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From icon to alphabet and back:
The work of bp Nichol
as challenge to typographical and literary convention

by

CLAIRE KEATING

A Thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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FROM ICON TO ALPHABET AND BACK: THE WORK OF bp NICHOL AS CHALLENGE TO TYPOGRAPHICAL AND LITERARY CONVENTION

by

CLAIRE KEATING

A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University

of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree

MASTER of ARTS

Claire Keating 1997 (c)

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ABSTRACT

Western culture has inherited a sense of linear, consecutive, unidirectional perception that has remained relatively unchallenged in many areas of discourse. Examples of the unilateral nature of communication appear in the typographical conventions of the printed page (layout, material surface, physical construction, spacing) and limit feedback and interaction between the reader and writer. Traditionally, the print-trained reader registers and interprets the mechanics of the page (its top to bottom, left to right ordering, left and right justification at the margins, and so on) without any particular awareness of them and does not actively engage with them as part of a critical evaluation of the 'text.' Instead, the reader habitually sees 'through' these elements (signs) to the meaning (referent) beneath. This preoccupation with the search for a 'meaning' be- yond/neath the sign has meant that other aspects of the text have been largely disregarded. Yet, for much of this century (and even earlier) some artists and critics have sought to transgress the more traditional literary structures and to draw attention to language as a concrete material, in and of itself, and not simply as it serves a referential function.

Various critical theories dispute accepted notions of the semantics and semiotics of language, reader/author/text relationships, and traditional methods of textual reproduction and transmission, among them Futurism, Dadaism, and Concrete Poetry. Some artists engaged entirely new registers of expression, discontented with what the predominant means of production, print, afforded them. Within the context of the page, Canadian poet bp Nichol exploits the properties and ambiguities of the sign in an effort to free the word from its referential function. In much of his work, the sign, the individual configurations which constitute the sign, and the elements which make up the page, are 'objects' to be 'caressed.'

To understand Nichol's work calls for a radical approach to the literary text, one that does not move hastily beyond the sign to a distant referent but one that remains poised at the 'surface' of the work. A 'reading' of bp Nichol becomes an exploration of possibilities that include the mechanics of the page, its support surface and markings. The kind of literary attention Nichol invites would seek to understand the graphic signs on the page as more than simply a system pointing to semantic 'meaning' in the larger world. This thesis undertakes an exploration of the alternatives. I hope that such an exploration will lead to a greater recognition of the role that each of the constituent elements of a Nichol text (sign, space, layout, material surface, physical construction) plays in its production.

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For Professor Dennis Cooley who was a far better teacher than I ever was a student.

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Figure 1.1 The Press Descending from the Heavens

Introduction

Things I don't really understand about myself:

1) Why I write at all.

2) Why I write the way I write.

bp Nichol
NOTE BOOK a composition on composition

In his book entitled, *What History Teaches*, Stephen Scobie states that the work of bp Nichol stands at the crossroads of modern culture and humanism, embracing elements of the linguistic turmoil that still grips twentieth-century literature and poetics: a post-structural critique of language, a de-centering of the authorial 'I,' and a reinstatement of the reader's role in the text, among other upheavals. In her book entitled, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*, Marjoie Perloff describes the work of experimentalists like bp Nichol as a "resurrection" of lost or overlooked traditions of early, experimental modernism that explode in what she calls the "futurist moment" (xviii). In his article entitled, "An ABC of Contemporary Reading," Richard Kostelanetz suggests that the stylistic pluralism of today's poetics results from the plethora of both "artists and artistic activity that crosses traditions in every art, not only literature" (37). Such remarks illus-

trate how the nature of Nichol's relationship (and the relationship of other experimental artists) to literary tradition remains problematic even today. This is due, in part, to the range of avant-garde sources and styles to which his work subscribes: collage, performance art, sound poetry, radio, theatre, and song, to name a few. This broad exploration of mediums of expression parallels his equally diverse exploration of topics of expression. As Caroline Bayard observes, Nichol's writing examines a "plurality of factors, ethnic, social, institutional, and cultural in defining the relationship of centre to periphery" (Poetics, 114). As such, it is easy for Nichol's vast oeuvre to overwhelm because of its diversity and super abundance. However, although Nichol embraced nearly every medium of expression imaginable, the touchstone for his work remains the medium of print and so an awareness of the historical and theoretical developments of the written word opens the door to understanding his remarkable range of accomplishments.

Roy Miki notes that, in Nichol's print-based experiments, "the surface of language is exactly where the depth is" (80). Within the context of print, Nichol believed that the different visual signs that define form and structure in language are as significant as their semantic function. When the visual signs are acted upon so that their relationship is somehow altered, Nichol believed the message was transformed as well. He believed that the relationship between language structure and language media

(whether print-based, aural, or visual) can define structures of meaning in such a way as to alter the experience, the interaction, and the expectations of its audience. By illustrating this in his work, Nichol sought to instigate a critical discourse among the author, the culture, and the interlocutor of his work.

To understand Nichol, then, an awareness of the historical and theoretical developments of the word, writing and print, becomes fundamental. bp Nichol seemed to have an intuitive understanding of the influences of print and writing on human consciousness. He revelled in manipulating, diverting, subverting, and converting the supposed 'norms' of print and its constituent elements, letters, in his efforts to make the reading public aware of print's shaping influence. The Nichol reader, then, must understand the 'norms' of writing and print, and the changes the medium effected in Western culture, in order to fully appreciate Nichol's artistry and genius. This thesis begins, therefore, with a chapter that explores the forces that shaped writing and later, print, and left their impress on all later human consciousness. This will lead, hopefully, to a better understanding of an extraordinary artist and self-described "apprentice" to language whose unit of expression was not limited to 'paragraph or stanza' but whose work embraced whatever "entrances and exits" (Scobie, 2) it needed to effect a communicative act.

Chapter One The historical and theoretical considerations of print and the text

Some of our oldest poems are not narrative: praise, prayer, tirade, persuasion, argument, instruction, description, riddle, and rune.

M. Travis Lane
Alternatives to Narrative: The Structuring Concept

It may be no exaggeration to claim that, more than any other single technology, writing has altered human consciousness and thought. The long movement from oral cultures towards cultures steeped in written technologies produced dramatic changes in social and intellectual organizational patterns. Today, these are so deeply ingrained in the mind that they seem native and natural to it. Upon closer examination, however, we can determine that features we may have taken for granted in thought and literature result from the shaping influence that writing, and even more print, exerts on human consciousness as it becomes increasingly literate. The changes in human sensibility that occur as a culture incorporates writing technology become apparent in a comparison of early writing patterns, where oral elements still linger, to later writing patterns, where literacy has been fully assimilated, and the writing has lost most of its

oral elements. For example, late-nineteenth-century texts, invoking a 'dear reader,' suggest an actively listening audience for whom the material was being prepared (as it oftentimes was). By the twentieth century, writing evolved to become a more independent construction of abstract thought, produced without an active consideration of its intended audience. This shift instilled the author with a certain indisputable authority within the text and reduced the reader to a passive consumer of the text. By the late twentieth century, the question of textual authority and the reader's role in the text, lead to unusual 'exposés' on the part of some experimentalists. For example, bp Nichol's text, *Craft Dinner* (1978), announces the existence of an "i" who at once asserts the writer's presence in the text but also denies it because the "i" is "not alive" but "simply these words as they follow one another across this page" (1). Smaro Kamboureli further suggests the use of a lower-case 'i' also posits a self that is "conscious of its limitations and relative marginality" (151). Writing that engages in this kind of 'exposé' - of the reader and of the writer - illustrates reading prejudices, the unconscious assumptions that accompany the reading act, and the forgotten audience that attended early oral engagements.

That language originates with an "I" and as an oral phenomena is obvious. With only extraordinary exception, written language has not existed without first being preceded by an oral dialect, and very few languages have been preserved in writing

at all.[1] According to Walter Ong, the Sumerian culture developed the first true script, Cuneiform, around 3, 500 BC, nearly forty-five thousand years after the first appearance of human civilization. Nearly 3,000 more languages have sprung up around the world since then. Barely one hundred of them were ever committed to writing and even fewer than that number can boast a formal body of literature (Ong, 9). Most languages, their originating cultures, histories and traditions have come and gone with little trace of their existences. The scramble among predominantly oral, Indigenous North-American populations today to reclaim their languages, literatures, and cultures before the onslaught of written, Western civilization illustrates how quickly and easily entire cultures can be eradicated.

Whatever Jacques Derrida may argue to the contrary, our current immersion in the written word often blinds us to the secondary position of writing to orality. A cursory examination of any early scribal text reveals a dramatic lack of word separation, punctuation, and readily recognizable word division between lines. The absence of virtually all those marks for the written page, which we have developed, suggests that originally texts were intended for oral delivery and aural consumption and not for

[1] A number of languages arose in Europe that were directly linked to the development and spread of writing. Among those languages are "learned Latin," (Ong, 113), Rabbinic Hebrew, Classical Arabic, Sanskrit, and Classical Chinese. These were the languages that were taught by the governing body (in Europe, the Church) in the school systems. Over time, they were reduced almost exclusively to a written script. As well, since the educational systems accommodated only boys, these languages were also sex-linked.

the kind of silent, visual scanning to which the late twentieth-century reader is accustomed. We will see in later chapters how Nichol sets aside many of those tactics that guide silent, visual scanning, to purposely make consumption of the work difficult and to awaken the reader to the intrusion of reading aids in processing the text. For example, to punctuate his own argument in *Zygal*, Nichol eliminates capital letters and punctuation:

> languageis or was or has been said before I did say
> once as gertrude did commas are disgusting little things such
> sucks she did did not say said they do things for you you should
> do for yourself they make you lazy. (39)

Nonetheless, in spite of the presence of residual oral elements in written texts at least as late as the nineteenth century, and the experiments of poetic practitioners like Nichol, scholars remained shy of investigations that moved beyond the textual realm to include the aural. Partial explanation possibly lies in the recognition that a text can easily preclude considerations that immediately present themselves in oral study such as author, audience, and the context of delivery. Further explanation may lie with the definition of what 'literature' means; in contemporary society, literature often includes only written, imaginative language.

Walter Ong offers yet another explanation. Ong suggests that the exclusion of certain elements from literary investigations results from our contemporary under-

standing of what it means to 'study.' According to Ong, the concept of 'study' arises from within literate cultures. Oral cultures do not 'study' as such. They may have a large body of accumulated knowledge but extended linear analysis remains the domain of literates, an off-shoot of the invention of writing itself. Ong persuasively argues that the linear, abstract, and cumulative nature of analysis is an extension of the technology of written expression and cannot exist without it. But speech and oral patterning are neither linear nor cumulative, and so, are inamenable to such scrutiny. For one thing, as Walter Ong observes, utterances (which is to say aural 'outerings'), are entirely ephemeral: "when I pronounce the word 'permanence', by the time I get to the '-nence', the 'perma-' is gone" (32). In effect, verbal utterances elude the framing and freezing to which writing relegates words on the page. For there is a difference in the *place* of understanding the written and the oral (verbal utterances exist in the realm of sound; writing exists in the realm of vision) that changes both how one thinks and how that thinking expresses itself. In *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (1968), Jack Goody diagnoses some of the mental and social changes that accompany the advent of writing. But it was the work of Milman Parry on the text of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that first awakened the scholarly world to the contrasts in oral and written modes of thought and expression. In his research, Parry demonstrated the need to consider

writing as a distinctly different use of language, profoundly distinguished from speech.

Parry established several distinguishing characteristics for oral composition and verbal transmission. His oral-formulaic theory outlines characteristics peculiar to oral transmission, as he observed them implemented in the Homeric verses, that include essential formulaic structures, rhythmic patterns, alliterations, assonances, redundancies, and mixtures of language forms (archaic, dialectical, artificial). Linear progression and a unique, complex development of thought and form, admired in written formulations, do not occur in oral processes. They often favour instead, as Parry discovered, idea 'clustering,' formula, redundancy, and structural simplicity. Walter Ong later suggests that the kind of structuring required to retain information orally, roots itself deeply in the consciousness. According to Ong, the structuring becomes so "incessant" to the oral mind that it forms "the substance of thought itself" (35). Formulas, strong rhythmic patterns, even body gestures (breathing and movement) reinforce oral memory. As a culture becomes increasingly literate, these memory aids often become cumbersome and unnecessary, at times even comical or possibly offensive. The culture begins to shed its oral habits and to replace them with habits of written expression. Even though western culture has but lately immersed itself in a written tradition, these habits are already strong. Caroline Bayard, in her examination

of the work of several avante-garde writers, including Nichol's, whose work attempts to subvert the usual "reading order" adopted by the reader, questions whether the poetry's "halting quality, the brokenness of the metrics, can resist the effects of time and habit" (Poetics, 68). Still, in the play between oral and written expression, that such poetic experiments invite, and in the process of discarding the old and bringing in the new, the characteristics of both modes of expression do reveal themselves. In later chapters, we will see how Nichol reintroduces qualities of unorthodox expression - particularly oral and graphic elements - in part to bring to the reader's attention their virtual absence from contemporary texts.

The act of committing words to paper largely reduces words to a visual component, de-contextualized and isolated from the external world. Even the 'voice' a reader may create exists within the reader's mind, silent to all but the reader. The characteristics of separateness and detachment that are peculiar to print eventually lodge themselves in the individuals who are born to, and raised within, a literate culture. William Cobbett, a Saxon visiting America in the late eighteenth century, wrote, in a revealing moment, of the detachment and logic he observed in Americans, attributes he put down to their book culture:

> They have all been *readers* from their youth up. . . they always *hear* with patience. I do not know that I ever heard a native American interrupt another man while he was speaking. The[y] . . . [are] . . . *sedate* and *cool* . . . [have] . . . a *deliberate* manner in which they say and do every thing, and . . . [have a] . . . *slowness* and *reserve* with which they express their assent. (McLuhan, 171)

Cobbett accurately observed the interiorization of print technology and its effect in shaping a new kind of consciousness.

Walter Ong made more observations on the effects of writing on human consciousness when he interviewed individuals from cultures that remained relatively untouched by the spread of print technology. Walter Ong found that these individuals experienced difficulty with self-analysis. One man responded as follows to Ong's invitation to describe his character: "What can I say about my own heart? How can I talk about my character? Ask others; they can tell you about me. I myself can't say anything" (55). Ong suggests that the ability to express one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences in writing creates a detachment that allows introspection, including self-reflection of the kind the man could not entertain. Writing enables the juxtaposition of the self to the external world and in relationship to itself.

Elizabeth Eisenstein's work, *The Printing Press As An Agent of Change* (1979), makes it clear how far-reaching and diverse the effects of print have been. In the age of scribes, when the production of texts was time-consuming and labour-

intensive, the body of written knowledge had to be carefully protected against damage and loss. This encouraged a kind of intellectual 'looking-backward' in scholars who remained intent upon preserving existing collections. By contrast, print, in its ability to produce multiple, accurate copies of information relatively quickly and cheaply, freed scholars from this pre-occupation, to expend more energy on exploration and investigation. The new ability to readily collect, produce, and then correct data in later editions brought a whirlwind of activity in a vast range of disciplines. For example, in a seventy-five year period from 1675 to 1750 Europeans were inundated with more than thirty different editions of encyclopedias (Eisenstein, 4). The impact of the printing press in Europe is profoundly, visually summed in the engraved frontispiece of Prosper Marchand's *The Press Descending from the Heavens* (See Figure 1.1). In this frontispiece, angels descend from the skies carrying the printing press to bestow it on religious and civic rulers respectfully waiting below.

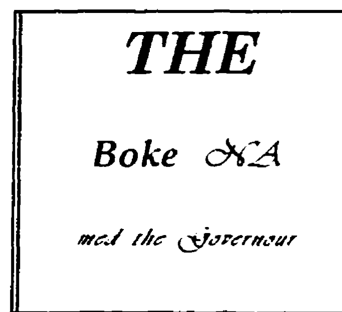
Perhaps these enthusiasts might have tempered their zeal if they had known what was to accompany the new machine. The printing press is an invention that blocked, spaced, and locked each word into space as a discrete unit: 'ap-' became a nonsensical consideration without '-ple' to complete it. As discrete units, then, words could be moved and manipulated, visual objects situated in a defined space. The positioning, composition, and distribution of words all derive from the power of

the print world. This kind of control over the word, as it exists as a discrete unit, also lends it a sense of inevitability, finality, and insistence. As Walter Ong notes, "Print situates words in space more relentlessly than writing ever did. Writing moves words from the sound world to a world of visual space, but print locks words into position in this space. Control of this space is everything" (67). The creation of a book which can be drawn and depended upon to deliver up, consistently and insistently, the same version each time it is printed, further contributes to the reification of the word and to the perceived degree of its truth and dependability when it expresses itself in print. (Nichol books make repeated challenges to the reification that accompanies a printed publication; later chapters illustrate how he manipulates and subverts traditional textual elements in order to 'free' to book.)

