In *The Voyage of Bran*, the hero is referred to as a "pagan chieftan" who is "the recipient of a prophecy of Christ" (Ashe. *Camelot* 66), associating Bran with the wounded Fisher King, who is further associated with Arthur and most profoundly connected with Cronus, *the* sleeping giant, the "god before the gods" (Ashe. *Camelot* 105).

Bran and Bron have been shown to be two aspects of the same legendary figure who are often conflated and confused. According to Larousse, Bran "possesses a magic cauldron in which the dead are brought back to life" and Bron...is shown as a fearless traveller sailing westward to the Land of Beyond....And under the name of Saint Brandon [Saint Brendan?] this pagan god was canonised and became the devout personage who brought Christianity to Great Britain" (349). It is interesting that the pagan Buamundus, "a convert of the Green Man," became a convert as did Saint Brandon/Brendan. In myth and legend, it is difficult to tell the pagans from the Christians; all savior-figures throughout history meld into one savior-figure, of which Christ is one of its later manifestations. One of Arthur's nephews or sons, Brandegore, is "Bran de Gwales," "recalling the Christian Bran [Joseph of Arimathaea] who brought the Holy Grail to Britain" (Larousse 351). So Arthur is seen as an older saviour-figure than Christ. Bran/Bron/Brendan are questers and are also aspects of the saviour-figure, as is Joseph of Arimathaea, Atlas and particularly Cronus--and Buamundus, who may be a conflation of these "sleeping giants," and who is a figure of the persona of bpNichol. "Brun," who is linked with all of these figures, is a "portmanteau." He

is composed by linking letters, but more importantly, he is made by linking words, and this is the way in which legendary and mythical figures are created. The wounded, castrate Fisher King symbolizes the "withering-up of perception" (Ashe. *Camelot* 189) that occurs when the saviour-figure is sleeping. Since the saviour-figure is language, as emphasized by the portmanteau, then the waking of this wounded fisher-king would mean a restoration of the Logos in a purified form and a reconstitution of the Phallus as symbol of spiritual and physical fertility and not of patriarchal power. In an inchoate wor(l)d, these patriarchal symbols would be invested with an "other," innate, "semiotic" power which would not be imposed by humans, but which would be allowed to show itself in humans.

The poet continues to conflate myths, deconstructing the pagan and Christian concepts of "underworld," and reviving the myth of "the Isle of Avalon":

Buamundus

Bua being  
possible variant spelling of  
Bron &/or Bran  
mundus  
the world &  
being as he was/is  
a world figure  
(again  
Atlas  
Bran/Chronos by a 3rd name)  
held the world on his shoulders

formulaic spelling = mundus  
bua

i.e. bua is under  
in the under world

the underworld carries  
the world on its  
back

Faerie &  
the Isle of Avalon  
(where Bron sleeps)  
etc. etc.

these  
& other  
probable

systems

facts

. (the unknown)

In this section, Nichol overthrows the entire phallogocentric notion that humans, particularly men, "carry the world on their shoulders" like the patriarchal Atlas figure. In fact, the underworld and the world are aspects of the same character, a Green Man/savior figure who is "under" the world and "sleeping" upon its waters at once, waiting to be revived. Meanwhile, this figure does hold the world up by its intangible aspect. Probable systems, facts, and the unknown are linked. Now Bron sleeps where Bran/Arthur should be sleeping according to legend--or do all savior-figures sleep on the "Isle of Avalon," guarding the holy grail that would revive the land that embodies sensual and intuitive perception? Bron is the original Fisher King, of whom there are many later manifestations, hence the "etc. etc." According to Ashe, the Isle of Avalon "is the same as Gwyn's fairy kingdom on Annwn" (*Camelot* 88). Walter Skeat notes that "Faerie" means "enchantment," that our modern use of the word is new. The savior-figure is "enchanted" on the

Isle of Avalon, just as the poet is enchanted when he undergoes his quest, his "Continental Trance," that will lead him to an inchoate wor(l)d, or to the legendary "Isle of Avalon."

Through the text, Nichol supports the view that our senses are withered up and that we cannot perceive the source of the earth, humans, or of culture: everything is "moving outwards / from a central point or probable beginning / no longer perceivable." "[T]he facts" have various derivations, including the poet's land/mindscape and Kristeva's "semiotic," which has not been lost within his consciousness. Once again in this text, "it all adds up to" the silent space and potentiality of the whiteness of the page.

In a section ironically headed ".(the gravity of the situation)," Nichol moves outward from his boyhood home, the earth, to a decentralized universe in which the source is so far removed as to be "no longer perceivable":

earth relative to the sun

the sun  
relative to  
the galaxy's heart  
the galaxy  
relative to  
other galaxies  
forming a larger cluster  
still rotating

the whole thing moving outwards  
from a central point or probable beginning  
no longer perceivable

Just as the origin or source of the universe cannot be known, so the origin of humans too is "no longer perceivable." History lost and forgotten, perhaps never



known, forever uninvoked; we move through mist-ery.

The poet offers "possible scenarios" and "facts" regarding the fates of Buamundus, Andronicus and Junias, and "what it all adds up to" is the blank, white, silence of the page. "[T]he known [is] guessed at," and some components of reality are "science & history / myth & legend," of which **Book I** is in part composed.

In ".(the end)" section, religion is deconstructed logically and scientifically-  
-and ironically, if we note the first line:

the known guessed at

thus conclusions  
&/or theories  
viz: science & history  
myth & legend  
some sense of  
the components of  
reality

religion being  
a combination of  
the real  
(i.e.  
re(a)l  
& the region

Religion is seen as "the real & the region," a combination of place and belief systems, or how individuals perceive "reality." Unfortunately, Christianity imposed itself upon many regions, thus wiping out the "real" of those regions. A "formulaic spelling" of "religion" yields:

formulaic spelling = re(a)l + region

= re<sup>2</sup>(a)lgion

where (a) = the fleeing centre  
the probable beginning

barely perceived  
translated (nonetheless) as  
'i'  
self at the centre

Although "reality" would suggest a "fleeing centre," "religion" insists upon "self at the centre." This narrow-minded, human-centered wor(l)d of organized religion is deconstructed "scientifically" and decentered so that it becomes a region of the unknown, and a space is cleared for the emergence of "other" in the text:

makes re<sup>2</sup>(a)lgion = re<sup>2</sup>ilgion

the 2  
drops away  
over the  
years  
(lack of  
a written tradition to  
preserve it) &  
the i shifts  
yielding

religion

a region of the

real

uncharted

(largely)

This uncharted "region of the real" is similar to the uncharted regions travelled by Bran/Bron, Brendan, Buamundus, Andronicus and Junias. Just as there is "all e to z" left to evoke in history, there is also "all e to z" left to evoke in spirituality,

although the "other" cannot be known or discovered as can a continent. This uncharted region of spirituality is a major aspect of be-ing in an inchoate wor(l)d.