In addition to promoting the acceptance of words as units, the increasing regimentation of a printed text and the layout of the print on the printed page, also influenced how the page would be interpreted and read. Particular uses of space on the top, bottom and sides of a page, the space between individual words and lines, and the placement of headings, footings, or sub-titles have come to be included as part of the inscribed meaning within a text. For instance, a break in a continuous line of print, indicated either by a horizontal gap in white space or perhaps by a vertical gap in the left margin, signals that a change in text follows. The placement of a line of print that

is marked off (whether capitalized, bolded, or italicized) also cues the reader for some kind of change in textual flow. In the musical score, *Clover*, Nichol utilizes white spaces set between the letters that begin the poem as indicative of a specific rhythm that the 'reader' must interpret. White spacing which follows particular letters indicates the amount of time that the reader's voice should give to them. Lines paired closely together function virtually as stanzas, while isolated letter units operate within a wider time structure. Caroline Bayard observes that Nichol employs both the text and its layout as "visual indicators" (Poetics, 169) that the reader must employ concurrently to interpret the piece. These kinds of visual cues, particularly in their extreme application in the above poem, stand in contrast to early manuscript writing which at times seemed unconcerned with the visual impact, or coding, of words on the page.

The title page of Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governour* suffices as an example. In it, the title arbitrarily employs two types of print and two sizes of lettering, and visually 'runs into' the author's name, all of which make it difficult to distinguish the title of the book. The first word, 'THE,' in bizarre oddity to print-based readers



is by far the largest printed word on the title page and 'Named' is split between two

lines as 'N A -' and '***med***' (I have attempted here to mimic the change in print size and style). The vertical arrangement of the title employs progressively smaller type and arbitrarily divides the words up to make an aesthetically pleasing arrangement. The arrangement, however, makes the title nearly impossible to read. Walter Ong suggests that the lack of concern for ease in reading the title reflects a mind that is oriented towards sound, not sight. The contemporary mind's difficulty in interpreting the title page illustrates how visual we have become and the extent to which we perceive words as discrete units: an orientation born from a culture that is deeply immersed in print practices. In *Our Spoken Language*, author A. Lloyd James remarks on the extent of that conditioning:

> Sounds and sight, speech and print, eye and ear have nothing in common. The human brain has done nothing that compares in complexity with this fusion of ideas involved in linking up the two forms of language. But the result of the fusion is that once it is achieved in our early years, we are forever after unable to think clearly, independently and surely about any one aspect of the matter. We cannot think of sounds without thinking of letters; we believe letters have sounds. We think that the printed page is a picture of what we say, and that the mysterious thing called "spelling" is sacred. . . The invention of printing broadcast the printed language and gave to print a degree of authority that it has never lost. (James, 29)

The authority of print also encourages a sense of closure on its subject matter as though what is discovered between the covers of a book is complete and final.

The print on any individual page reinforces this sense of finality. Pages, in prose at least, are commonly filled up, reducing blank spaces to a minimum, often in justified left and right margins. There is a sense of holding the reader at a distance by this filling-up of the page; the reader can examine the text, but there is no obvious or easy visual way 'in' to the work, no way to pierce the rigid composition that marks a page. More telling, perhaps, is the consequence that, regardless of a disagreement with the text, no amount of argument can alter the print; it remains immutable and irrefutable. Further, the ongoing dominance of the written text and the march of print remains inexorable. By the twentieth century, Western print culture at least, had inherited a sense of perception that was linear, uni-directional and cumulative. Further, as print technology became ever more uniform, exact and widespread, print's impress on the mind faded further into the unconscious, where it operated virtually as an act of nature, a sign of the way things 'are.' The reader increasingly tended to disregard the material presence of the text itself and to look *through* the words to a perceived meaning *beyond* the text.

Nichol's work, as we shall soon see, attempts to unseat this apparent oblivion to the text's material nature. Nichol remains acutely aware that literature occurs as a

direct function of its physical existence in a book or earlier, manuscript format, or, certainly, any physical format it may take on. In his own writing, Nichol exploited the often overlooked consideration that literature grows from its inception from a set of *written* texts *printed* in books. But, historically, the study of literature directed little attention to its technological and material roots.

Historical circumstances and philosophical paradigms contributed to this blindness. Up until the nineteenth century (and even later), scholars largely limited themselves to an exploration of the historical evolution and referential function of language rather than the material and physical nature of its presentation. The Aristotelian premise of the subordination of art in its physical manifestations (whether literature, music, dance, theatre, or film) to the rules of imitation, representation and reference, further contributed to a concentration on the historical and referential aspects of the text.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, technology and philosophy came together to cause a dramatic paradigm shift in the current perception of language. Innovations in nineteenth-century typography foregrounded print's forgotten material roots, and the founding premise of modernism in the twentieth century introduced art (including literature), as an autonomous and self-reflexive entity. As a result, scholars began to examine the visual impact of letter design and stylistic

choices. Stéphane Mallarmé's work, *Un Coup de Dés*, remains a touchstone of both historical and aesthetic reference for virtually all later poetry which later experimented with material aspects of the page. But, while poets and artistic practitioners played with the materiality of the text, scholars remained reluctant to fully engage the issues that were raised by such textual production.

At least two explanations proffer themselves for this seeming lack of attention: the established physical dimensions of the page and the book itself, and the profound shaping that writing effected on the unconscious mind. The book carries a particular stability and weight. In its physically separate casing (its bound covers) the book effectively removes itself from the ordinary circuit of communication, demanding a singular consideration limited to its enclosed pages. As a result, the book instills itself with a peculiar authority. The assimilation of the technology of writing to the subconscious mind has had profound metaphysical implications (as A. Lloyd James, Walter Ong, and Jack Goody note). Notions of truth, reality, and perception are inextricably bound up with the technology of producing the printed word. Until modernism focused attention on the formal means of production in literature and the visual arts, the primary condition of the materiality of form went relatively unrecognized. Modernism - in its ideation of works of art as autonomous, self-conscious and self-

reflexive - opened the door to a conception of the material nature of texts and its ability to shape and influence 'meaning.'

Ferdinand de Saussure has been influential in his breaking up of language into two distinct, but inextricably linked, realms - the material sign (signifier) and the conceptual component (signified). To be sure Saussure (and later theorists) did not assign to the material nature of the text the role that was carved out for it later by experimentalists such as Dadaists, Performance Artists, or Concrete Poets. But, in acknowledging the materiality of writing as distinct from the meaning it was attempting to convey, he has helped us to see the physical workings of language:

> Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs: the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words: the spoken forms alone constitute the object. But the spoken word is so intimately bound to its written image that the latter manages to usurp the main role. People attach even more importance to the written image of a vocal sign than to the sign itself. (Saussure, 23)

The critical point for this discussion lies in Saussure's distinction between the signifier and signified (even if Saussure intended this to be only a theoretical, and not a practical, division). In the deconstruction of the sign into two independent, but linked, elements. Saussure established a way to examine the signifier, and laid a

groundwork for later investigations of formalist poetics and linguistics, and in turn, the foregrounding of the conventions of print themselves.

Two later developments in linguistic theory further affected our understanding of the materiality of written productions: first, the (primarily) Formalist investigations into the nature of poetic language (influenced by, and parallel to, the poetic and avant-garde activities taking place in the early half of the twentieth century); and second, an increasingly refined and sophisticated understanding of the division between signified and signifier. By the early twentieth century theorists recognized that there were no hard and fast criteria by which to readily distinguish poetic uses of language from the language of daily discourse. One of the founding members of the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926), Roman Jakobson, proposed the alternative notion that in poetic form "language is perceived in itself and not as a transparent or transitive mediator of something else" (29). Jakobson developed this idea further in *What is Poetry* (1934), where he wrote the following:

> Poetry is present when a word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and internal form acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality. (29)

This statement implicitly acknowledges the materiality of language and its physical presence and nature. Yuri Veltrusky's related article, *Some Aspects of the Pictorial Sign* (1973), presses the point that the materiality of the signifier is more than merely a vehicle for/towards meaning: "the materiality of the signifier affects considerably the specific way in which the picture conveys meaning." Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference* further establishes the materiality of the signifier if only by establishing the 'absence' that writing embodies, the statement which is not present, the speaker who is absent, and the context of the utterance which is missing. Further, Derrida demonstrates, through the actions of, for example, metonymy and metaphor, that an eternal play of differences occurs in written language. With this kind of 'play,' meaning cannot be 'fixed' in a text.

These kinds of literary investigations, alongside experimentations of poets and artists, increasingly pointed to the importance of the materiality of the signifier in the formulation of meaning. Still, attention to this materiality was articulated more by poets and practitioners than by scholars. Scholars, for the most part, maintained a curious reluctance to abandon the authority of representational language and to explore the influence that language's very materiality and means of production play in the creation of meaning in the text. Although investigators like Saussure, Jakobson, and Derrida ascribed to the materiality of the signifier a particular literary charge, they

only stood at the brink of ascribing to the materiality of the text its ability to actually shape and produce meaning. Their investigations and separations of the signifier and signified were intended primarily for theoretical consideration. It was other, avant-garde movements which pushed such theoretical propositions to their practical, applied limits and implemented them in actual expression.

It is with those poets and practitioners that we can locate bp Nichol and his work, and it is to bp Nichol that we now turn. The work of bp Nichol grounds itself in both the modernist position of the autonomous and self-reflexive nature of a work of art and in the postmodernist position of its extreme non-representational nature. According to Stephen Scobie, the work of bp Nichol stands at the "crossroads of modern culture," where the common concern is for language, as Scobie remarks, "whether it is regarded as a stable entity - a tool, a raw material - or as a completely unstable one - an endlessly shifting play of difference" (9). Whereas conventional reading habits direct the reader towards a distant referent, the work of bp Nichol often remains at the 'surface' of the text, focused on the signifier and the various material elements that contribute to the production of meaning. Bp Nichol's texts may or may not reveal a phenomenological stance, but they are what they present as much as what they re-present. The 'words' that bp Nichol employs often refuse the representative positions within which they are traditionally ascribed and present themselves first

and foremost as material entities. As such, the work of bp Nichol often constructs 'meaning' by foregrounding the materiality of the sign and insisting on an acceptance of the word as an absolute and self-contained entity in itself, in an effort to free the word, in varying degrees, from its referential function. In much of Nichol's work, the sign, the individual configurations which constitute the sign, and the elements which make up the page, are, in his words, "objects" to be "caressed" (Book-machine). In this focus on the materiality of language Nichol pushes the separation of the two elements of the sign beyond the scope first conceived by Saussure and others.

To understand Nichol's work, then, calls for a radical approach to the literary text, one that does not move hastily beyond the sign to a distant referent but one that remains poised at the 'surface' of the work, as a first layer experience in which each word is grasped as a potential syntax. Largely freed from their referential function, letters and words become increasingly visual. A 'reading' of bp Nichol becomes an "exploration of possibilities," possibilities that include the mechanics of the page, its support surface and markings. The kind of literary attention Nichol invites would ask us to understand the graphic signs on the page as more than simply a system pointing to semantic 'meaning' in the larger world.

Various critics, notably Steve McCaffery and Stephen Scobie, have carefully studied the visual (alphabetic, iconic, graphic) elements of Nichol's texts in a search of

their 'meaning.' I will begin with a consideration of the graphic elements found in the work of bp Nichol, including iconic and alphabetic representations, and examine them primarily from the perspective of their physically tangible qualities in an effort to understand how those properties shape textual meaning.

Chapter Two Graphic elements, including iconic and alphabetic elements

At Koraku-En, in Japan, there was a garden house built over a stream.

M. Travis Lane
Alternatives to Narrative: The Structuring Concept

According to Brian Henderson, the habitual use of language to point towards things and ideas that ostensibly exist outside or beyond language "obscures the moment of immediate experience that language itself presents: the moment of origination, the creative naming of itself" (1). bp Nichol is also well aware of the supposed transparency of language, what he calls the "unself-conscious passage" that language often undertakes "through words into events or messages outside them" (Report 2: Narrative, 77). But Nichol commonly prefers to reintroduce the 'moment' of language's origin by foregrounding the elements that give text presence: the size, shape, and colour of the page, the weights and shapes of letters, and various other graphic elements. Every text necessarily includes these components but bp Nichol places a particular emphasis on the visual and physical elements in an effort to show the reader the tre-

mendous influence of physical resources in the shaping of meaning. Within such contexts, in which all contributing signfiers - the page, the letters, the colours, even the smell - potentially emphasize a unique and separate signifying event, the writer and the reader must engage in an especially interactive relationship to produce meaning.. For bp Nichol, writing can never be a set code that is handed down to the reader; rather, writing for him is a field of activity where the reader takes on a "productive role" (Prose, 85) in order to mobilize significations. As much as this field of activity allows both writers and readers to alternately shift their positions from "centrality to transition," a shift also occurs in understanding at the level of the word itself where, as Nichol states, every word functions "as both form and content of itself. Each word can signify through its insular insistence."

Nichol believed that the shifts in reader/writer positions and ones that would point towards understanding the potential significance of materials that constitute the text, would require "a long period of emphasis on syntax, the single word and the relationships between words when liberated from older modes and genres" (Prose, 75). According to Nichol, this engagement would result in a restructuring of verbal relationships in syntax, within the word, and among words along various lines "using syntactic models borrowed from other systems, or by inventing new ones" (Prose, 76). Thus, normative reading patterns and traditional referential meanings would be

systematically undermined. According to Steve McCaffery, what results is "an ex-

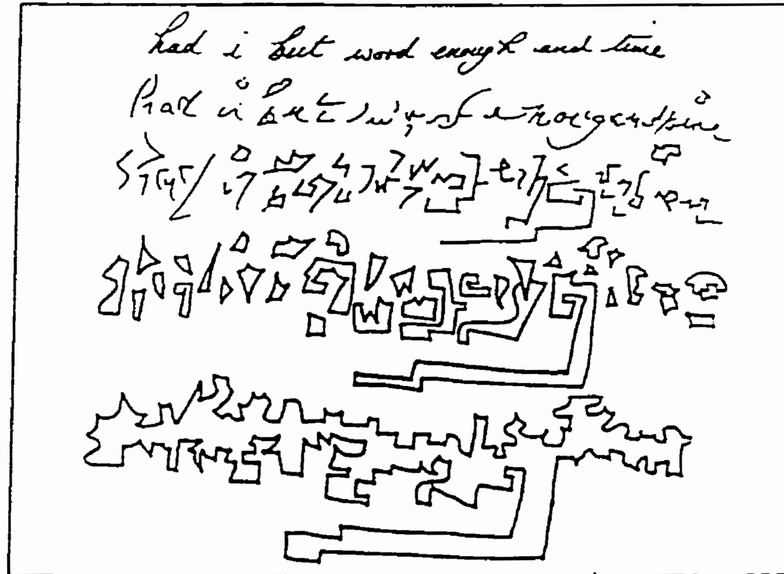


Figure 2.1 Had I but word enough and time

ploration of possibilities - sonic, lexic, and/or iconic" (Notes, 47), and a transformation in what a "reading" of poetry actually entails. In Nichol, the word at times is so radically reduced that the resulting composition can only be considered as an independent iconic construct without immediate referential capability, as Figure 2.1, above, illustrates.

As a graphic 'exploration,' *Had I but word enough and time*, attempts to present 'reading' as a kind of 'seeing,' in echo of Pound's earlier hieroglyphic investigations. It is difficult, if not impossible, to impose alphabetic or other referential order on this graphic to interpret it; the construction must be visually per-

ceived and understood without (at least initially) employing referential linguistic processes.

bp Nichol's *ABC: The Aleph Beth Book* serves as a well-known example of using letters of the alphabet as individual constructs. In *ABC*, Nichol presents individual letters in such a way that the reader comes to recognize the capacity of each letter as an individually constructed element, rather than its usual perception as a part of a grouping of co-dependent elements employed to create words. In this book, as well, Nichol challenges western readers' assumptions concerning both poetic construction and readerly consumption of the poetic text by juxtaposing a poetry manifesto that relates the death of traditional poetry to the deconstruction of the alphabet itself.