Nichol's Book tells the Story of two apostles and a giant, and this story may be just as "true" as the Biblical one. The poet's story emphasizes that accounts of history are always selective, that a finite number of events is chosen to record from an infinite number of events, and that this choosing is always subjective and "not disinterested." Unfortunately, Nichol's trio falls out of history as organized religion takes hold, and in a particularly bitter passage, the poet suggests that fanaticism rules and that what is essential to be-ing is lost:

open to  
misconstruction &  
fanaticism  
which does not yield to  
science or  
history (in that  
sense)  
thru which  
the names shadows of  
Andronicus, Junias & Buamundus  
flicker  
but are never glimpsed

Organized religion is seen to do violence to humans and to history. Like the chronicler of Knarn, the figures of Andronicus, Junias & Buamundus "are never glimpsed": they are flickering presences in the text. Nichol's biting tone regarding the dogma and doctrine of religion changes to a mood of sadness and loss at the disappearance of the three main characters of the Story.

In a conflation of Christianity and various myths and legends, Nichol calls into question and then deconstructs these language systems, thus decentering the

wor(l)d that they govern. The "i," too, is decentered, as it has no more authoritative doctrines to rule it, and it is free to move about in space on the page.

**Book I** of *Book 6 Books* abolishes authoritative language and with it authoritative "knowledge." Nichol successfully deconstructs and decenters the wor(l)d--a formidable task--in this Book.

Ashe and Nichol have a strikingly similar sense of imaginative vision:

Behind most of these variants is an oceanic sense, a notion of the disaster as an estranging plunge into depths. Hence the island to which the lost king goes, in the sunset recesses of the Atlantic. But the depths are formative. Ocean is not only the engulfer but an all-engendering womb. If Arthur is not hidden in the midst of the sea, he is hidden in a hollow cave; and the Titan [Cronus], his prototype, is both at once. The place of apparent death is the place of life, Atlantis itself is the true Eden. Whatever the form taken by the myth, *the glory which was once real has never actually died*. Somewhere, somehow, Cronus or Arthur is still living, enchanted or asleep through the ages. The Grail is still in safe keeping. The visionary kingdom is still invisibly 'there', latent. (*Camelot* 105)

In the section called "INCHOATE ROAD," Nichol makes manifest the "visionary kingdom," and the spiritual and physical fertility of the Grail is released. The poet refounds for himself and for his readers a lost "Atlantis" or "Camelot," in which all humans must become "martyrs" by bearing witness to their own becoming in this new wor(l)d. "there must be an order in all things / to be discovered not imposed.... (*The M: Book 3*)

## Part Three

### I. Inchoate Wor(l)d

The name of the section, "INCHOATE ROAD," has much significance to bpNichol's long poem. "Inchoate" means "just begun," that is, a beginning. The word "inchoate" take its root from the Latin *inchoatus*, pp. of *inchoare*, meaning to "hitch up," as in a "strap fastening a plow beam to a yoke" (*Webster's*). This is the usual metaphor to describe humans' relationship to the "other." The poet chooses his words carefully; it is important to him that his readers understand this intimate and intuitive union with the "other." Concomitantly, living in an "inchoate wor(l)d" is akin to possessing Keats' quality of negative capability, in that "inchoate" also means "being only partly in existence or operation; *esp* : imperfectly formed or formulated" (*Webster's*). We will never consciously know the "other," and much (perhaps most) of our wor(l)d will remain intangible to us, known only through imagination and intuition. The poet/chronicler of Knarn has metaphorically moved from Hawking's "elsewhere" to a wor(l)d that is habitable by humans. He has quite literally travelled from the "rim world" of outer space into the inner space of his own consciousness and of his own wor(l)d. bpNichol finds place in the seemingly endless time and space of existence--and this "place" is right behind "home plate," the lid of the eye. Through this inchoate rootedness in consciousness, Nichol offers all humans a place in their wor(l)d.

In part I:1, the poet introduces us to a literal "Choate Road," which runs

through Port Hope, once again demonstrating the union of the tangible and intangible aspects of our wor(l)d. Nichol is also punning (rather seriously) on the name, "Port Hope." The road through this port is "inchoate": "in Choate Road / a car stalled / underneath the bridge i / pass over / another fragment." A car is stalled in/on this road, and it is ambiguous as to whether the vehicle is beneath or on the bridge, making "place," and even the vehicle itself, amorphous. The "stalled" driver/poet/vehicle is "underneath" the land bridge yet he "pass[es] over / another fragment"--perhaps some language/knowledge from the waters of Lake Ontario. The "i" misses something but at this time cannot know "what the frag meant."

However, the stalled consciousness of the poet proves to be a prelude to a major cosmic constellation:

winter storm across the lake's imperfect ice  
blue gaps in the clouds & snow  
older worlder order  
o der wrld er wrl o  
inchoate world

Through this intuitive insight in part I:1 of "INCHOATE ROAD," the poet comes to an understanding of the wor(l)d that allows him to accept an inchoate wor(l)d. The older world order that he glimpses through the gaps in "sea" and sky is broken down to an even more primal wor(l)d order in the penultimate line, which suggests Keats' mist-ery. This is not a human order; it is not to be known consciously, but by a "letteral" activity. This shifting of letters opens boundaries and creates spaces where this other order may be made manifest. "[W]rl o" phonetically becomes

"whirl oh!" as a dizzying of the senses seems to allow entry into the mist-ery,  
which in turn allows for the discovery of and entry into an "inchoate world."

In part I:2, the poem describes borderlines and edges, although the words  
shape a fishing line, signifying that the poet is searching the fathomless depths:

life like lake like

line

lingers

Lifeline/shoreline/poetic line lingers in the waters. Nichol discovers that he needs  
the fluidity and deviating motion of ocean to carry him "home":

a dream of  
ocean and  
pacific one i was born by  
bounded in that first family  
superior as the other shore  
crossing the land bridge between  
ocean-going vessels steaming into  
both ports i  
was there

  sea to sea  
all i needed was  
to let the water take me  
home

"[A] dream of / ocean" is both a dream of primal source/m/other and a dream of  
*okeanos*, the "river" that surrounded or bordered the world; in both cases the poet  
is dreaming of a protective womb. This desire to be protected is further  
emphasized by the poet's mention of his native Pacific Ocean, the word "pacific"  
here denoting "calm, peaceful, or pacifying." "[T]hat first family" is Nichol's own  
family. Any human's "first family" is primary and a child (ideally) feels protected

within that unit. The poet is "bounded" in his family as Lake Superior is bounded by its shores. Nichol is also "bounded" in that he must move with his family from Vancouver to Port Arthur on Lake Superior (which place becomes Thunder Bay in 1970--the place where the sleeping giant lies), always "crossing the land bridge" by train tracks. In Canada, "sea to sea" would usually denote Vancouver to Halifax (or vice versa) harbours. Lake Superior is thought of by the child-poet as a "sea," and Nichol had watched steamers coming into both ports--Vancouver Harbour and Port Arthur--"sea to sea," "see to sea," "sea to see." The poet now realizes what he could not see before, that he must, and must have, accepted the fluidity of ocean into his consciousness so that he would be borne "home" to an inchoate wor(l)d without such struggle and pain.