Both the book's title, *ABC: The Aleph Beth Book*, and its physical construction, recall a child's book of ABCs. None of its pages is numbered, as though the author remembers that a child who cannot read likely also cannot count. The bright, red book measures just 5" x 5" with a childlike, cardboard hard cover that presents its title in bold, easy-to-read print. The pages are of thick and durable construction, protected with a plastic-like coating (reminiscent of the practice of covering pages to protect them from a child's sticky fingers). The size of the pages makes them both easy to turn and difficult to tear (possibly to accommo-

date a child's wayward fingers). Each page contains a clearly demarcated inner frame in heavy black ink that is set approximately one-half inch into the page. Each page presents only one letter of the alphabet, centred within a thin black frame, and one sentence of the manifesto, running around the outside of the frame, in a simplistic rendering of text that one might expect to find in a child's primer. However, the initial cues that this book is a child's primer are quickly and then constantly disrupted. So are the reader's attempts to accumulate other cues to construct a different 'meaning.' As Nichol's *ABC* overturns conventional assumptions about 'ABCs,' the reader begins to revise (or at least to reconsider) the traditional function of the alphabet in the construction of words that create meaning.

The inclusion of a poetry manifesto on the first and last pages acts as a framing device for the alphabet itself. Fragments of the same manifesto, threading throughout the ABCs of the text, and the fragmented letter-like elements in the text, suggest that the alphabet used to construct the poem is shattered. Two texts result: the text of the manifesto semantically stating that "poetry is dead," and the text of the alphabet, deconstructing and reconstructing itself. The fragments of manifesto and alphabet, found within the text, must be newly and continually constructed by an intervention (and invention) on the part of the reader. In effect, the text is auto-referential, and, less immediately, intertextual as well. In it, the al-

phabet itself dynamically serves as a text, drawn upon both to construct the words of the manifesto but also subject to the declaration of the manifesto.

The manifesto declares itself freed from the "artificial boundaries" that "we have placed on the poem." One of those boundaries is the alphabet, the very alphabet upon which *ABC* so dramatically depends. The employment of capital letters to deconstruct the alphabet in the text proper, and at the same time the use of capital letters in the construction of a poetry manifesto that semantically decries their use, dismantles (or, at least, ironically interrogates) "boundaries between ourselves & the poem" and enables the poem to "live again" (Manifesto, pages unnumbered).

In part, Nichol undertakes a search for the 'origin' of meaning through an explo- sion/ration of the smallest unit of meaning, the letter. The sub-title, *The Aleph Beth Book*, contradicts the initial visual impression that this is a child's primer (the book is brightly coloured, block-lettered, child-sized). Critic Steve McCaffery suggests that the Hebrew words/letters "aleph beth" recall the "cabbala" in its "exploration or rediscovery, in the very letters of the Hebrew alphabet, of the divine creative function lost since the Fall" (McCaffery, 47). Nichol invites us to a similar rediscovery in our own alphabet. By juxtaposing the manifesto next to its constitutive elements - the alphabet letters - Nichol suggests

that to rediscover poetry and our own "divine creative function," we must return to the fundamental creative construct of language, the individual letter. The manifesto, and Nichol's entire argument, appear below.

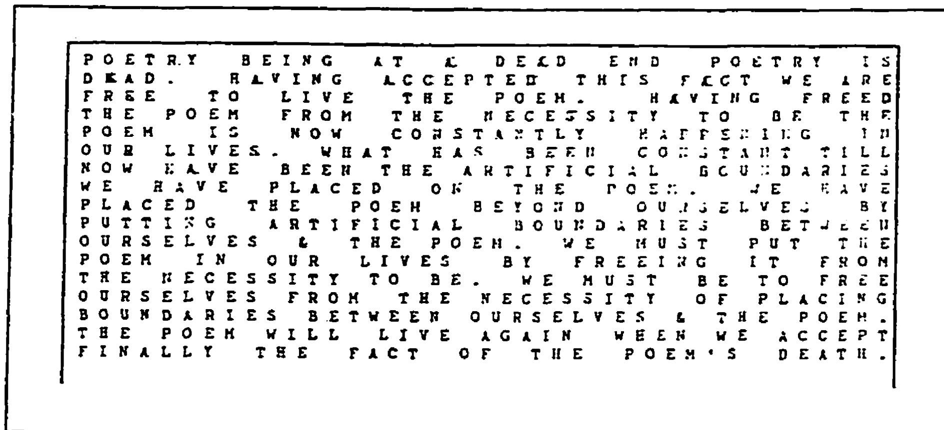
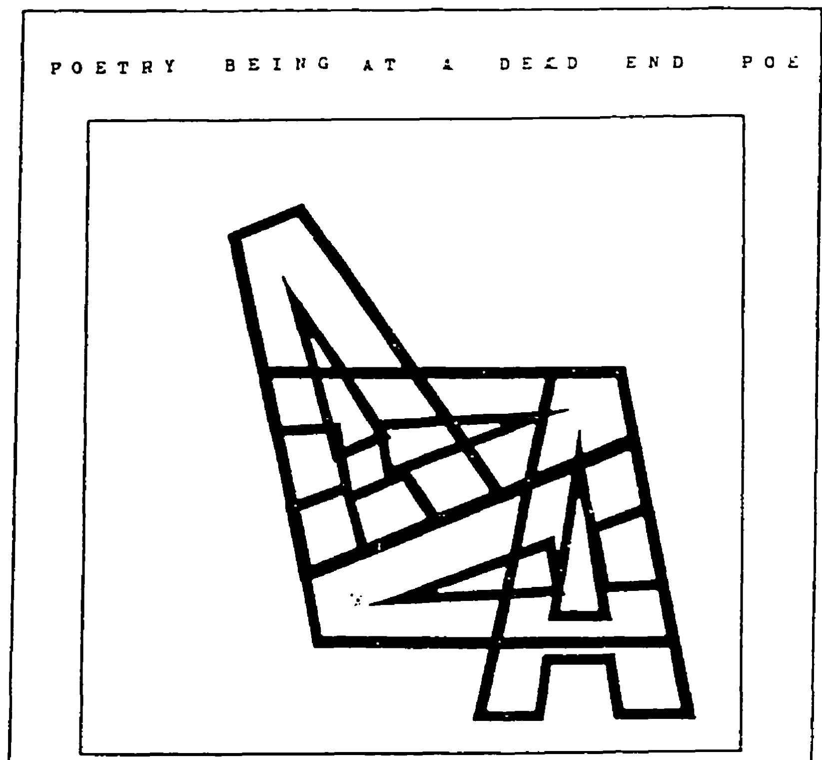

POETRY BEING AT A DEAD END POETRY IS
DEAD. HAVING ACCEPTED THIS FACT WE ARE
FREE TO LIVE THE POEM. HAVING FREED
THE POEM FROM THE NECESSITY TO BE THE
POEM IS NOW CONSTANTLY HAPPENING IN
OUR LIVES. WHAT HAS BEEN CONSTANT TILL
NOW HAVE BEEN THE ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES
WE HAVE PLACED ON THE POEM. WE HAVE
PLACED THE POEM BEYOND OURSELVES BY
PUTTING ARTIFICIAL BOUNDARIES BETWEEN
OURSELVES & THE POEM. WE MUST PUT THE
POEM IN OUR LIVES BY FREEING IT FROM
THE NECESSITY TO BE. WE MUST BE TO FREE
OURSELVES FROM THE NECESSITY OF PLACING
BOUNDARIES BETWEEN OURSELVES & THE POEM.
THE POEM WILL LIVE AGAIN WHEN WE ACCEPT
FINALLY THE FACT OF THE POEM'S DEATH.

Figure 2.2 Manifesto

Stephen Scobie observes that a portion of this manifesto repeats itself on each page of the book "as a running marginal commentary on a series of twenty-six letter-drawings, each of which presents a multiple-exposure of a letter of the alphabet" (47). Figure 2.3 (right) illustrates the juxtaposition of a portion of the n



where a letter appears to shape itself (Figure 2.3, above), we suspect an *A* lies on the page, but the shape, overlaying itself repeatedly, obliterates itself so extensively that it virtually becomes a self-referential construction.

Readerly expectation that this is an *A* establishes itself through certain cues: the title of the book is ABC (albeit deconstructed by the words "aleph beth" in the sub-title); and the positioning of a graphic, resembling in points, an 'A' at the outset is the reader's first encounter within the text after the manifesto (as in children's books the letter *A* appears first). Finally, because of the first two cues, the reader begins to anticipate an *A* on the opening page. (We do, in fact, 'know' that this first figure originated as a letter from Nichol's own discussion: "I was exploring letter overlays. I was interested in the play of the light through the letters and what happened to the form of a letter when it overlapped with itself" (Out-Posts, 23).) The letter itself appears within a black frame on the page (more on this later).

The commentary, "poetry being at a dead end poet" (ABC), runs across the very top of the page where the presumed *A* appears (See Figure 2.3), but the commentary runs outside the inner black frame on the page. Because it remains outside the frame, the commentary appears to refuse to acknowledge or to privi-

lege the letter contained within the frame. But the manifesto's first line also violates the frame of the page.

The manifesto neither begins at the left-hand side nor aligns itself vertically with the inner frame. The line drops off the page's right-hand side, leaving an apparently incomplete word and disrupting accepted notions of 'white space' on that side. Subsequent pages pick up on the manifesto, although not necessarily at the point where the manifesto leaves off (referentially or visually) on the previous page. The almost arbitrary appearance and disappearance of the manifesto, outside the inner black frame of the page, and often outside the frame of the page proper, gives the odd sensation that another, inaccessible reality exists beyond the frame of the page.

On other pages, the manifesto also runs vertically on the right or left sides of the margin, or on the top or bottom of the page, or, in other variations, faces either in, out, up, or down. The changing positions of the words engage a process of breaking free of boundaries that, in conventional uses of the page, threaten to frame and freeze. Nichol's creative use of typography makes an unequivocal statement about the restrictive nature of language, beginning with its smallest element, the alphabet. By repeatedly establishing, then smashing, the reader's pre-

conceived notions about the letters of the alphabet as a basis to language, Nichol drives the point unerringly home.

The book's final page re-states the manifesto in a construction parallel to that on the first page; however, the body of the text here is crammed towards the bottom (rather than the top) of the imposed inner black frame. As a result, *ABC* sandwiches a deconstructed alphabet between a declaration of the poem's demise - "we accept finally the fact of the poem's death" - that urges the reader to break down the "artificial boundaries between ourselves and the poem" (Manifesto). As accepted strategies of reading and perceiving deteriorate, we come to understand the letter as an "originating function" and perceive that "creation is a perpetual act" (Henderson, 19). The commentary's argument that "the fact of the poem's death" frees us "to live the poem" (Manifesto) suggests that Nichol is exploring new possibilities of the poem and that he invites us to accompany him in this quest.

In an early exploration of the difficulties of language translation, bp Nichol and co-composer Steve McCaffery sought to access a "non-verbal pragmatic sign formula" in order to "by-pass" the need for translation" by "utilizing such shapes and non-verbal elements as possess maximum semantic possibilities" (Translation, 84). *ABC* is an early exploration of how to move towards non-verbal alternatives,

although its material springs from semantic constructions. Some of bp Nichol's most exciting explorations of iconic expression (which we will explore later) come elsewhere in his radical transformations and expansions of the alphabet, as manifested in his letter drawings in *Love: a book of remembrances.* The text of *ABC* utilizes some words, sentence structures, and paragraph structures in the form of a statement to make its own statement (and even it, in turn, is continually challenged and overturned!); *Love: a book of remembrances* departs from a dependence on any ordinary use of language to construct meaning almost exclusively from letters employed as self-presenting icons. The shift from letters as representative of pre-constructed thought, to visual configurations that must be independently considered, begins in the first chapter, "Ghosts."

"Ghosts" consists of several letters copied from gravestones by the utilization of a 'rubbing' technique that transfers only the edges and raised portions of the letter to the paper. Because of the method of copying, some of the letters in "Ghosts," which at first are clearly discernible - among them, *M* and *Y*, and possibly *O* and *R* - by the end of chapter one disappear under the effects of the rubbing process. The process suggests that what exists on the page is always only a copy or re-presentation of the letter, but never its reality. The letters are but a ghostly impression and, we see, even that spectre can be lost in the process of reproduc-

tion. There is a play on a Derridean concept of difference in the progressive deterioration of letters throughout the chapter. The ghostly letters remain elusive, lacking in definition.

The idea of absence, again reminiscent of Derridian language theory, is explored further in Nichol's chapter two, "Frames." "Frames" plays with ideas of being, reality, fiction, and the paradoxical ideas of inside and outside. In chapter one, the letters' images appear as a shadowy memory of their former existences. In chapter two, the written word and visual image struggle with each other for primacy and sometimes appear to engage in a battle to negate each other's visual and verbal existences. Some frames are more clearly linguistic and deconstructive, calling attention to what the actual frames do and how such visual signs can control our 'reading' of them. All the frames, simply by their appearance in a book, call into question our conventional notions of what happens there.

As an example, the hand-drawn frame of *Frame 4* depicted here appears to be a last line of defense, struggling to keep the word, 'outside,' from trespassing on the visual space of the frame. The emptiness within the frame suggests ~~that~~

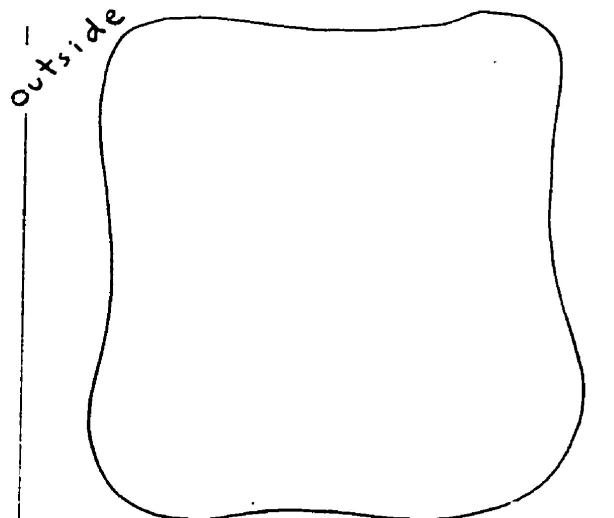


Figure 2.4 Frame 4

that the graphic images, defeated, have fled before the imminence of a written onslaught, have themselves become 'outside.' By *Frame 10*, lexical expressions enter into the hand-drawn frame and entirely displace graphic images, as though written words have successfully violated the inner frame to overtake visual space. But the question remains: what is 'outside'? The conflict between the visual and verbal elements suggests a parallel to our own debates about what

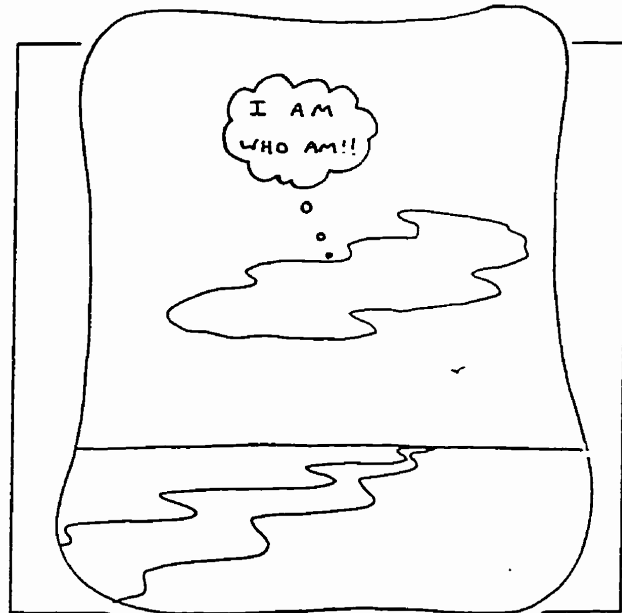


Figure 2.5 Frame 10

should remain 'outside' the realm of conventional notions of reading and writing. *Frame 4* (Figure 2.4, above) for instance, holds a voice 'outside' the frame. Later frames contradict the idea of a voice that exists 'outside' a frame by illustrating that frames exist everywhere and that 'outside' exists only in a relative sense. The frame shown on the following page entitled, '*Frame 9 & 12*,' attempts to offer a compromise between the written world and the visual, but *Frame 13*, also illustrated on the following page, implies that "there is no relationship."