In I:1, Nichol talks about making it by land; in I:2, the waters are prevalent. Now the poet realizes the full implications of his "discovery" of the fluidity of ocean:

1 if by land

(you can make it on foot)

2 if by sea

(i need

a boat

to carry me

OUT

THERE



"OUT / THERE" is an extension of boundaries, an escape into the unknown, and the poet requires a boat--a vessel --that will bear him on his journey. The poem and the poet together compose this vessel. As Nichol quotes from Archibald Lampman in "A BOOK OF HOURS":

'Yet, patience -- there shall come  
Many great voices from life's outer sea,  
Hours of strange triumph, and when few [hu]man's heed,  
Murmurs and glimpses of eternity'. (Hour 17)

"[W]ater" as the poet discovers "OUT / THERE," where he may hear and see "[m]urmurs and glimpses of eternity." Nichol has had his fishing line sunk deep...

In 1:4, the poet wonders about how the poem "tracks him" even as he seems to track his own river of thought through the writing of the poem. "[W]ater music" suggests a fluid yet precise motion of ocean that can only be heard by those who will listen. "Music" and "poems" come down to the sea in rivers, according to the poem. The Assiniboine and Red Rivers flow into one another at Winnipeg, creating a mixture of "different" waters: "'everything gives way & / nothing stays fixed.'" The flowing together of the waters creates variation; they are never the same. The Red River flood that occurred in the poet's childhood, when the waters overflowed to OUT / THERE, never left his consciousness.

We build our settlements by rivers: "'the river shines / between the villages,'" and although there are variations the rivers are essentially the same. Nichol wonders: "two translations / see how they wind / this way & that / this name or another / tracking me." The two rivers are like two different translations of "water music." The poet's translation/perception of this phenomenon is tracked

through the writing of the poem, which is tracking Nichol's own consciousness in true Brechtian fashion, not only exposing a reflexive consciousness, but also a peculiar kind of Nicholean "outward-looking self-reflexion," or perhaps a "wor(l)d reflexion."

Waters and songs are equated with poems in I:5, where Nichol sees "all" emptying out into an ocean of textual and metaphorical unfathomable depths, as "ocean / 'n ocean 'n / ocean / 'n ocean 'n..." descends the page. One hears a falling musical scale, or a rhythm of the tides; either way, there is a certain mathematical precision that humans cannot approach. The songs/poems have now "fallen over the edges"; the poet's eyes must now have a look of "wild surmise" akin to that of Keats' explorers. One can see again in this construct of the poet the character of the chronicler of Knarn, still charting the unknown, although he is gaining a sense of surety in fluidity now; he is no longer grasping after facts to write down in his chronicle.

In I:7, the poet declares:

this is the world

not these words

not this poem

this is the world

"[T]his" is indeed the wor(l)d--it is the be-ing that we are experiencing during *this* moment--not the poem or the words of the poem. However, we do experience the words of the text as a vital entity. For its readers, *The Martyrology* becomes a part

of the wor(l)d; its words continue to speak despite the demise of the vessel through whom they were written. What is being emphasized here is the dailiness of living and the importance of the moment and of living momentarily. If one would recognize/realize the "Inchoate Road" that we are all on, then one would intuit that "this" particular moment *is* the world--it is all that we have and we must learn to "momently" let it go.

In Section II:4 Nichol recognizes that the very powers that pull us together are the same ones that pull us apart:

under the stillness  
the silent stretches  
a current accrues  
air collide us

not so much the river but the riven  
moment (more meant to you than

then this

The river/air/poem currents all collect in ocean. Our thoughts accrue in river currents on their way to ocean. In "air collides us" we hear "Heraclitus," reminding us that "[we] can't step in the same water twice." Air/breath/vocal chord currents collide to create communication and meaning by fracturing the silent stillness of the moment. Phonetically, there is "more meant" in "moment." The "moment" is always "now" even as time progresses and old "meanings" are forgotten--("more meant to you than"--than what? There is no closure of the parentheses; a fragment is forgotten--"then this"...

In Section II:5 the poet damns the fall of perception that occurred with the

creation of the Adam and Eve myth: "out window the light / damned width of the river's length." Nichol here confounds width and length, demonstrating what happened to our cognition after the "Fall." He then laments that life in Western society is dictated by the "Fall" and "original sin": "very hush of the damned world goes / dawn & on ocean river / lake / stream." The "hush" signifies that humans cannot, or are afraid to, use their vocal chords in praise of the creator as they were meant to. This hushed world of damned primal beginnings ("dawn") is what Nichol has so obviously experienced: "i was caught in the twist & / toss in the water / (essential's pull / these pools / perceptions / falls / all's a damn now / a pulsated full." "Full" may denote "pregnant" here, since the "fall" is replaced by a dam, and "dammed" water is always full. The poet also feels himself damned; the "fall" was a double damage to humans. We are "damned" before we are born by the concept of "original sin," and we are damned for our entire lives due to a damming of our senses or "perceptions." This is a harsh life sentence, and it is a very narrow one:

(so that these rhythms are established  
closure (details -- what we call a  
theme) globular, returning, the  
circumnavigation of  
the work/world

Due to our withered perceptions, our consciousnesses ("work/world") are framed in a circular manner. However, Okeanos is a "river" that once circumnavigated the wor(l)d. Now "Pacific" is only *an* ocean that Nichol was born near, although he considers Lake Superior to be his "native" water. There can be no more

circumnavigation of the wor(l)d, as signified by the lack of closing parentheses-- the "work/world" is left open, which opens up endless possibilities for meaning.

Nichol strongly proposes that there can be no more circumnavigation of the "work": "'for other waters are / continually flowing on' / & other songs" (I:5).

The poem suggests that all poems are in some way flowing into one poem, that all poets are writing the same poem. There are thereby no "masters," and the "work" will never be complete.

In II:6, Cloudbottom, from which the saints (language) tumbled (they did not "fall") is refounded as the poet "tumbles" into a consciousness of an inchoate wor(l)d through the act of composition:

we drift on as the snow mounts  
higher climbing  
towards an imagined top or ridge  
entrances the cloud world hid  
to the fall now  
thru snow, white clouds  
the world be/l'eau

As the snow/frozen l'eau mounts, or climbs, "we" are raised up as well, towards an imagined entrance to an inchoate wor(l)d that is now clearly perceived; this "cloud world" is "hid / to the fall now." Perception is for this moment restored. Through "snow" and "white clouds," changeable, ephemeral substances, we reach "the world be/l'eau." This wor(l)d is fluid as ocean, primal as the ocean floor, or just beneath this floor. "We" are seeing "thru." The last stanza suggests that we be "be below the water," so that we may see thru or beyond our current framework of knowledge. There is a hint of a lost Atlantis here--"way down below the ocean /

where I want to be," as the song goes, and it seems that Atlantis is here being recovered and restored by the awakening of some sleeping giant. The sleeping giant becomes language, which creates all possibility, and out of which the poet/text is also a creation. In Kepler's universe, the world below was heavy, dense, and fallen; here it is transformed into a "promised land."

In II:7, Nichol demonstrates that we, who are words, or letters, must always take a waterway back to our primal beginnings--the ocean. The poet puns on the French *eau*, so that "ocean" is letterally made of water:

o eau (eaucean)

o world (lake  
river,path the vowels take  
to the sea)

eau io  
i 'nvoke you  
sometimes

why?

The wor(l)d is seen as a waterway for the vowels/ourselves to take from/to the womb/tomb of the sea. Playfully, Nichol contracts the first letter of Io's name, Io being the purported inventor of the five vowels of the first alphabet (Graves 52.a). The poet does invoke "io," and other letters of the alphabet, to take him to his path "to the sea." Io is only fully present once in this piece, due to a contraction of one or the other of the letters of her name, yet we feel her presence, both letterally and muse-ically. Nichol questions the invoking process, and he seems to answer himself in the ecstatic ending of this section:

INK o it

*!whirl!*

Once again, it is as if a dizzying of the senses has created an intuitive realization in the poet of a wonder-full "new" wor(l)d in which he finally trusts, or in which he at least has faith for this moment. This inchoate wor(l)d has been created by writing ("INK"), and every word in the English language contains at least one vowel, hence the invoking of "io." However, through punning and deconstruction, the poet breaks the rigidity of meaning and form in language and thus frees language/letters/humans to move as they will. The exclamation marks denote his ecstasy at this achievement.

And the moment of trust continues. "Gilgamesh" becomes "giggle mesh," an historical puzzle or simply a word game. The poet is delighted with his cosmic constellation, yet he is wary and worried that it will all "blow away" at any moment:

looking for the place the puns flesh out  
the body of speech is  
re vealed, the veil  
drops away  
the dance!  
sheer ecstasy of glimmering  
part icles part airy  
nothingnessence  
flow of grammar hammers in  
my chest, the breath's pressed OUT  
quick liquid spout of  
the wail:  
THOT  
a kind of harbour or  
land  
and m and no  
places the eyes rest  
flat/calm/march/day

--still snow still--  
(did i expect it to blow away?)

"[T]he body of speech" is the poet's own body, where "the puns flesh out," revealing its own dance for perhaps the first time in the poem. Once again, this is sheer ecstasy for the poet. The "part icles" in "sheer ecstasy of glimmering / part icles part airy" reminds one of icicles glimmering in sunlight, melting, ephemeral, as is all experience and all phenomena in an inchoate wor(l)d. The mention of "nothingness" recalls the chronicler of Knarn; however, this word now suggests the stuff from which all things are made, so that the concepts of "nothing" and "essence" are seen to be intertwined and inseparable. The chronicler has made a long journal/

journey to attain this realization. "[B]reath pressed OUT" and "THOT" are associated with "OUT / THERE" through the capital letters, "OUT / THERE" denoting an inchoate wor(l)d that is without constraints and boundaries, a "region of the real" that offers a LARGE potentiality. Speech and thinking are freed here to move as they will. When "the breath's pressed OUT," there is a birthing, or a speaking, and when "the wail: / THOT" begins, consciousness is born. There will never be a permanent, or even semi-permanent "harbour" or "land" for humans; we are changing in a changing wor(l)d and we must "expect" this. However, "--still snow still--"; the whirling white changing stuff is quiet/still and is also still here. The poet wonders, "(did i expect it to blow away?)," indicating his continued wariness of this newfound wor(l)d. Once again, as with the apostles and the giant, we see that faith and doubt are inextricably bound.



Nichol continues to play on "water," which in the poem is "emptying out (somewhere) / beyond / water." Water empties out "(somewhere)" beyond, signifying that this fluid substance is the most intimate thing in our wor(l)d with the "other," which may exist below "l'eau." The poet is suggesting that although the ocean is perceived to be the primal source of life on earth, it is not necessarily the source of all be-ing; in fact, it is probably not *the* source. The poet firmly believes in an "other" power that is both within and without us, and which exists within and without our wor(l)d.

In the final sections to "INCHOATE ROAD," the poet alludes to Moses, Noah and his ark and to the Fall. In section III:5, bushes, brush, and bullrushes all suggest the rescuing of Moses from the water by the Pharaoh's daughter. However, the receiver of the Ten Commandments is "erased" here, since the poet alludes to the terrain of "different rivers i followed the courses of," not to different commandments, or rules, that he followed. The courses of the rivers are various ways that lead OUTSIDE the boundaries imposed by a tablet of ten humanly formulated "laws." Unlike Adam, the poet has no desire for power that would cause him to wish to "name" everything: "some i knew the proper names of / we called them all 'the river.'" Nichol is unlike Moses in that he "receives" laws that can only be experienced; they may be shown but they can never be told or writ. The poet is not left by his mother in the bullrushes to be protected from the Egyptian patriarch; rather he collects bullrushes for his mother. It is during this activity that he "fell / full face in the mud," suggesting quite clearly a

literal/letteral and NOT a metaphorical Fall. The concepts of patriarchal laws and fallen perception are distinctly falling out of the poem. Patriarchal power, where "man should rule the earth" and name all creatures, is also falling away from this poem/consciousness as the poet recognizes that an effort to "possess" the local is powermongering: "understood the local & the universal / but moved too often to make the local my own." The poet did move a lot during his younger years, but given his nature, it would seem that "moved too often" would also refer to change as he takes his path momentarily down the river to ocean. Nichol realizes the fluid, changing nature of his own existence, and he knows that power, "ownership," and constancy are not possible in the wor(l)d in which he lives: "i was born from water / bore me away from home / again & again after i was born."