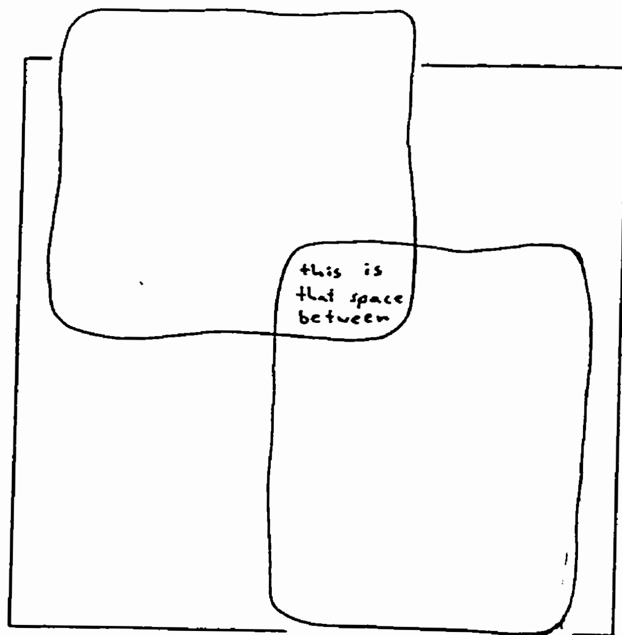


Figure 2.6 Frame 9 & 12

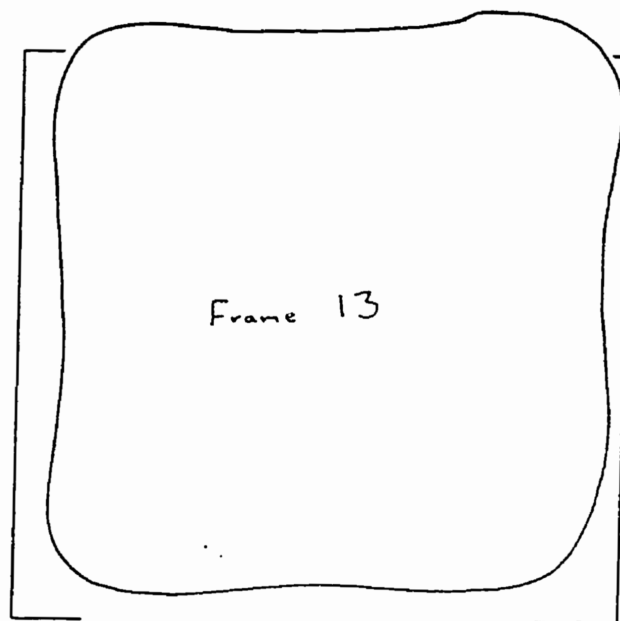


Figure 2.7 Frame 13

By the end of this series, the reader is left with the unsettling suggestion that reality defines itself through a thin black frame of language and through a consciousness, neither of which we, like the cloud, can ever hope objectively to understand or assess, and both of which, again like the cloud, contain and shape what we are and how we are able to perceive the world.

The second-last chapter of *Love, a book of remembrances*, entitled "love poems," mediates the shift into the final chapter, "Allegories." In "love poems," a 'reading' of sentence fragments and individual letters presents itself, forcing the reader to utilize independent letters as 'words' to be 'read.' By the time we reach the last chapter, "Allegories," the words and letters present themselves as a self-referential code, "words as they are simply words . . . HAPPILY BUSY . . . N O T I N G N O T H I N G!!" (Allegories #6, #10, and #18). Letters, once understood in a referential sense in the earlier chapters, must now be understood in and of themselves by the time we reach the final chapter. Nichol challenges the reader to abandon any particular authority that words and letters convey and to recognize that any determination about language necessarily comes from within the system of language and, as such, cannot be objective. The problem for the reader, like the problem for the cloud, is that, since we articulate and come to understand our existences through language, we are restricted by the frame of language. The

frame, however, is often invisible to us. This invisibility contributes to our mistaken belief in the objectivity, inevitability and the stability of what we present in language. Like the cloud, blinded by its comic-strip frame to our voyeuristic presence, we too assert, " I am who am!!" We do see, however, that Nichol views his task as one that invites new 'readings' of letters, readings that lead us to question our accepted notions of truth, reality, meaning, and knowledge and to acknowledge their subjective origins.

Allegory #4 continues to stab at our belief in the objectivity and stability of language. *Allegory #4* presents a three-dimensional 'T' that appears to contain its own world or, at least, a self-contained narrative potential. The top bar to the 'T' offers a glimpse of a comic strip frame, similar to those found in chapter two. The 'bubble cloud' floating out from the 'T' suggests that an individual exists inside the letter, ostensibly unaware of our presence. Further discontinuities add to the difficulty to definitively interpret the meaning of the allegory. The 'shadow' of the 'T' is white rather than black and its

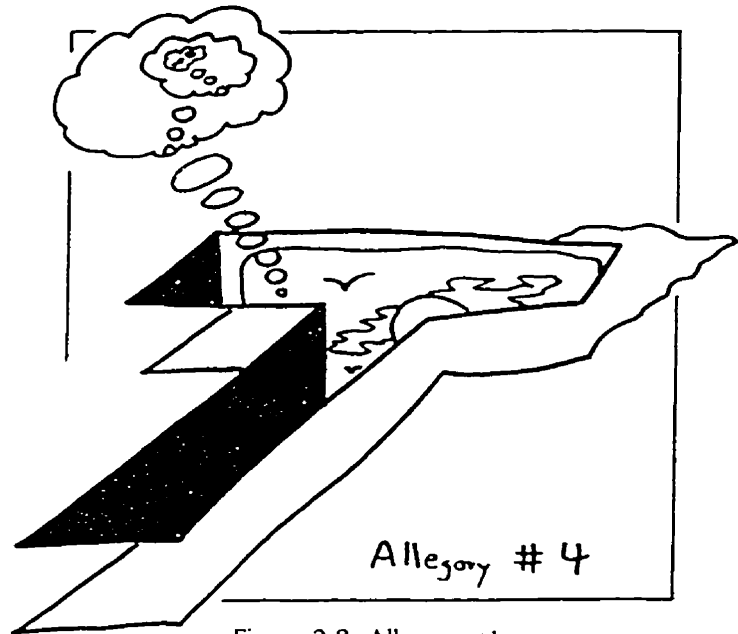


Figure 2.8 Allegory #4

upper right edge, unexpectedly torn, inaccurately reflects the 'T' shape. The black sections on the left side of the 'T' proper give the appearance of depth, but the outer image of the 'T' in the upper left arm contradicts that suggestion. There appears to be a paradoxically empty space between the inside and the outside of the 'T.' It is unclear whether any point of reference in *Allegory #4* can resolve these contradictions. The contradictions suggest that no particular 'reading' exists for the letter, and in this 'T' at least, multiple 'readings' and multiple realities co-exist. Each reality seems oblivious to any other reality. In effect, the contradictions in the individual letters reflect themselves in language as a whole and cast doubt upon any self-assured assumptions about meaning. Our glimpse into the world of the letter 'T,' and its unpredictable shadows, destabilizes our notions about 'T.' If the world of 'T' is ever partly-present but also ever partly-absent to us, how can any determinate notions of language, and more - truth, reality, and meaning - be resolved?

Allegory #28 (Figure 2.9) offers another example of the contradictions that may exist in language. Here, the capital letters *O*, *D* and *E* have miscast shadows. The letter *O* has a shadow behind it but also a shadow that is perpendicular to it. The first (expected) shadow is black, but the second shadow is white and thinly outlined in black.

The capital letter *D* throws a shadow in front of itself. By contrast, the letter *O*, which stands beside the *D*, and presumably receives light from the same direction, throws its shadow in the opposite direction (in fact, twice, and in two, different directions!). To add to our uncertainty and confusion, the shadow of the *D* actually appears in lower case as a tipped over *d*. The letter *E* throws a pattern of multiple and contradicting shadows similar to the *D*'s, laying its shadow as an 'F,' which would be generated in a direction inverse to the D/p.

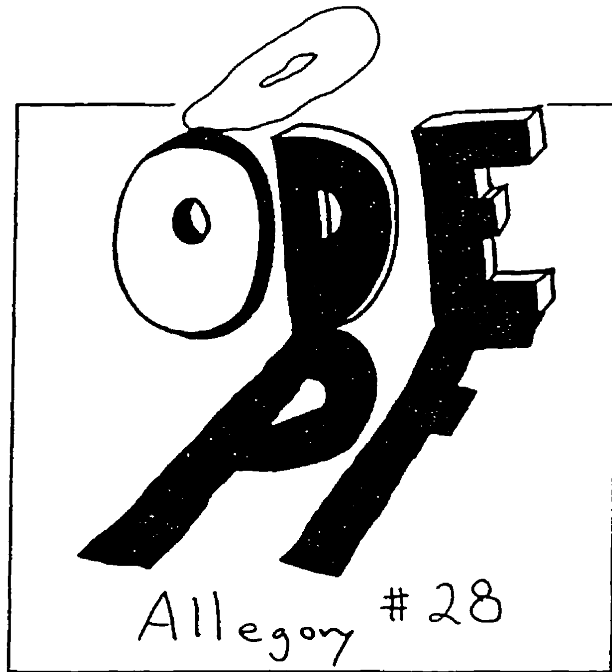


Figure 2.9 Allegory #28

Through a fluctuating and disorienting play of light and shadow, depth and surface, the *Allegory* series depicts our basic lettering system as illusory and untrustworthy. The *Allegory* series repeatedly throws into question the system that the 'reader' traditionally employs to create meaning. A gap always looms between our familiar understanding of the letter and what, upon careful investigation, we might otherwise find there. But it is toward the gap that Nichol beckons - to a

place where word and world collapse and the reader can create significance more on her own terms.

It is telling that Nichol presents *Allegories* as a comic-strip. The use of comic strip elements intrigues Nichol because he feels that the visual strip sequence by-passes the syntactic requirements of language and offers, instead, a visual code that can be more directly 'read' and understood:

> The familiar grammatical line alters in passing through a comic-strip world. A tension arises between two different types of syntax: the grammatical which has the word for basic unit and the spatial, pictorial unit of the strip frame. (Prose 3, 41)

To the ghosts found in chapter one of *Love, a book of remembrances*, whose traditional syntax lingers within a single linear frame, Nichol suggests an alternative position of the multiple frames of the comic strip:

> The frame is the sign of its own containment. . . in conventional writing the signifiers refer outward to their signifieds. In comic strips what is signified is contained within the strip. Write the word "tree" and the signified refers to a space outside the page. Surround the word with a speech balloon and have it spoken by a man staring at a tree, then the signified moves in, to become interiorized as a specific drawn tree . . . what we stress is that there is no such thing as "realistic" writing . . . the frame functions both as syntactic unit and receptacle of content, the movement is inwards

> to the referent (what is contained within the frame) and outwards to the syntactic constituency (one frame alongside other frames). (Prose 3, 44)

Nichol presents *Allegories* this way because, as he argues, the comic-strip format holds forth the possibility of the "existence of another world of printed, syntactic convention which operates outside many of the axioms of traditional literature" (Prose 3, 44). Nichol argues that the movement towards interpretation and understanding as they operate in the comic strip world remains fundamentally opposed to that of traditional literature. In the comic strip, words refer only to elements contained within a single frame of the comic strip. A reader would not likely mistake a reference to a 'tree' within a comic strip as a reference to a tree outside the comic-strip. Rather, the reader acknowledges and applies word elements and references as they apply exclusively within the frame.

To progress beyond a single comic-strip frame, however, the reader depends on a cue that lies external to the comic strip element, that is the frame. The frame surrounding each comic strip unit propels the reader sequentially through a comic. When the reader completes one frame, s/he progress towards the next. By contrast, in non-comic-strip writing, individual words gesture outwards to the external world, but progress linearly and sequentially by their internal grammatical structuring.

According to Nichol, several implications arise from the comic strip's differing structural dynamic. First, the need for description is nearly eliminated because there is a synthesis of words and images that allows a visual understanding of the action: "a dark street can be depicted without the need to write 'the street is dark'" (Prose 3, 45). Then, because of the insular nature of the individual frames that constitute the comic strip, "time sense" can readily be distorted. 'Meanwhile' is an often-employed, ambiguous announcement of time change. Nichol employs techniques that distort time sense in the comic-strip elements found in *Two Novels* (as one example). An expression like 'meanwhile' is acceptable in the framework of a comic-strip; in traditional literature, however, the reader expects the work to ground itself in real time. Background settings change from one comic unit to the next without announcement or the background settings are so ambiguous that time becomes uncertain. The two comic strips that follow (Figures 2.10 and 2.11) excerpted from Nichol's novel, *Andy*, illustrate these ideas.

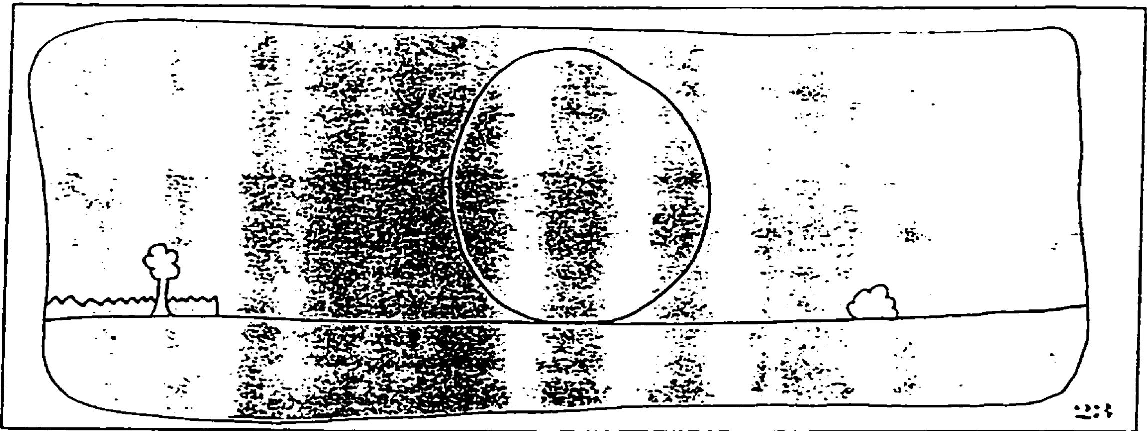


Figure 2.10 Andy

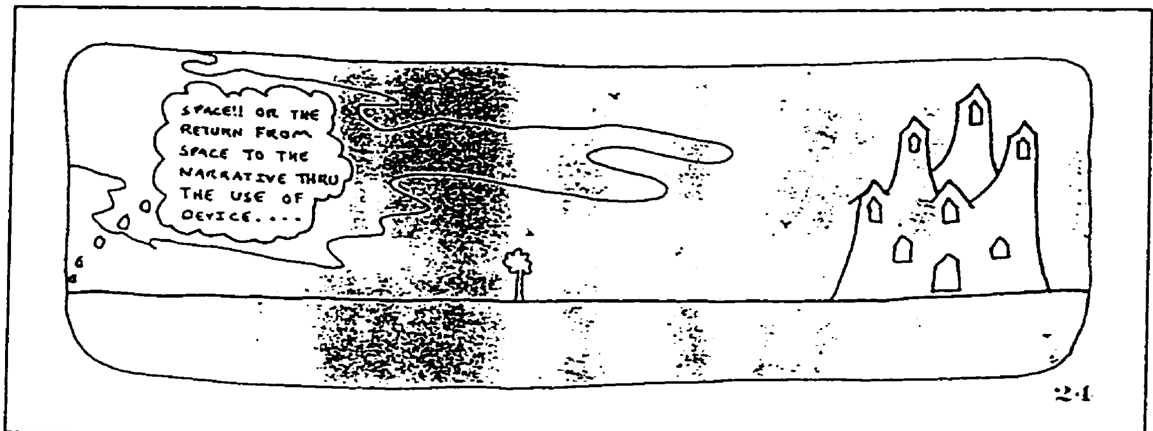
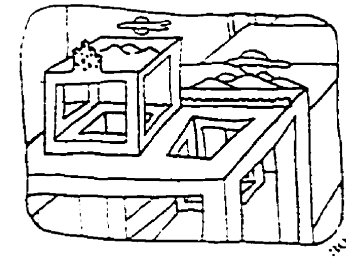
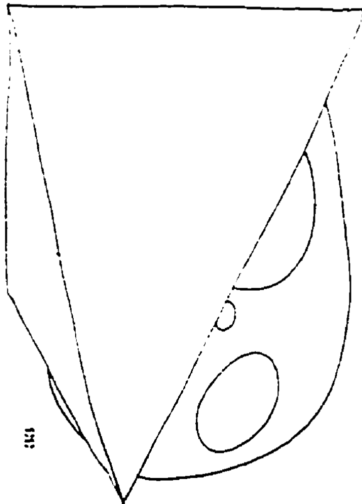


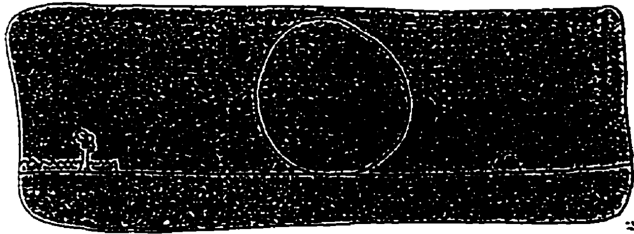
Figure 2.11 Andy

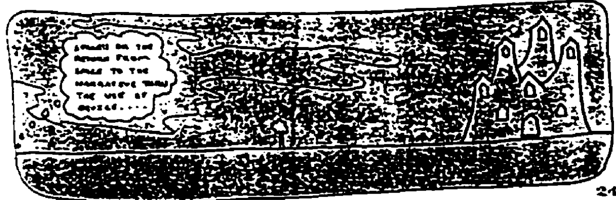
The above comic strips, and comic strips generally, manifest other characteristics markedly different from traditional fictional texts. Characters rarely age over time; *Dagwood* has not aged in forty years (an exception exists in the comic strip *For Better or Worse*, whose characters have aged in recent years). Time sequencing can be enacted through the use of frames as the reader moves from one comic-strip unit to the next. Grammatical sequencing can easily be manipulated. The frames can act like a sentence, each comic unit 'adding up' to a meaning by the end of the strip. Frames can be nested within each other (thought 'bubbles,' for instance), overlaid on top of one another, set in confrontation with each other, or constructed as individual and self-contained units that may either parallel, complement, or have nothing to do with each other. Finally, comic-strip collages can construct a kind of metalanguage. In one frame, numerous individual, self-contained units of action can co-exist which, when 'read,' visually complete the story. Figure 2.12 (following page), the central page of *Two Novels*, illustrates just such a metalanguage construct.