Again, in section 7, the poet questions and even mocks the ten commandments and biblical authority: "flood / flawed / flowed / (how you move from / imperfection to imperfection in / the world)." Most mythologies have a flood story told with slight variations, and Nichol suggests that the stories are "flawed." We recall the words of Paul, "Even our prophesies are imperfect." Not only is Nichol showing us that humans are "flawed," or imperfect, but he is also manifesting an imperfect existence, or an inchoate wor(l)d, within this text. When the poet states in section III:6, "'i should've been a sailor' / wasn't," metaphorically he is speaking a lie. Nichol has always been a "sailor," a quester in/on the sea of life, a journeyer into the current of consciousness. As has been shown previously, the poet is searching for a saviour without when all the time the

saviour is within, just waiting to be reached, to be "tapped."

An "inchoate wor(l)d," as with all other "realities," is created by humans: "ink eau / ate world"; in this case the wor(l)d is created by the ink upon the page. But not only that--water always leads us back to ocean, primal source, m/other, encircling protective substance. In III:8, Nichol notes that the flood "resided," not "subsided," "all those years": "when the flood resided / i saw we'd lived / under the sea / all those years." Once again there is a strong allusion to a lost Atlantis that must be restored. Nichol takes seriously his own aphorism: "the trick is to know the depth always / & that the surface'll get you there / the flood'll bring you to the top" (III:3). The poet perceives the flood to be a continual state of mind. He suggests that humans must be consciously aware that we are our own arks, and that we must bear ourselves/wor(l)d along. The unconscious depths of our minds will always surface, as the aphorism goes, since we are emotional and intuitive beings.

So we come to "position ourselves" in society not solidly, but "35,000 feet" above the ground, as the poet views the earth from a jet plane. This "position" could be approaching Cloudford, as the "EPILOGUE" TO "INCHOATE ROAD" so clearly states:

spots to which we come, position ourselves  
heirs to our veaucabularies  
terror that fires us  
all gollem: finally  
someone marks our foreheads  
four elements there

we lurch forward

enact tradition

monstrously

familiair

familheir

tri bull

labyrinthinemine

a tour of gnossos

logos

osos

(o that s.o.s. of  
consciousgnoss)

Humans tend to make for themselves a "spot," or place in the wor(l)d, where they may feel that they "belong." "We are words," and we inherit our "veaucabularies" (partly derived from water and air) from our ancestors, which is to say that they are the prototypes of ourselves and of our perception of the wor(l)d. We are "fired" like the clay of the earth (Latin *terra*) out of which we are created. We are also "fired," or motivated to live and to "position ourselves" in some meaningful place, out of literal terror--not only at the thought of dying, but also in fear of living, since many humans on *terra* seek safe havens. Fear "lurches us forward." "Golem" takes its root from the Hebrew *golèm*, "a shapeless mass" (*Webster's*). We are all fairly shapeless masses when we enter the wor(l)d, and the Christian myth tells us that we are shaped of clay; certainly our bodies decompose and become a part of the earth when we die. But Nichol means something more by this. In Hebrew folklore, which comprises in part the "myth / legend / rumour / truth" of things, a "golem" is an "artificial human being...endowed with life" (*Webster's*). In Nichol's poem, we are composed of the four elements, and our foreheads/ consciousnesses are "marked" by some "other" creative power. We "lurch forward" in a robotic, gollem-like motion, then we "enact tradition /

monstrously." Often we do not act out of our own thought or volition, but we simply follow tradition. We "become" human by following our own traditions, which are familiar, in the "air" as in the family, and are also as such inherited ("familheir"). These family traditions largely dictate how we perceive "reality" and how we act, or "lurch forward." This is both "tri bull" and "labyrinthinemine." Both of these words recall the Minotaur and its labyrinth, suggesting that the family and cultural tradition create such a labyrinth, which is both "thine" and "mine," according to the poet. It is interesting that "the legend of Daedalus...on the mythical plane posed the problem of the birth (or rather the rebirth) of the practical arts....He was a typical example of the universal inventor...." (*Larousse*). Daedalus invented wings with which to fly, as the poet is doing now in a jet plane. Nichol has clearly made manifest that we invent our mythologies and in so doing we invent our wor(l)d(s). Although Daedalus is metaphorically "outside" the cultural labyrinth, he is inventive in entering the labyrinth in such a way that he may "retrace his path" (*Larousse*). He saves the Minotaur, a "monstrous" creature like ourselves. Nichol intimates that there is no "position" for humans in any current society just as there was no position for the Minotaur in Cretan society. The mythical Daedalus is like the poet in that he invents wings to escape the labyrinth after saving the "monster." "Inchoate Road" is a way out of the labyrinth of our current culture that leads to an inchoate wor(l)d, where humans would no longer perceive themselves, nor be perceived, as "monstrous" and caged.

However, this tribal ("tri bull") labyrinth of tradition/culture/memory does

give us our necessary "tour" of what is available by way of "gnossos" and "logos." By this time in the poem all authoritative meaning of these terms has fallen into the text. "[G]nossos" and "logos" are now associated with "osos," the Latin word for bone spelt twice. Knowledge and speech are thereby intimately connected with the human body, and it is urgent that this connection be made, as suggested by the deconstruction of "osos": "(o that s.o.s. of consciousgnoss)." The poem here moves to reconnect body and mind/consciousness/knowledge. However, consciousness is seen to be formed, or "chained," by received knowledge and tradition rather than by individual thought or volition. We are all born into a certain culture, a certain family, a certain area (thereby entering into "the real of the region") and it is impossible to escape the gnossos and logos of these influences. However, the poet has shown that it is possible for our minds/bodies/spirits to take flight from the "labyrinthinemine" cage, or the codes that bind our consciousnesses, by being inventive and by giving up our apostolic fear of going against the multitudes.

The poet again satirically condemns the naming of the "other": "or that old question / 'who's the boss?' (b.s. os)." Through a slight rearranging of the letters, the naming of the "boss" is seen as "b.s.," which may again recall the Minotaur, the "monster" associated with humans. Old bones tell us something of our human history and the bone-house harbors the soul. "Os," here suggesting body, mind and soul, is "boss," although in this poem we are always conscious of an "other" presence that is powerful and pervasive.

Once again, there is an allusion to the Minotaur and to the "labyrinth" of memory--much of it lost or forgotten. By this time in the poem, the chronicler of Knarn has come to find his "position" in the world and he does have a community of friends, although they are still in some way "alien," as they are spoken of in a foreign language ("amigos"). However, these "amigos" are now in some vital way familiar: "minos most of our memory / we function out of loss / amigos." "*Los amigos*" also means "friends," suggesting that we cannot function without friends. The first two stanzas describe how the chronicler of Knarn came to begin *The Martyrology* by "turn[ing] the words clumsily."