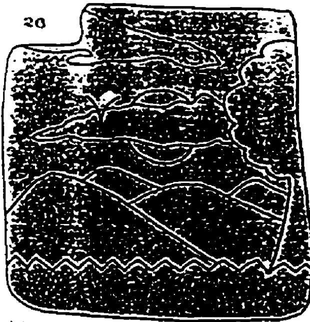


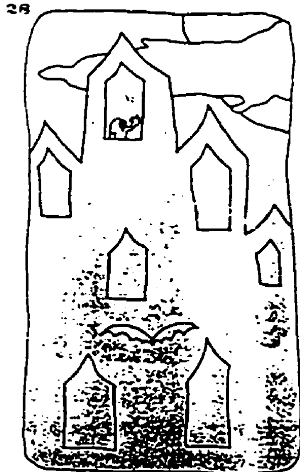


the numbers beside these illustrations by the author
correspond with those in ANDY — please cut them out
(the other side of this paper is sticky, lick it) and place
the illustrations carefully in place — we recommend









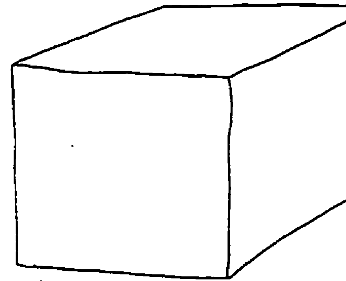
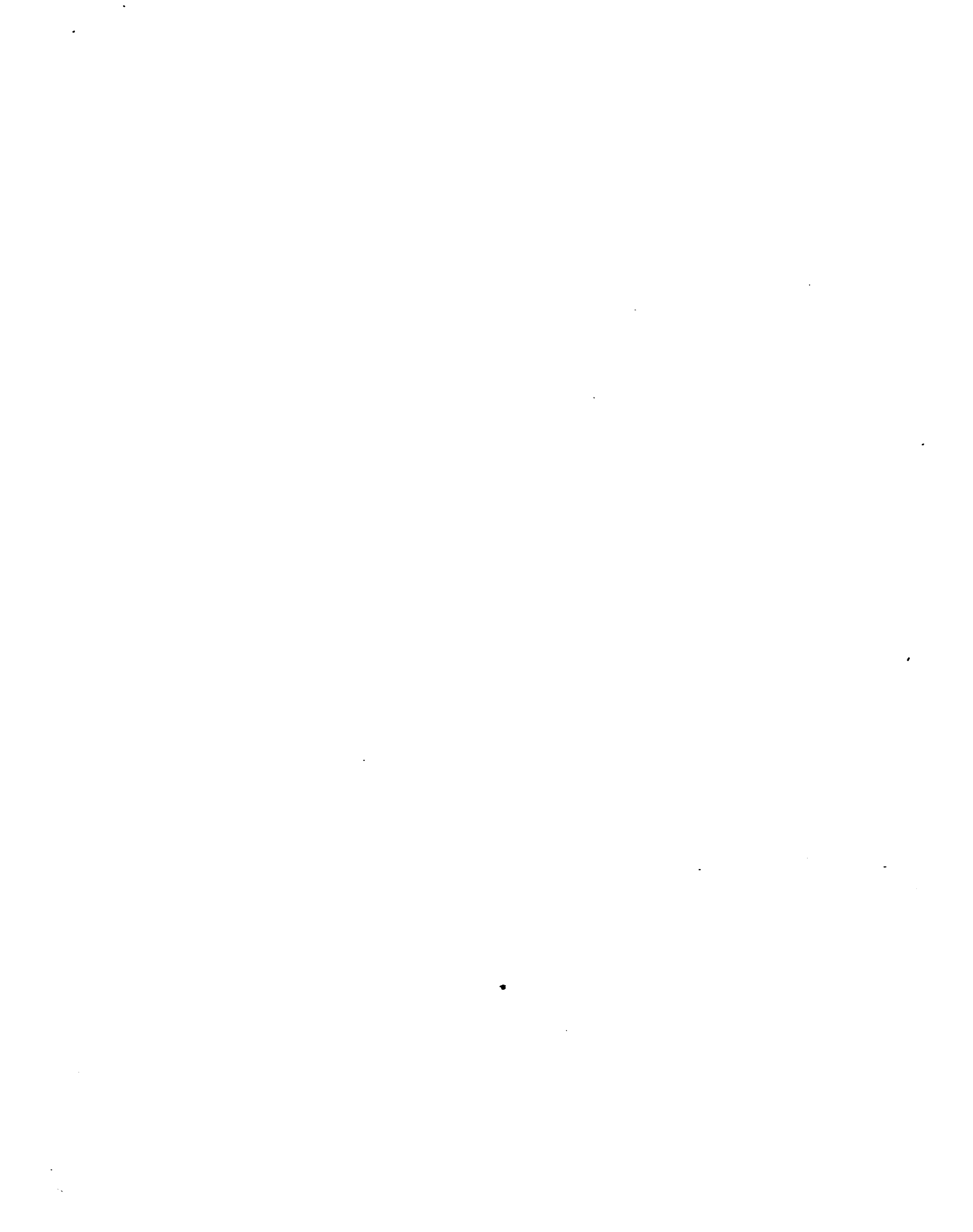


Figure 2.12 Two Novels



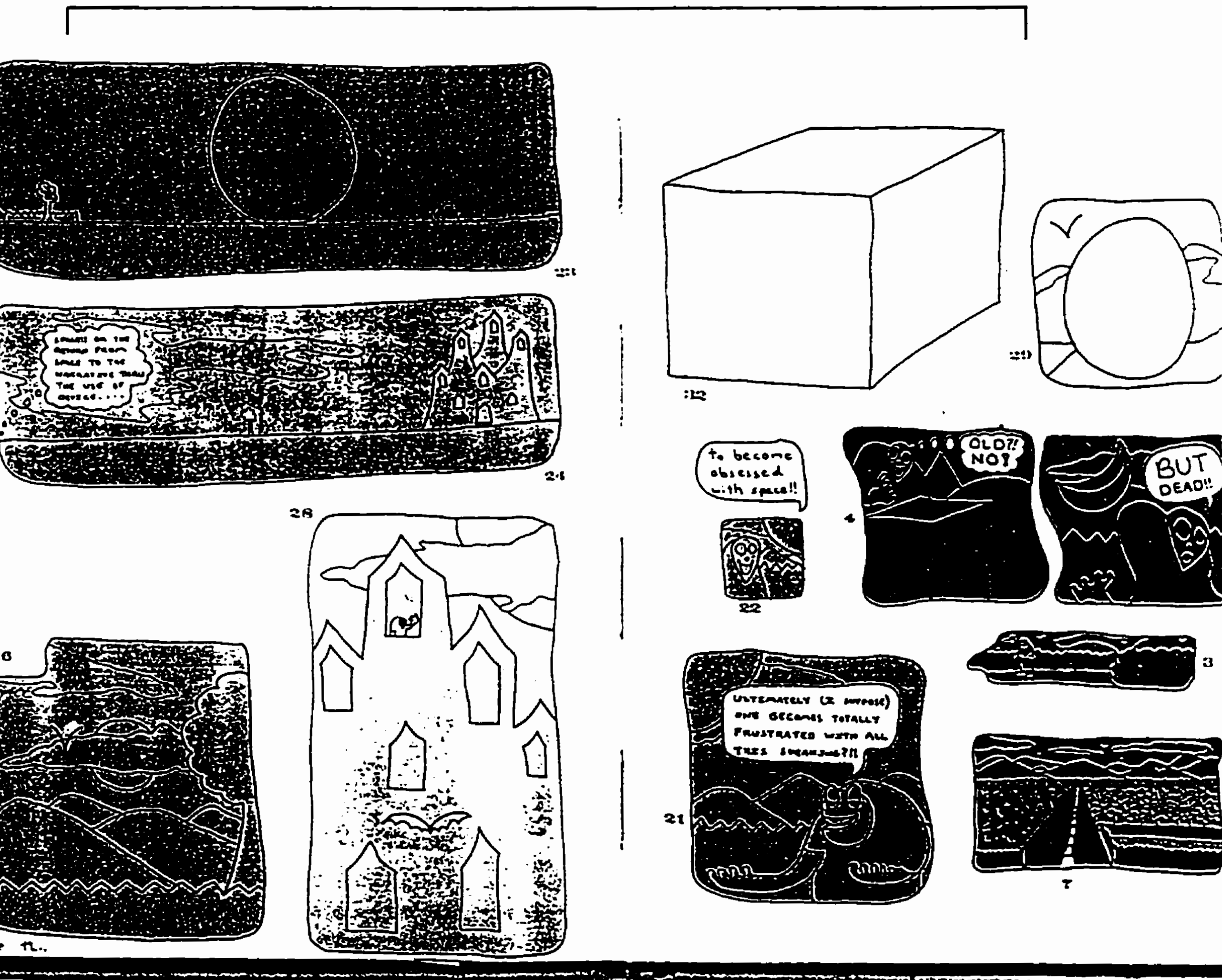
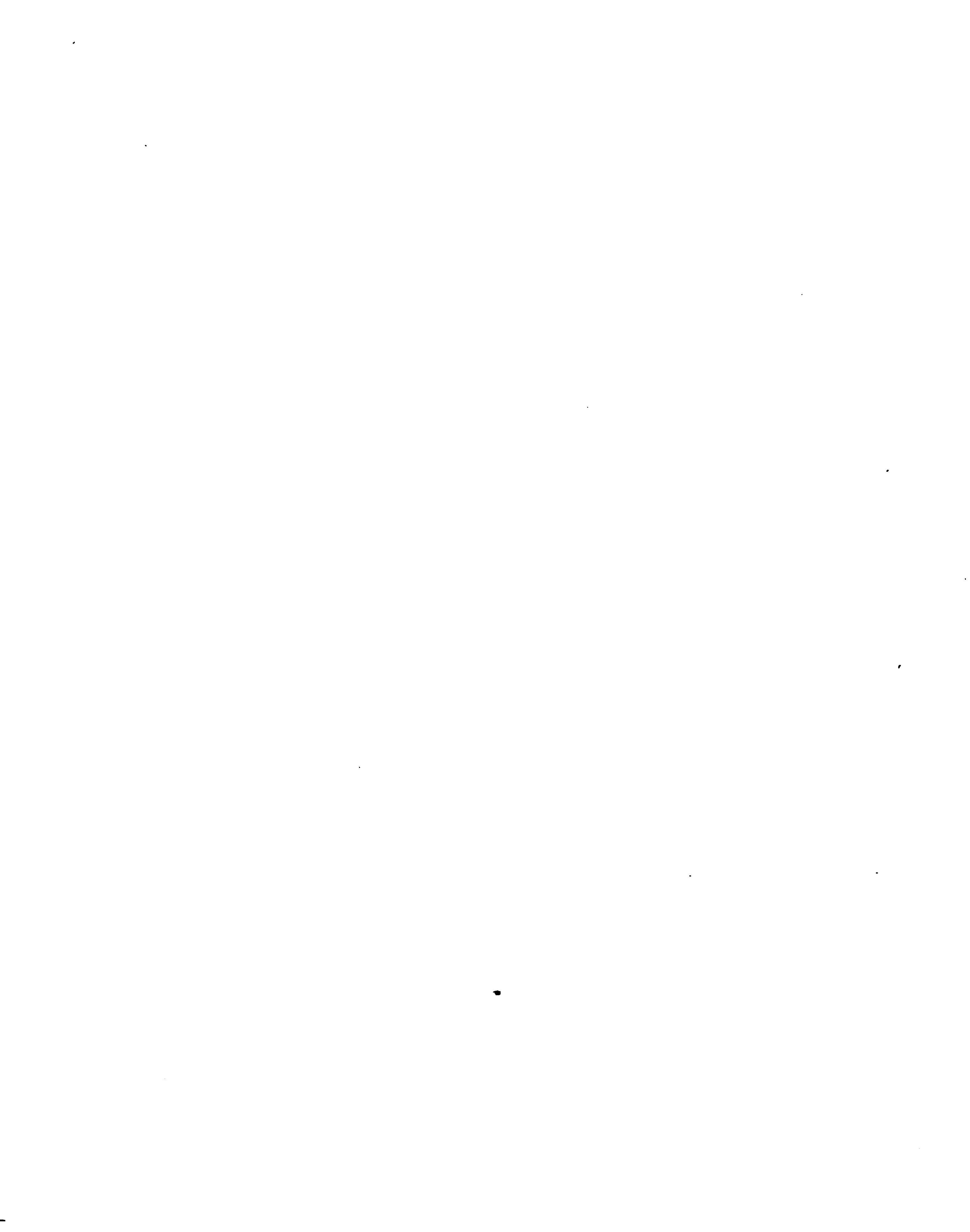


Figure 2.12 Two Novels



Nichol and McCaffery liken the strategy illustrated in Figure 2.12 to the often numerous written commentaries found in the margins of a medieval manuscript, placed there by many different hands over the lifetime of a work. Like the comic collage, these commentaries refer "out to other texts" and the book becomes a "single term in the larger code of 'text' which itself becomes the externalized bone structure of the book" (Prose 3, 52).

Nichol's unusual materials and methods to produce or disturb 'meaning' make us conscious of the normative readings and perceiving processes that we engage in. By disrupting those processes, Nichol illustrates how often we are the unconscious subjects of learned operating systems. 'Meaning' that we came to *see* in reading, we now recognize under Nichol's tutelage, does not necessarily originate *in* us but, more often, filters *through* us. Nichol makes these systems apparent to the reader by disabling systematized reading/perceiving tactics along lines related to what Russian Formalists first identified to diagnose the habit of systematized reading and perceiving.

The early Russian Formalist movement detected two critical problems: the tendency towards "over-automatized" responses on the part of the reader and the lack of any recognition and understanding of the two distinctive elements constituting the sign - the signifier and signified. Russian Formalist critic Victor

Shklovsky noted that "as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic . . our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic" and "the object" "fades" until "even the essence of what it was is forgotten" (11). Poetry, Shklovsky asserted, should awaken the reader to his/her over-automatized responses and emphasize the discrepancies between the signifier and the signified:

> the function of poetry is to point out that the sign is not identical with its referent . . . along with the awareness of the identity of the sign and the referent . . .we need the consciousness of the inadequacy of this identity . . . this antinomy is essential, since without it the connection between the sign and the object becomes automatized and the perception of reality withers away. (Shklovsky, 181)

Similarly, bp Nichol disrupts the operating system that encourages an unconscious consumption of the text when he seeks to arrest the "obsolete way of seeing language" that results in "over-automatized" responses (Shklovsky, 181). Nichol then propels the reader towards a new way of seeing that places emphasis on "the single page as a radically modifiable surface" (Prose, 85), invites the reader into a "search for significance" and towards the "unacknowledged present through which twentieth-century literature has moved." Shockingly, according to Nichol, this present may include insanity: "we enter the world of psychosis, of unsure footing . . . that realm where the building blocks exist and must be questioned; where we teeter always on the brink of revelations that remove our footing"

(Prose, 76). Nonetheless, Nichol invites us to engage writing at the level of the word and the page itself to discover for ourselves language's "moment of origination" (Henderson, 1). The material elements at the 'surface' of the page play a critical role in this originating moment.

Nichol utilizes one of those elements, 'white space,' to explore the possibilities of the page. As the next chapter will show, white space acts to create spatial and temporal sequences and to radically disrupt the time sequence of a passage in a text.

Chapter Three The function of space on the page and across the text

so the question arises
in any narrative what
does all this bl--k space
mean?