The old god Pan and the figures of the "sleeping giants" are resurrected in this "EPILOGUE" to "INCHOATE ROAD":

Pan plays the world 'pon his flute  
old bullfoot amazes us  
pipes bright as language  
sleepy giants  
who will wake you  
mourn your death &  
dance your resurrection  
dreaming world  
(the rivers branch like  
trees  
someone's always leaving

We recall from *The Martyrology:Book I* that "st and does not amaze." This figure of the artist is "a statue with a corner lost," suggesting that he has lost some aspect of the "real." However, the introduction of Pan into the poem reinvests the wor(l)d of *The Martyrology* with all of the regeneration, renewal and vision that Pan symbolizes. An inchoate wor(l)d is being born/borne here. The "sleepy

giants"/saviour figures are mourned and danced/sung into resurrection by the poem. The poem wonders "who," strongly suggesting the reader, will mourn his or her "death" and dance her or his own resurrection or rebirth. "[R]ivers and "trees" may both be thought of as branches of language and/or families, which have been shown in this poem to be intimately intertwined. Of course "someone's always leaving"; death and loss are a part of the natural cycle of the wor(l)d and these conditions are now accepted into the poem: "we function out of loss."

The poet once again puns on water as primal source that allows all life-- scene and seeing: "(meme eau: i'm just looking at the sea 'n world / (eauver & eauver))) / something fishy when the tongue slips." There is a primal/fishy/Freudian slip here in that in this Heraclitean wor(l)d one can never experience the "meme eau" twice. The poet, however, feels that he is seeing the same scene/seen wor(l)d over and over, or is this scene like the sea, turning and churning "eauver & eauver"? It would seem that the poet recognizes not only his desire for constancy, but also the "reality" of the constancy of change.

The "sleeping giants" are us; "giant talk" is a capital pun in that "A" writes to "A." The first letter of the alphabet writes back to itself, creating self-reflexion, thinking, and understanding. In the final strain, the poem continues to bridge the gap between humans ("me" and "you") and also between the subjective and objective selves, which were riven with the Passion of Christ:

letting the future know

we're playing thru



gulf the gulls & mist rise out of

stretches between 'me' & 'you'

Nichol is a seer, a visionary as he "let[s] the future know"--he predicts--that there will be no gulf between humans and particularly there will be no rift between mind and spirit/body and soul. The sleeping giant has awakened and the paradisaical vision is now temporally possible. This possibility has been created not only by the poem, but also by the reader's participation in creating the text: "we're playing thru / gulf." This "gulf" is the same one that the "gulls & mist rise out of"--it seems to be a vast chasm from which all be-ing--all phenomena--in the wor(l)d arise. This chasm of endless possibility is all then that "stretches between 'me' & 'you.'" The single quotation marks around 'me' and 'you' suggest that these terms are synonymous, that there can be no distinction made between them. The subject/object split is healed, and it is now possible for the activity of "we is [singular verb] a human community" to occur. There is also playfulness, as the entire passage puns on "playing thru" a game of "golf." All profundities arising out of the text of *The Martyrology* are born of this play.

## II. "THE GRACE OF THE MOMENT"

Book VI has been discussed extensively by Nichol in his interview with Pauline Butling. To live within the present moment is a difficult task--"now now now now now / stammering accurate speech"--but it is a way of being that humans must strive for. And this way of being does involve suffering, "just the bare longing of the moment lingers." bpNichol longs to live fully within, and to bear witness to, the "grace of the moment." It is our consciousness of death together with our living, this "brief bright ribbon," that gives us "human grace":

we carry the red ribbons mark us for death  
the blood of being flooding out or  
leached

brief bright ribbons we wrap the  
present in  
this human grace

"[T]he blood of being" marks our mortality and the pain of living; however, "grace" (<L. *fauórem*, acc. of *fauor*, "favour") suggests that life is a blessing that has been granted to us by some "other" power. Since language is sacred to the poet, then so are humans; "we are words":

the lips & limbs articulated  
made whole, holy in that sense,  
sanctus sanctuary  
hidden within the bright tangles of the body

We make ourselves whole--link mind, body and soul--through the act of articulation, and we must remember that "articulation" in this sense may include signs of silence or of body language, such as that of making love. In the sense that the trinity of our being is no longer riven, we are "holy," holy sanctuaries for

that essential energy that connects us with the "other." And we are beautiful and bright--and tangled--sanctuaries for our precious souls.

The poet laments that it is difficult to bear witness to one's "momently" coming in the wor(l)d, since two or more truths may occur simultaneously even though they may seem logically to collide rather than to cohere:

two 'n one or  
in one door & out the other  
voices speaking  
that this suffering is born in language  
that that is true & that that is true  
two true or  
wholly to be believed but  
who'll y'find to  
believe it?

Once again, there is suffering when voices are not heard, when they metaphorically go "in one door & out the other" of the listener. One may know that two or more things may be true simultaneously, and this is "two true," or too true for some people to believe. Many humans desire a "truth" that they can blindly believe in because this is easier than "think-ing / say-ing / be-ing / sing-ing in the wor(l)d." The poet has uncovered an inchoate wor(l)d, where there are many truths and this is very profound; however, "who'll y'find to / believe it?" Who will find courage to follow the poet down Inchoate Road to an inchoate wor(l)d?

In this inchoate wor(l)d, humans are "holy alive / & holey / wholly here":

leave it  
this pain words wear  
carry within them like a spine  
involves the very line its  
twists & turns

we say it burns  
it hurts  
                    the body aches  
                    the heart breaks  
we are dumb or numb  
inarticulate in the face of it  
rhyme badly  
search for metaphors  
when what it is is the world  
that noun

To "leave it" implies letting go of the desire to explain why multiple truths may exist simultaneously. This is the "pain words wear," or the pain humans bear when attempting to find "truth" in the face of many truths.

In certain Eastern religions, essential human energy is seen to release itself in the spine; the symbol of regeneration and renewal is a serpent. Here, "this pain words wear" involves not only a human spine but also the "twists & turns" of a poetic line. Articulation/ writing is painful--it burns and hurts as may the physical spine of the poet at the time of this writing, since it was a growth on his spine-- "this pain words wear"--that was the cause of his death. This is speculation, but the metaphor is apt and Nichol did subscribe in some way to the concept of determination, as he explains to Butling: "...you know, the road that's there in the beginning and the road you travel on, so it is almost laid down for you before you move."

Pain may numb and dumb humans/words as it did the apostles in **Book I** of *Book 6 Books*; we are made "inarticulate in the face of it." Humans "rhyme badly"; we move with halting rhythm and measure--in writing poetry and in our own be-ing in the wor(l)d. We are awkward in our attempt to live in the grace of

the moment, feeling pain that is not mingled with joy in our existence, and feeling no gratitude for the grace of be-ing.

Nichol gently mocks those who "search for metaphors" when all that there is is one's own be-ing in the moment; that is, there is only ever "the world / that noun." And this is where holy, holey humans may be fully present within the grace of the moment:

that thing  
upon which (within)  
this singing is a small instance of a being  
holy alive  
& holey  
wholly here

These last lines feel sacred as the poet sings in his own "brief bright ribbon we wrap the present in."

The poem moves to further debunk the Christian idea of paradise in an effort to have humans accept their unique paradisaical "reality" here on earth in an inchoate wor(l)d:

s makes the comic cosmic  
heaven sheaven  
drunk on the i's dea of paradise  
i deal  
shuffle off this mortal coil

A transcendent heaven is "sheaven" here by the addition of the letter "s," and this does ironically make the cosmic comic. "Sheave" means "to gather and bind into a sheaf (*Webster's*)," bringing to mind the secret of the Elysian mysteries.

"[S]heaven" thus suggests the unfolding of these mysteries by allowing them to reveal themselves in an inchoate wor(l)d. "Ideas" are born in individual

consciousnesses, hence the "i's dea" of paradise"; however, this "i's dea" is influenced by drunkenness on the doctrine and dogma of organized religion. This "i's dea" is an "ideal" vision of perpetual abundance and happiness, although it involves "shuffl[ing] off this mortal coil." "[I] deal" and "shuffle" suggest a card game, a game of chance in which one is not able to foretell the existence or nonexistence of an afterlife. All we have is now, our be-ing on this earth, and the poet mocks speculation into the future, particularly any efforts to "control" the future such as foretelling a life after the word, "death."

The poet quotes Nicolette Gay from *The Painted Inscriptions of David Jones*: "People read instead of looking; paradoxically, because letters are so familiar people do not know what they really look like." Since we are composed of letters, *we* "do not know what [we] really look like"; we do not know ourselves, and we do not strive to know ourselves, as does the poet. This process of knowing oneself involves bearing witness to one's own becoming in the wor(l)d; it involves a deconstruction and a recreation of the self that is perpetual and painful. However, the poem suggests that this process will be necessary for all humans in an inchoate wor(l)d.

In the last passage of **Book VI**, the poet makes clear that death is the thing that activates the moment:

last blessings  
last writes  
death tracks the very life he rites  
writ large

that letter of  
the law waltz

just you  
& the language too

this business of process  
nothing more than  
the moment's grace

he Church has lost its power here. "[L]ast rites" refer to "blessings," or to a final grace/favour from the "other." Life itself is seen as a blessing so that one's last moments are "last blessings." "[L]ast writes" are final words in the moment(s) before death, the final words of a poet, himself a word, or of any human being. "[D]eath tracks the very life he rites," seeming to push the poet's writing forward--relentlessly down the page--as though he were being pursued by some hunter. In this way, death activates the moment. This poet's journal/ journey is "writ large"; his very writ-ing/liv-ing is seen as a ritual that he attends to momentarily. The letter of the law becomes a "waltz" of process--"just you / & the language too." It is now language itself, and thus individual humans, that/who have acquired authority. Here, one can feel only the spirit of the law, since "this business of process [is] / nothing more than / the moment's grace." And living in this grace, we become holy/holey/wholly human beings.

## Part Four

### I. "AFTER BIRD"

"AFTER BIRD (improvising)" follows the six books of *Book 6 Books* as a most profound "afterword." This section is in part a tribute to the late jazz saxophonist improvisational artist, Charlie Parker, a.k.a. Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, a.k.a. "Bird," whom Nichol greatly admired. The improvisational movements of this text seem to comply with the desire of **Book VI**, that is, with the ability to live within "THE GRACE OF THE MOMENT."

In keeping with the concept of "the grace of the moment," Nichol allows change to occur within himself and others. In an interview with Clint Burnham, he comments:

In this particular work, what I'm dealing with has to do with the notion of process. I am developing certain ideas through time, because many of the ideas focus on the effects of time, not just on the body, but also on the mind, how it changes. Meanings change, the way you focus changes. I'm trying to encompass that in this work, as opposed to a lot of long works where what you get is the person attempting to build this kind of fiction that they have a consistent body of thought from when they start at the age of 20 to when they die at the age of 80. I just don't think that's (here comes that word again) "realistic." In my experience you move on, your thinking changes and develops. (295)

The poet sees himself and others as changing, rearranging, be-ings, and he continues to strive for "the absolute precision / of fluid definition / the saints learned long ago."

The epigraph to "AFTER BIRD" suggests this fluidity of be-ing:

'to let fly high/let  
that bird go, see how yur hand

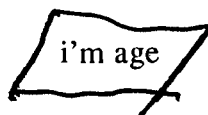


takes up the space so itself  
without the bird cramped in it.' (bill bissett)

Nichol comments:

What I really like about that quotation of bill's is the image of the bird trapped in the hand, and if you release it, the bird is free to be itself, but you also see how the hand takes up the space. He takes the focus entirely off the bird and puts it onto what is possible for the hand when it ceases trying to capture things. (IV with Burnham 294-95)

So Nichol's writing does not strive to "capture things." Rather it is a fluid forward motion manifesting a fluid, unbounded and receptive consciousness, much like that depicted in Kipling's "Portrait," which most profoundly manifests her own consciousness. Birds often represent the spirit, or soul. In these artists' consciousnesses, the spirit is set free so that this intangible essence may once again be united with consciousness and corporeality. The "essence" can only be manifested when it is let free, or "given up." Nichol remarks: "[W]riting is not an act which is trying to capture the living; writing is the act of occupying the space that's there, with the tools at your means, the pen, the hand, the brain" (IV with Burnham 295). Occupying the space that's there. In "Hour 9" of *Book 6 Books: Book II: "A BOOK OF HOURS,"* the poet demonstrates that we are both blessed and circumscribed by time, which is essential to "the space that's there":



Our human space is embodied in the parallelogrammed image of "i'm age," which embodies the concepts of space, time, image, language, consciousness, and

composition ("parallelogram" < *graphein* "to write"). Although we understand that this is the "space that's there," we will come to a much more profound understanding before the "unconclusion" of *Book 6 Books*.

"AFTER BIRD (improvising)" occurs in eight parts. That "yardbird" is not only an improvisational jazz player but also a chicken once again mingles the playful with the profound. Part 1 has to do with the sensual nature of being:

little flight

angle

what i 'eard

being then

or not

f m er all at

once

twice

faster than the humming word

honey

bee/ing's sing

all that code

ah that muse

ic'll stick'll

new little light

fangle

what i?

what ur?

"[L]ittle flight" may be referring to the bird in the epigraph, the "angle" being the bird's flight angle. It may also refer to the "little flight" of words as they angle their way across and down the page. The "h" is elided from "heard" to give the word a more sensual, and also a more playful connotation: hear "eared" and "erred." "[B]eing then / or not" throws into question once again the nature of being and nonbeing; the chronicler is still wondering; the apostle is still wandering.