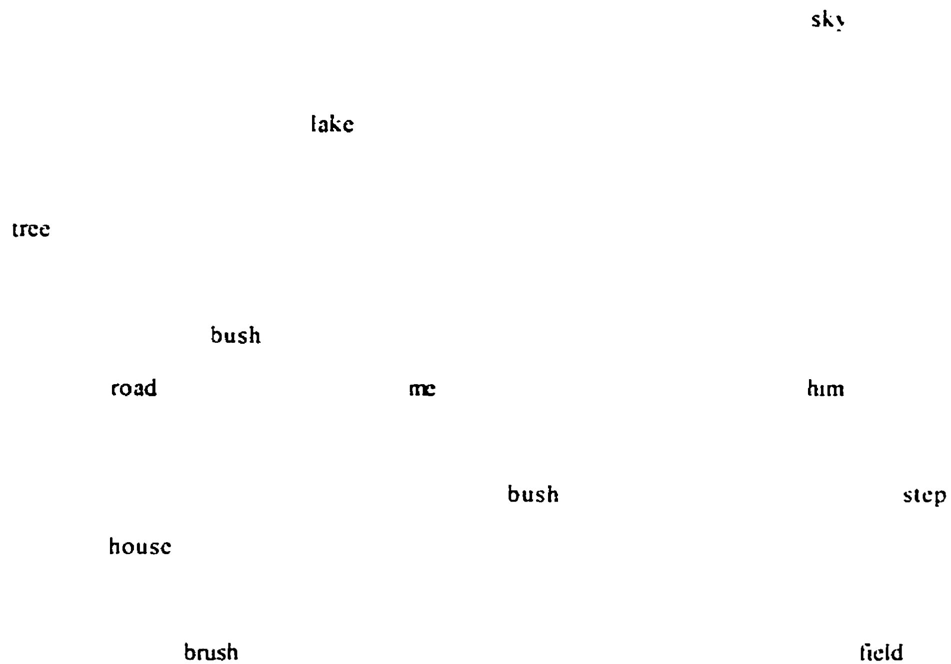
Steve McCaffery & bp Nichol
Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-machine

The concept of spatial form in literature has remained contentious since it gained currency in a 1945 essay by Joseph Frank entitled "Spatial Form in Modern Literature." Frank's basic premise is that some modernist literary works (including the literature of Eliot, Pound, Proust and Joyce) are spatial insofar as they prefer simultaneity over sequentiality. Frank founds his argument on a time/space distinction initially articulated by G. E. Lessing in *Laocoon* (1766). Observing that literature and the plastic arts manifest themselves in different mediums, Lessing argues that the fundamental laws governing their creation must also differ. Lessing notes that the means of aesthetic perception by which an art form is perceived will be occasioned by its form of expression. Literature, he argues, is perceived through language which unfolds itself through time, and so the form best suited to literary expression is narrative sequence. Similarly, since form in the plastic arts is perceived simultaneously through space, it can best realize itself through a spatial expression.

Lessing was criticizing two art forms, pictorial poetry and allegorical painting, that were popular at the time. Pictorial poetry included graphic elements in its expression, while allegorical painting employed verbal elements, a 'mixing' of spatial and temporal elements with which Lessing disagreed. Frank notes that the value of Lessing's work is twofold: Lessing recognized that "form issues spontaneously from the organization of the art work as it presents itself to perception" and that "time and space are the defining limits of literature and the plastic arts in their relation to sensuous perception" (Gyre, 8). Frank uses Lessing's distinction to illustrate how modern poetry's expressive thrust, manifested particularly in Imagist poetry, moves in the direction of spatial form.

Ezra Pound, a leading theorist of the Imagist movement and a practitioner of Modern Poetry, defines an image as some thing that presents "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." Frank points out that this definition requires the "unification of disparate ideas and emotions . . . presented spatially in an instant of time" (Gyre, 9). As a result, Frank writes, aesthetic form in modern poetry is based on a "space-logic" within which the temporal nature of language is continually disrupted and "the meaning-relationship is completed only by the simultaneous perception in space of word-groups that have no comprehensive relation to each other when read consecutively in time" (Gyre, 13). Nichol's *Extreme Positions* (1969) de-

velops a pictorial poem that relies on just such a space-logic structure for meaning. In the segment presented below, an entire setting readily unfolds before the reader's eyes, yet the 'narrative' defies any linear, cumulative reading though the words, "sky," "lake," "tree," "bush," "road," "me," "him," bush," "step," "house." "brush," and "field," do share certain elements which might be linearly analyzed to produce a certain kind of 'meaning':



Extreme Positions (1969)
bp Nichol

The words in the above text are all (potentially) nouns or pro-nouns; they are all single-syllable. The sense of the piece falls into place only when the reader resists exercising any temporal closure on the disparate words and allows, additionally, a word-picture to form.

Extreme Positions reveals the story of a *ménage à trois* in vivid word-pictures which implement the space-logic structure described by Frank. An understanding of the piece can be achieved through the recognition of the internal relationships among word-groups as they operate on and across the space of the page. In a related excerpt from *Extreme Positions*, (Figure 3.1), a single word "eye" is placed alone on one page facing the words "moon . . . tree . . . shh . . . (adow)" on the adjacent page. The careful placement of the lone word "eye" on one page, physically separated and perhaps, therefore, 'watching' the activity of the second, facing page, suggests the presence of an unseen and (possibly) unknown voyeur. Further meticulous placement of the words "moon," "tree," "(adow)," in their respective spaces to the right-hand side of the second page, suggests a scene of stillness and silence. The use of "shh," mark of an expressive sound, further emphasizes the silence and secrecy and indicates the presence of at least two individuals. Their meeting under the moon, at night, in silence, suggests a romantic, if not an illicit, encounter. The physical movement of the reader's eye across the space of the page from "shh," under the revealing light of the

moon, to "(adow)," under the concealing darkness of the tree, suggests the lovers' initial encounter and subsequent movement towards privacy and secrecy in the shh(adow) of the tree.

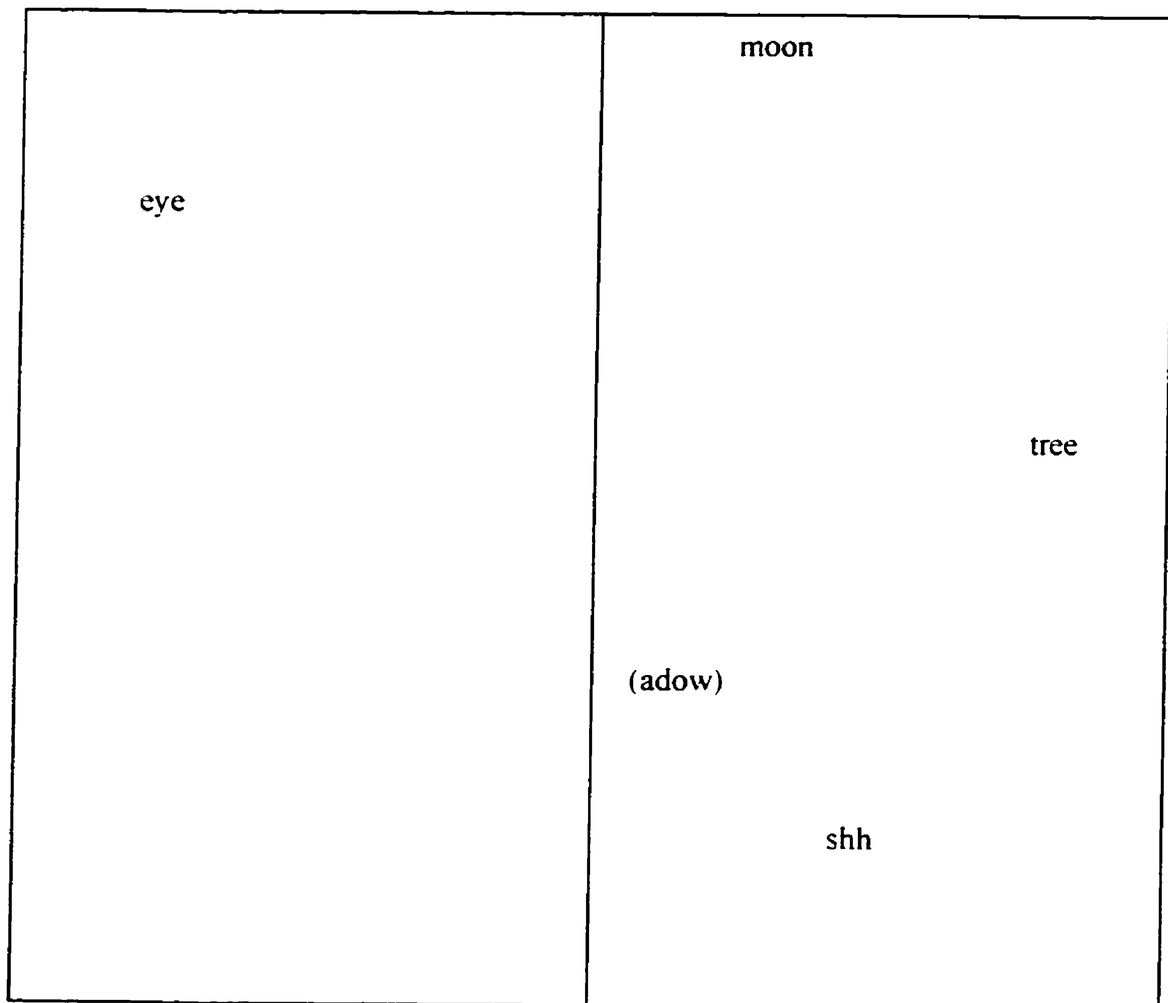


Figure 3.1 Extreme Positions
It is important to recognize that *two* pages are represented here, facing one another. The lone word 'eye' appears on one page facing the words, 'moon,' 'tree,' '(adow),' and 'shh.' The words are reproduced as they appear in the text, but it is difficult to recapture the visual and sensorial impact of the placement of 'eye,' alone on the page. In the original text, the 'eye' gives the uncanny impression that it is 'watching' the 'scene' on the facing page.

For bp Nichol, the page is an "active space" and "a meaningful element in the compositional process." Further, its physical size and shape are "significant variables" (Narrative, 117). *Extreme Positions* reflects a clear preoccupation with word placement, textual appearance and the use of space. The reader cannot help but take into account the printed appearance of the text and the dispersion of type and words across the white space of these two pages. The dominance of the white space, the minimal use of words, their careful, even spacing and placement on and across the page, impart a sense of stillness and secrecy. In particular, the position of "shh," separate and alone at the bottom of the page, instills a quiet urgency to the scene. The 'story' the poem tells cannot therefore be 'read' in the sense of a traditional narrative sequence unfolding from left-to-right and top-to-bottom through time, but instead resolves itself more through the space-logic structure identified by Frank.

In this form of expression, space becomes the primary field against which words define themselves. Taken to its extreme form (Frank uses the example of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*), such poetry forms a language of absence rather than of presence. According to Frank, that poetic form culminates in the "self-negation of language and the creation of a hybrid pictographic 'poem'" (Gyre, 13).

The following example from bp Nichol's *Still Waters* illustrates Frank's point:

```
                                              )
                                            (   )
em  ty            and                 cl (         ) ds
                                            (   )
                                              )
```

Still Waters
bp Nichol

The reader of modern literature does not come to comprehend these pieces solely through an on-going accumulation of meaning over time that elapses during linear narration; instead, as Frank remarks, the reader must "suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a [simultaneous] unity" (Gyre, 15). Defined by Frank as the principle of reflexive reference, this concept has left its impress on all later poetics, and most visibly, on many avant-garde writings.

The work of bp Nichol offers exceptional examples of the implementation of reflexive reference. Often, in a Nichol piece, the reader must perceive the elements of the work as they are juxtaposed in space. 'Meaning' must be discovered more through the internal relationships of the disparate elements within the piece, than through an unfolding in time.

bp Nichol's novel, *Two Novels*, offers another, striking example in which the reader must re-orient his/her attitude towards language and embrace the principle of acute reflexivity in order to understand the work. *Two Novels* contains two stories, *Andy* and *For Jesus Lunatick*. The novel's format disrupts nearly every possibility of a traditional temporal reading or interpretation. Right from the outset, a reader is put to the test. There is no indication from the cover's plain black binding which side of the book is the 'front' or 'back' or which way is 'up' or 'down.' Further, regardless of the 'front' the reader chooses, if the reader opens the book in a traditional, left-to-right fashion, the 'first' pages are always upside down. To begin reading in a traditional left-to-right, top-to-bottom fashion, the reader must open the book in an untraditional, right-to-left pattern, and read right-to-left towards the middle of the book, or move at least to the mid-way point of the book and begin reading either backwards or forwards from there. But even the mid-way point is difficult to determine since the page numbering is not sequential from one end of the book to the other. Once 'there,' the reader is forced again to discriminate among reading avenues (from the middle, the reader can choose at least two reading directions: left-to-right or right-to-left). If the reader chooses to determine the mid-way point by reference to the collection of pages that are sandwiched between the two longer texts that appear to run upside down and towards each other from each end of the book, then yet another choice needs to be

made. These kinds of ploys occur repeatedly, disrupting the process of narrative sequencing and the reader's customary accumulation of meaning. The reader is forced to suspend a usual temporal completion and to place certain assumptions in abeyance until their discrepancies can be resolved through further internal referencing.

Once the reader reaches a mid-way point of the novel, if s/he continues her examination in a left-to-right pattern, she realizes that the sandwiched pages consist of several blank pages, six pages of numbered graphic elements mounted on 'sticky' paper, a copyright page, and one more blank page. The reader can remain with these pages and attempt to determine if they are a self-contained unit. If the reader again continues in a left-to-right, 'front'-to-'back' reading pattern, she discovers that the story, *Andy*, begins immediately following the final blank page. The reader quickly recognizes that, although *Andy* can be read in a left-to-right fashion and made 'sense' of, if s/he wishes to read according to ascending page numbers, the reader must turn to the 'end' of the book and read backwards from right-to-left.

Should the reader choose this reading pattern, the pages would follow the standard novel format: the book's cover opens to the title page, the publisher is listed separately on the next page, as is the name of the author. The page numbers then ascend sequentially and the novel makes 'sense.' The reader can then undertake a sequential construction of meaning employing normative, temporal reading strategies.

Even that strategy comes to ruin, however, when fewer than twenty lines into the story, yet another story line interjects.

In *Andy* at least six different story lines continually interrupt each other without introduction or warning. As the time-flow of the narrative is repeatedly transgressed, the reader is forced to hold multiple story elements in conceptual space while simultaneously examining other fragments. Linear reading strategies and methods of analysis cannot resolve the resulting sense of dynamic and simultaneous action in the competing stories, or find any easy principle of abeyance. The reader must retain an awareness of competing story lines and avoid premature closure until the disparate elements reveal some form of internal logic or consistency.

Generally, the story fragments are separated by a space between segments; at other times, the story fragments and characters merge into one story line.[2] Figure 3.2

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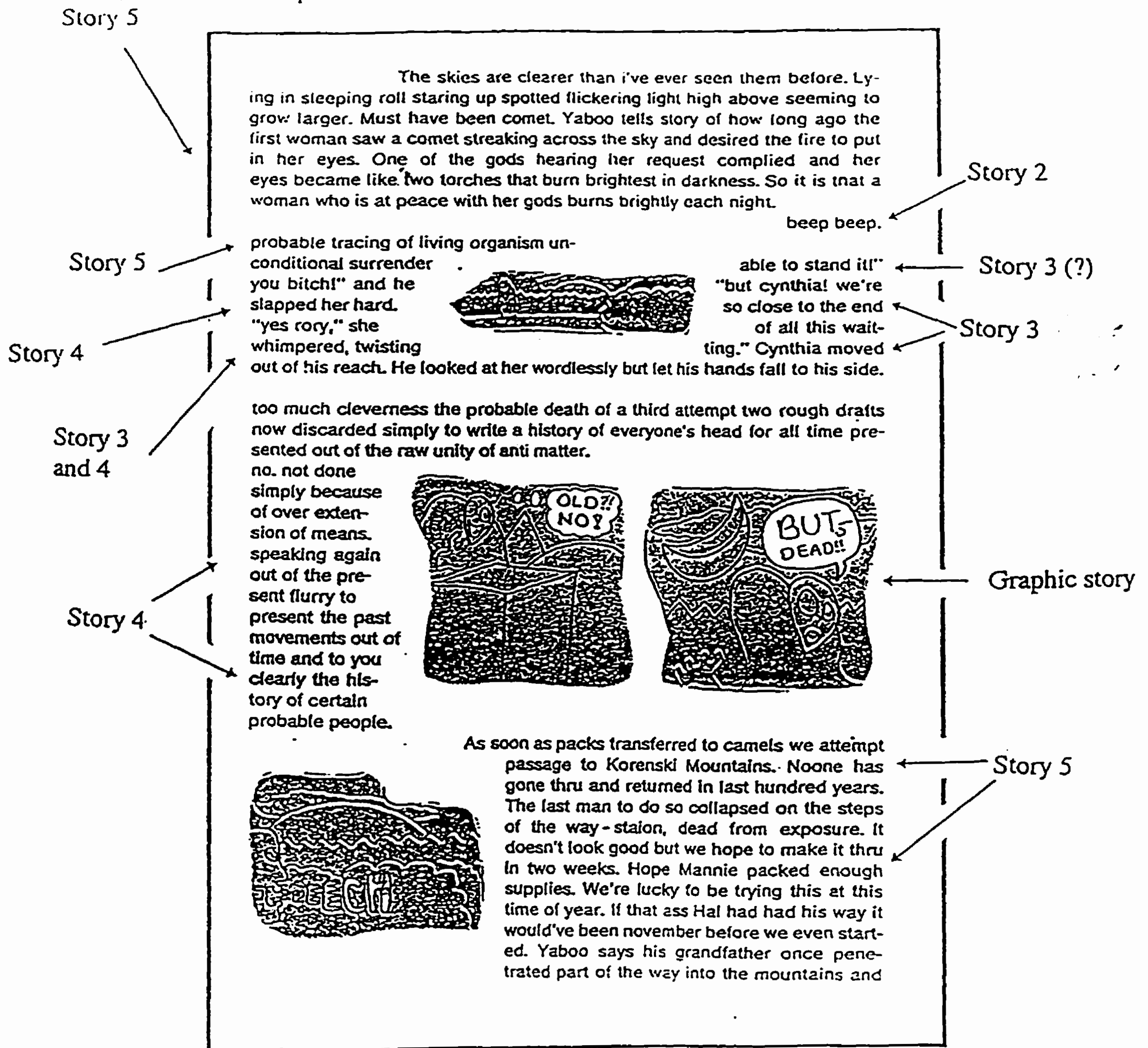
[2] My break-down of *Andy* into six story fragments includes only the text-based segments. If the graphic elements count as an independent story, then *Andy* contains seven story lines. If it is so considered, since the graphic elements interrupt and, arguably, cover-up textual segments, *Andy* becomes nothing but story fragments from pg. 10 (the story's third page) to pg. 32 (five pages from the stories' 'end'). Further, even when the reader disregards the graphic segment and arbitrarily numbers the text-based stories sequentially from 1 - 6 in order as they appear in *Andy*, merged story fragments begin to appear. These might be counted as yet more story lines. Examples of merged story lines can be found in Figure 3.1; other examples include the following: pg. 11, para. 2: Stories 2, 3, 4 merge; pg. 28, para. 1: Stories 3, 4, 5 merge; pg. 34, para 3: Stories 1, 2, 3, 5 merge; pg. 36, para 2: Stories 1, 2, 3, 4 merge. Steven Scobie, in his discussion of *Two Novels* in *bp Nichol: What History Teaches*, does not break down *Andy* in this manner at all; Jack David, in his discussion in *Writing Writing: bpNichol at 30*, in *Essays on Canadian Writing* concludes that there are only five story fragments in *Andy*; oddly, neither critic counts the graphic elements as parts of a separate story, but instead both appear to consider the graphic elements as supplementary and secondary to the text.

(following page), from *Two Novels*, illustrates this idea (the marginal numbers are my own insertion to point out where story fragments interrupt each other).



The skies are clearer than i've ever seen them before. Lying in sleeping roll staring up spotted flickering light high above seeming to grow larger. Must have been comet. Yaboo tells story of how long ago the first woman saw a comet streaking across the sky and desired the fire to put in her eyes. One of the gods hearing her request complied and her eyes became like two torches that burn brightest in darkness. So it is that a woman who is at peace with her gods burns brightly each night.

beep beep.

probable tracing of living organism unconditional surrender

you bitch!" and he slapped her hard. "yes rory," she whimpered, twisting

able to stand it!" "but cynthia! we're so close to the end of all this waiting." Cynthia moved out of his reach. He looked at her wordlessly but let his hands fall to his side.

too much cleverness the probable death of a third attempt two rough drafts now discarded simply to write a history of everyone's head for all time presented out of the raw unity of anti matter.

no. not done simply because of over extension of means. speaking again out of the present flurry to present the past movements out of time and to you clearly the history of certain probable people.

As soon as packs transferred to camels we attempt passage to Korenski Mountains. Noone has gone thru and returned in last hundred years. The last man to do so collapsed on the steps of the way-staion, dead from exposure. It doesn't look good but we hope to make it thru in two weeks. Hope Mannie packed enough supplies. We're lucky to be trying this at this time of year. If that ass Hal had had his way it would've been november before we even started. Yaboo says his grandfather once penetrated part of the way into the mountains and

Figure 3.2 Andy

The break-down of *Andy* into its different parts becomes more confusing on page ten, where successively ordered numbers, randomly scattered on blank sections, begin to appear. The blank sections and the numbers in them, can disorient the reader and, again, check the time-flow of the narrative. The numbers in the blank sections correspond to numbers beside the graphic elements found in the centre section of *Two Novels*. This suggests that the corresponding graphic element should be pasted into *Andy* where the blank sections appear. The numbers disappear by page thirty-two, five pages before the story's conclusion, in accordance with the number of graphic elements, but pages thirty-three and thirty-four still include large, unnumbered, blank segments. As the reader searches for clues to the meaning of the blank segments and their corresponding numbers, the reader may stumble across the graphic elements in the centre of the book. If so, the reader may disrupt his/her reading to re-examine these elements, again disrupting the narrative's temporal flow.

The graphic elements in the centre of the book are comic-like, slightly crude pictures which are hand-drawn in heavy black ink. Most of the graphics are uniformly coloured in shades of orange and pink; two are black and white. Some graphics incorporate word and sentence fragments notated by a 'balloon' framing device often associated with comic-strip dialogue. One page of graphic elements,

exceeding the overall size of the novel's 6"x 9" dimensions by more than four inches, folds over. When the reader unfolds the page, the bottom left corner reveals these partial instructions:

> the numbers beside these illustrations by the author correspond with those in *ANDY* — please cut them out (the other side of this paper is sticky, lick it) and place the illustrations carefully in place — we recommend
>
> *Two Novels* (1969)

The final words, "we recommend," are found at the very bottom of this page and any further recommendations are lost because the page ends. The words "use this," handwritten, and located approximately one inch to the right of the "we recommend" text, are also partially cut off. If the reader follows these instructions, not only must the reader disrupt his/her intellectual drive to temporal completion, but physically the reader must enter into a veritable 'spatial-making' of literary event through the construction-by-destruction of the novel (in a cut-and-paste of the graphic elements).

Curiously, if a reader actually does act to cut and paste the graphic elements in their marked places in *Andy*, some of them come together to shape a picture. The picture pieces, however, never quite fit each other. A close examination reveals that the picture pieces themselves appear partly cut off at either the top, sides, bottom, or all of their four edges concurrently. Like the story fragments,

then, the graphic elements are incomplete; it is always impossible to create a complete picture as Figures 3.3 to 3.6, found below and on the following pages, illustrate.

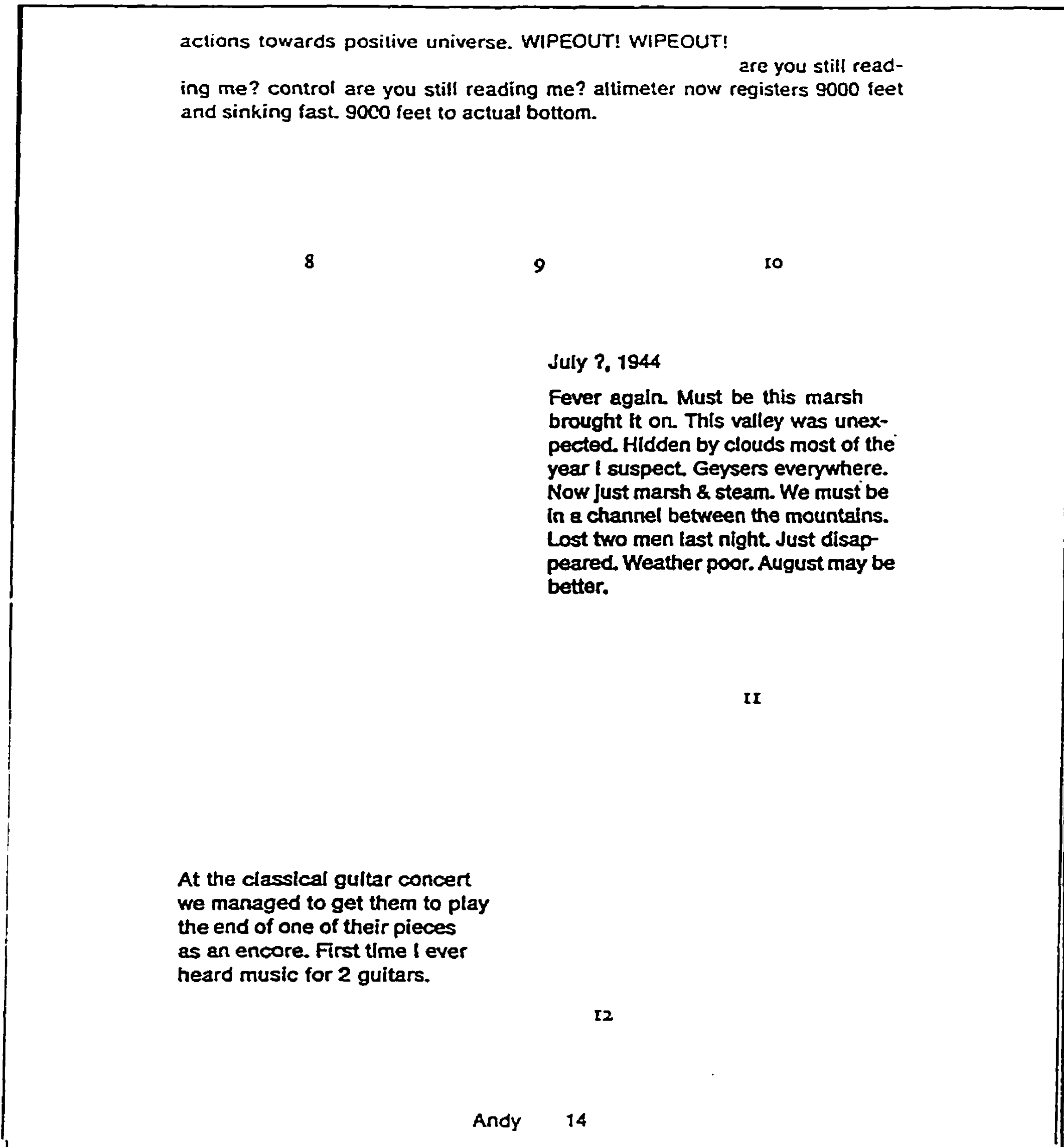


Figure 3.3 Andy

This is how page 14 in *Andy* first appears to the reader before encountering the centre section instructions to cut and paste the numbered graphic elements into place. The numbers illustrated here, within the frame, as 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, correspond to the graphic elements found elsewhere in the centre section of the book

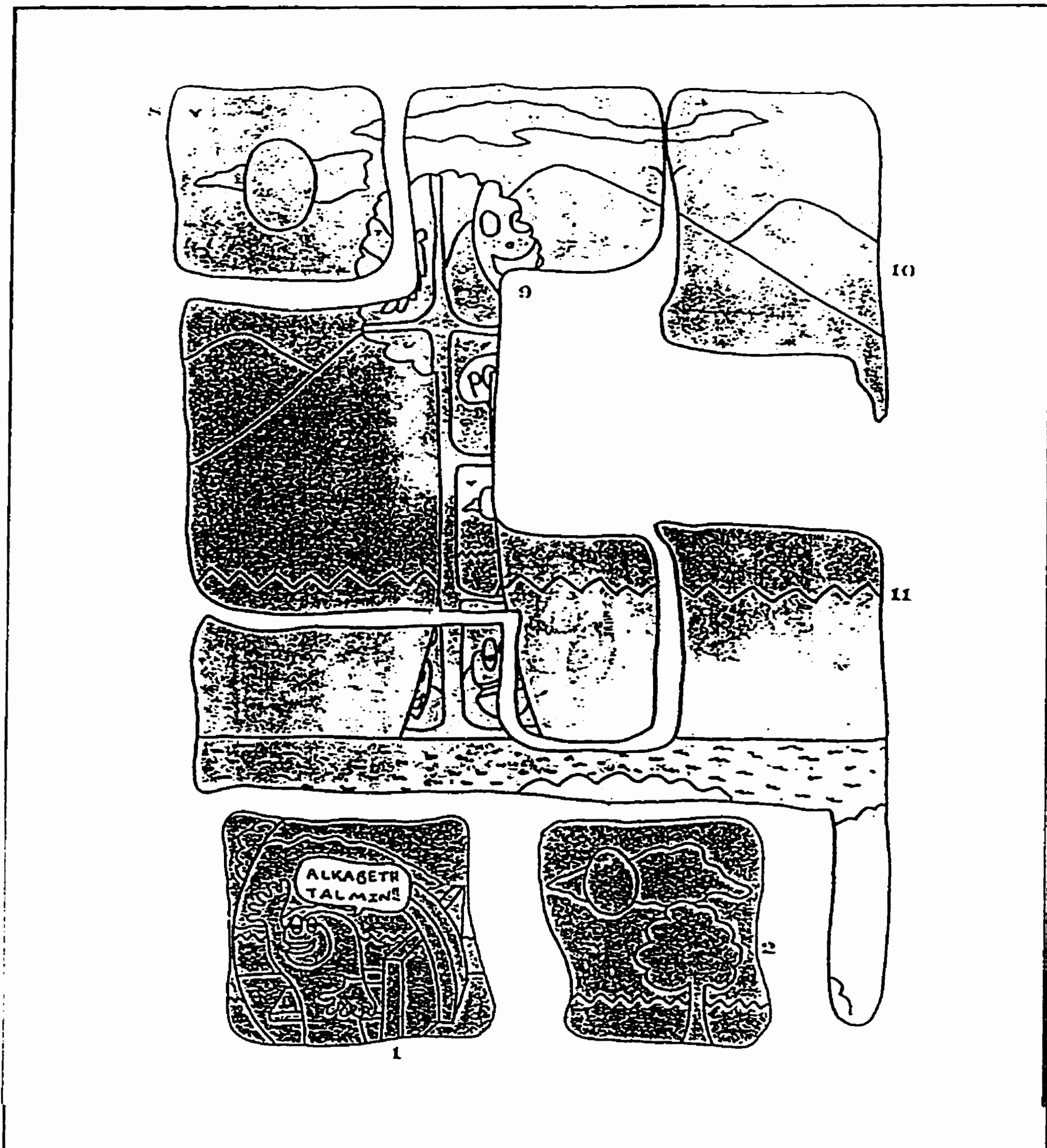


Figure 3.4 Two Novels, Centre Section I

This page from the centre section illustrates graphic elements 8-11 which the reader cuts and pastes into place on page 14 of *Andy*. The photocopy does not capture the bright purple colour of the graphics.