Words begin to break apart with the freedom of birds in flight as the ephemeral nature of being is expressed: "f m 'er all at / once / twice." One can hear "femoral," reminding us that "syntax equals the body structure" and that we are mortal beings. "Birds and bees" are associated with procreation. Birds, bees and words are intimately connected with be-ing; the bee's song becomes be-ing's song. "[A]ll that code" suggests nature and individual letters of the alphabet, which are freed on the page so that the poet sighs, "ah that muse / ic'll stick'll." The muse-ic of the poem sticks in the ear like honey as the "bee/ing's sing." This constant signifying process that is "faster than the humming word" creates a new vision of our wor(l)d: "new little light / fangle." This light is allowed to occur within the text; there is no Biblical command of "Let there be light." Rather there are questions and wonderings: "what i? / what ur?" Ur is phonetically related to "ear" and also to the Ur tablets found in Sumeria, "lost" for so many thousands of years. Twentieth century "i" and the ancient Sumerian "i" are evoked through these questionings, blurring the distinction or identity of the "i" within the

historical body of "we." The question of personal and geographical identity remains open within the poem.

In Part 3, the one chosen by God to be saved from the flood is deconstructed, and this is seen to be a "just code": "no ah then / just code." No law is a just code and we are all our own arks, carrying nature within our consciousnesses. Zoroastrian concepts of "good" and "evil" are fallen out of this text. In a playful sequence, closure of the Old Testament is argued against. The rainbow, symbol of hope and promise, becomes an architectural structure or a musical instrument: "ark de triomphe / the rain bowed / like a fiddle." The simile continues to suggest transformation (vial) in a flood: "like a vial in a storm tossed sea." In Hour 23 of "A BOOK OF HOURS," Nichol quotes Earl Birney: "*walk alone in the wind and the dusk / toward the beautiful antediluvian sky.*" Birney, Nichol and D.G. Jones concur in their contentions that the flood has not subsided, but continues to reside in each human. Jones comments:

Canadian Literature exhibits not only a sense of exile, or alienation from a vital community, but also a sense of expectation, or restoration to that community. Here we find the exiled old Adam. Here we also find the sleeping Adam or dreaming Adam, who is a somewhat different figure. He is the sleeping giant, the major man...the personification of a world order, lost or as yet undiscovered. If there is a Canadian identity as yet unrealized, he is it. He embodies what James Joyce calls the uncreated conscience of the race. Associated with this figure are the images of the ark and of the mountain, also potential symbols of a world order. (15)

Now Adam becomes a member of the body of saviour-figures/sleeping giants. The ark and the mountain ("hill") are potential symbols of an inchoate wor(l)d order in Nichol's text:

sharp as a hill  
from which the dove will fly out  
bird did (world) into the blue

In the epigraph to this poem called "AFTER BIRD," the bird did "fly out," and this "little flight / angle" allows a "(world)" that is "lost or as yet undiscovered," to emerge.

II. "a translation only / no conclusions no"<sup>9</sup>

bpNichol is one human who achieved that quality called "cosmic consciousness" by allowing the "other" to work in and through him. In uncovering an inchoate wor(l)d, an earthly promised land, Nichol saves us from the biblical concepts of a "final conflagration" and a last judgment. Humans may go forth unafraid in a wor(l)d where they truly feel that they belong. The poet is not only a metaphorical "fire escape," but also a literal/letteral one. Irene Niechoda notes how Nichol described his Comox Street apartment:

On the door of my room was a sign that said IN CASE OF FIRE  
BREAK GLASS. And what you did was you punched in the glass,  
opened my door, raced through my room, threw the ladder out my  
window and climbed down it. My room was the fire exit. If you  
take this as literal truth, that's all it is. But it's so bizarre,  
no one would believe it. (July, 1987. 95)

As the poem earlier questions, "who'll y' find to / believe it?"

Through the process of the poem, the poet has learned the answer to the question, "How do you grow a human soul?" His quest is complete. In section 6, "book" and "bird" are intertwined as symbols of the soul, or of the activity of the soul:

wholly book

wholly bird

wholly & always completely itself

fragile

---

<sup>9</sup> *Book 6 Books*. "A BOOK OF HOURS." Hour 2.

easy to lose  
what a line meant  
's there

it is

there

it is

there

Book and bird have their own integrity. Each is complete, whole, holey and holy; these are qualities of a being living in an inchoate wor(l)d. We are wholly and holey at once in our unboundedness and our integrity. It is "easy to lose" what a lifeline or a poetic line meant, and the poetic line of *The Martyrology* is this poet's lifelong work. Once again, the profound arises out of a play of language as we hear "lineament" for "what a line meant." Although the meaning of a life is "fragile," "'s there," 's suggesting a serpent, "the source from which the power unwinds," "source" signifying the "other." The apostrophe of the contraction is suspended in mid-air, suggesting the intangible essence of spirit or soul and of the "other." "[I]t" signifies the unnamable, ineffable, "other" that works in and through humans and empowers their souls. "[I]t" moves around on the page as an elusive presence. This is both a playful and an affirmative movement; "it is" affirms "its" presence, and "it is" t-here. The "other" works in and through the poet always when he is bearing witness to his own becoming in the wor(l)d, when he is giving himself over to process. "It," the "other," is "there" and "here" at once, both within and without this work/wor(l)d.

Part 7 plays with the "ing" of process and with the integration of subjective and objective selves: "me / an'i /'ng." The apostrophe continues to hang in mid-air. The surrounding, "ambient" "i" is intimately connected with "eye" (seeing) and "ear" (hearing) as well as with space and with silence, signifying that the instruments with which we perceive the wor(l)d are not all sensual:

(i ambient

eye

ear

)

Although the parentheses are "closed," the ear that can hear silence is outside the boundary and the eye that can see space floats between the boundaries. "i ambient" can be deconstructed to "i am *bien t*," the "t" signifying the cross of martyrdom in this new "land promised to the saints." The poet is well.

"i" is always going beyond itself and not surrounding itself:

but then of course i is always rushing in &

think

say

ing





be

sing

"i" is perpetually involved in making meaning, or wor(l)d order. "i" is involved in the process, or flux, of liv-ing in the grace of the moment.

"AFTER BIRD" is bpNichol's "bird song," as he makes his way back to a natural language. In the final section of this Book, the previous parentheses denoting the flux of liv-ing are transformed into the soaring wings of a bird, or of a human spirit. The "i" has been left behind in favor of nature, the "bird" symbolizing the soul, and the "cloud" hinting at Cloudtown, or an other "other" plane:

sky

wind

cloud

bird



wanted nothing more than that

bird song

wanted that

nothing more then

It is as if the poet has experienced the word, "death," and is speaking from beyond this experience with some other language or voice, since the "i" is not present. bpNichol and his quest are complete, and he is satisfied with his work/wor(l)d. For the poet of *The Martyrology*, there is "nothing more then." And there is also "nothing more," then...

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