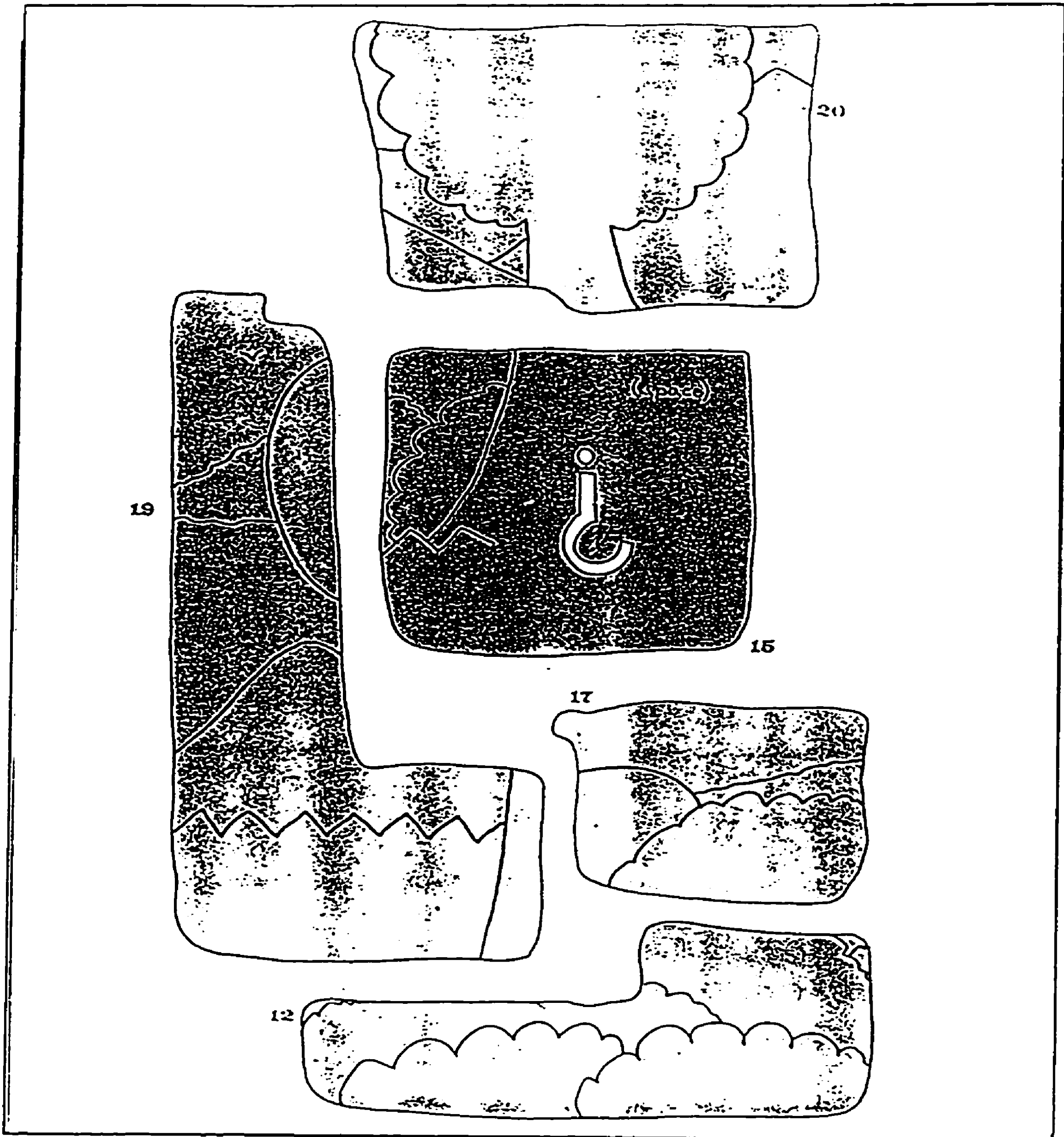


Figure 3.5 Two Novels, Centre Section 1a

This page from the centre section includes graphic element 12, which also belongs on page 14 and which completes the 'picture' that graphic elements 8-11 begin to create. Three discrepancies appear when the reader cuts and pastes the parts into place: first, the graphic elements do not 'fit' each other; second, graphic element 12 is inexplicably bright orange in sharp contrast to the purple of graphic elements 8-11, and finally, the graphic elements hide some of the text (and, of course, all the numbers)

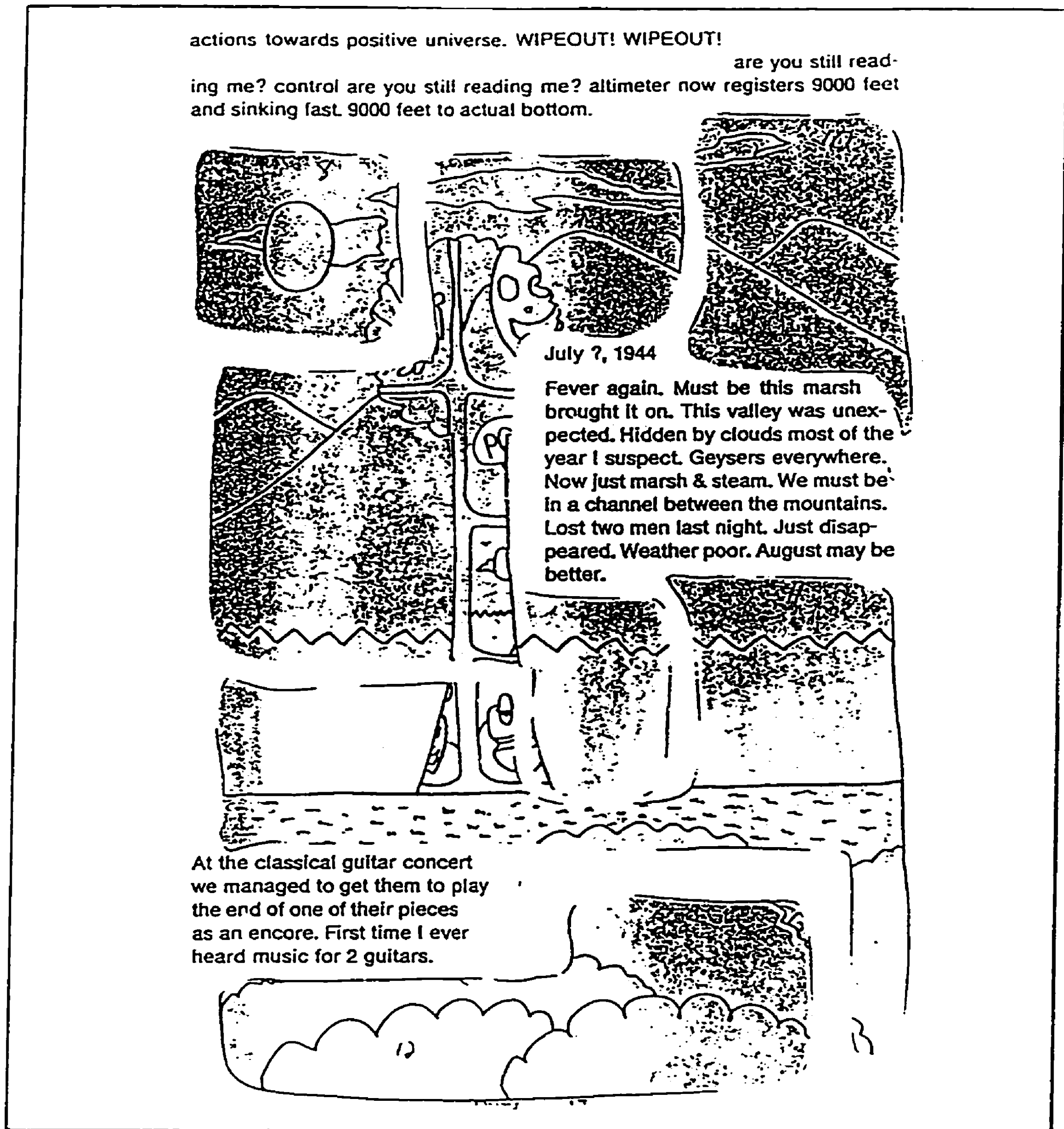


Figure 3 6 Andy, p 14 with cut and paste graphic elements

This is how page 14 of Andy appears when the graphic elements are pasted into place. The graphic elements begin to dominate the page and draw the reader's attention away from the textual aspects The question inevitably arises as to which is the 'correct' text or, indeed, if a 'correct' text exists or can exist

As Figures 3.3 to 3.6 show, when the graphic elements are pasted into place on their respective pages, some of the graphic and textual elements appear engaged in a struggle to eradicate one another; at the least, they compete for physical space and dominance. At times, one element dominates; at other times positions of strength appear equal; in extremes, either the textual or graphic portion erases the other's presence on the page, (compare, for example, Figure 3.3 to Figure 3.6). If the reader completes the cut-and-paste of the graphic elements, s/he may return to the beginning of *Andy* to re-read it with the graphic elements present or continue through to the second half of the novel, sub-titled *For Jesus Lunatick*. This portion of the novel repeats the temporal/spatial structure of *Andy*. It contains a fragmented, dream-like story line that describes an obsessive and highly-charged emotional state of its main character. The character compulsively re-enacts the same scene throughout this half of the novel. As if in a dream, characters sometimes merge or exchange positions or become other characters unexpectedly. The layout of the novel operates in the same manner as *Andy* opening from right-to-left but otherwise beginning with the story's title and an epigraph. Blank segments physically dominate the space of *For Jesus Lunatick*: eighteen pages of the forty-six page novel are left completely blank and only a single page, page nineteen, is entirely filled with text (most pages are filled with less than one-third

text). As a result, the one page that is especially dense with words appears over-filled, although it would appear so under more normal circumstances too, since the text of page nineteen spills beyond its bottom margin. As a result, the reader faces the same reading and interpretive difficulties here as s/he encountered in *Andy*.

As a result, *Two Novels* remains inconclusive to the reader, but the second story fragment in *Andy* offers one suggestion on how to approach the book. The fragments of *Story Two* suggest that a time/space traveler has become lost on his/her mission: "beep. beep. sonar locating objects at 10,000 feet and you? where are you? beep.beep" (Andy, 7). The mission may be meant to bring the disparate elements of time and space together in an increasingly metalingual narrative:

> beep. beep. . . elemental differences between the years passings. over and out. over and out. please? decisions to do what must be done, to link the two universes of matter into one incompatible whole. . . time as central concern as time concerns central control room sonar projections of infinite signals death in limited universe of ABC movement. travelling sphere concern head removal to total response unit of body speech and language in timebound type form possible message to understandabling years hence. phase one of this attempt. talking actual speech recorded and bought down. speaking. attention please. . . you are now entering universe of anti-matter. negative speech from mind speaking. . . attention now. you are entering uniphase of anti-verse. (Andy, 8-10)

The fragmented speech, the neologisms ("understandabling" and "uniphase"), and the discontinuous story fragments make it impossible to be certain of what is occurring. Eventually, though, repeated references to speech and speech loss, particularly written speech, and an increasing sense of panic, brought on by shortened sentence structure, increasingly sentence fragmentation, and repetetive statements, suggest that a collision between communication genres is imminent:

> too much cleverness the probable death of a third attempt two
> rough drafts now discarded simply . . . divorce from ABC trapping
> influence. freedom. freedom. repetitive death of linear emotion. . .
> free flow to follow hollowing motion of verbal wipeout. . . predicated police control of sentence structure to conceal emotion. . .
> moving into union of matter. moving into mattering union. ultimate
> destruction of death speech forms. visionary spheroid thot to
> dominate in globe construct model of working mind. (Andy, 8-10)

A tenuous relationship begins to develop between the comic strip elements and the *Andy* story fragment. Both appear preoccupied with escaping the "ABC trapping influence." The balloon speech in the comic strip elements of *Andy* is fragmented, difficult to correlate with the graphics in which it is found, cut-off and unreadable, or near-gibberish: "ALKABETH TALMIN!!" (*Two Novels*, centre graphic elements). Each of the three 'readable' word fragments foreground word-

ing aspects of written language that are often overlooked. The first fragment in the *Andy* comic-strip states: "to become obsessed with space!!" (*Graphic 22*); the second fragment states: "Ultimately (I suppose) one becomes totally frustrated with all this speaking?!!" (*Graphic 21*); and, as part of two facing pages which are otherwise empty, the third fragment states: "Space!! or the return from space to the narrative thru the use of device . . . . " (*Graphic 24*). The juxtaposition of textual elements to the comic-strip images reflects the extreme positions of the time-space continuum: language as it is revealed in the unfolding of narrative sequence and image as it is revealed in an instant of time in space. Even as they present a spectrum of communicative measures, however, the ill-fitting graphics and fragmented story elements suggest that a final 'meaning' is impossible and fraught with gaps in understanding.

The inability to reach any solid conclusions about *Two Novels* is further underscored by the epigraph to *For Jesus Lunatick*. The epigraph comes from an eighteenth century poem, *Jubilate Agno*, by Christopher Smart. Smart's poem is incomplete; less than half of the original manuscript survives. In part because of the incomplete manuscript of Smart's poem, in part because of the intricate structural layout of the Smart poem, and in part because of the multiple obscure details and intellectual complexity of his poem, this piece continues to baffle literary

critics. It remains a tantalizing but elusive poem. One critic, William Force Stead, describes the writings in *Jubilate Agno* as the "experiments and probings of intellect and spirit" that "provide the entrée into the amazing, crowded lumber-room of Christopher Smart's mind at the moment when that mind was in crisis" (*Introduction*, 20).

Two Novels distantly echoes *Jubilate Agno* in several enticing, but elusive, ways. *Jubilate Agno* follows an antiphonal structure composed of *For* and *Let* verses. According to William Force Stead, many of the *For* verses in *Jubilate Agno*, match *Let* refrains. The *For* verses in Smart's poem remain difficult to match to their *Let* refrains because so much of the manuscript has been lost. Further, the *For* and *Let* elements were separately constructed on folios, and subsequently scattered throughout Smart's manuscripts. Lack of any clear relationship among the folios has made reconstruction laborious and, perhaps, dubious.

Two Novels contains comparable, apparent gaps in its pages. Startlingly, both *Jubilate Agno* and *For Jesus Lunatick* are missing eighteen pages, but the parallel remains frustratingly imperfect since *For Jesus Lunatick* also contains large blank segments on partially printed pages. *Jubilate Agno* contains obscure and seemingly fantastical references in subject matter that took William Force Stead years to uncover as little known, but accepted, 'facts' of the period. As

Stead has shown, 'real' life and fiction frequently intersperse throughout *Jubilate Agno*. *Two Novels* follows a similar pattern of intermingling the mundane and the fantastical. For one thing, both works mention a cat: Nichol's fictional bob de cat in *Two Novels* and Smart's real-life cat in *Jubilate Agno*. Further, *Jubilate Agno*, continually, but inconclusively, reaches for meaning. *Two Novels*, Nichol informs us, also plays with the reader's instinctive drive to find 'meaning':

> By simple repetition of key phrases the true meaning has been obscured in an attempt to get at other possible layers. Having passed thru the door into his particular sea space time form we are left with no alternative but continuation of search for meaningful utterance beyond abc trapping influences. (*Andy*, 31)

Like *Jubilate Agno*, *Two Novels* remains steadfastly inconclusive, yet alluring. The reader cannot help but return to it and attempt to resolve its puzzles. Yet, the reader's search for conclusive meaning in *Two Novels* will be continually frustrated because, as with *Jubilate Agno*, what the reader has to read and explore (in *Two Novels*) is only a fragment of what once existed. The physical gap of the missing pages is so great that the reader cannot satisfactorily span it.

Two Novels, then, shows a preoccupation with the textual appearance of the page as space shapes it. Nichol takes extreme care in his arrangement, grouping, and assembling of materials, arguing that "in poetry you create a territoriality

by means of a spatial syntax" (Book-machine, 92-3). His purpose, at least in part, is to shock us into a recognition of the conditioning that accompanies our habitual reading and analysis of texts. Nichol employs the arrangement and layout of the print to underscore and undermine the reader's typical reconstruction of the visual unity of print as it is normally perceived against a field of white space. This disruption is sometimes related to the experience of time:

the message of typographic space is absense

(loss

of speed &/or memory trace).

to print a word

t h u s ,

has the effect of slowing down reading, of drawing out the moment of intake,

the

spacing

of

words

on

a

page

imp l i e s

a n

e

v

e

n

f

u

r

t

h

e

r

s

l

o

w

i

n

g

d

o

w

n

actual

gaps in

mem

o

ry

(Book-machine. 88-90)

Paradoxically, the form of any text, the above text certainly, is possible only through its relationship to space. A fundamental and defining tension exists between the white space of the page and the words and line on the page. In common topography, the kind observed in most words, say, the white space of the page fixes the word and the word, especially when it is arranged with other words into a line, imposes a sense of order to the line and the page. When the word is disrupted, as in the above example, our unconscious assumptions about order, line, and spacing, become abundantly apparent. In standardized texts. the reader also assumes that the line structures the space of the page while the white space gives shape and receives form. Because words generally dominate the white space and the reader's attention usually focuses on those words, the reader commonly overlooks the shaping role of space on the page of full print, until, again, space is actively exploited. Nichol seeks to awaken the reader to her/his assumptions regarding reading strategies and to demonstrate that

every assumption the reader makes "in the end narrows the range" of his or her "vision" (Book-machine, 91).

For bp Nichol, the importance of space on the page is at least equal to, if not greater than, the significance of the words placed there. Utilizing space in ways that defamiliarize the reader to the work also engages the reader with the work, forcing him/her to become even more actively involved in making meaning. bp Nichol destroys the usual fixity of words, lines, and the traditional layout of words on a page so that they can be newly and more richly received by the reader and provoke in him/her an active response rather than a passive reception of the text. Nichol comes close to discarding old limits, particularly those established by prescribed definition and usage, in preference for interactive play. Although the loss of fixity and traditional textual values may create a certain anxiety on the part of the reader, it also invites readerly participation in the act of poetic creation. It is a poetics designed not to move the reader to an external world beyond the page; rather, Nichol's work holds the reader purposively on the page at the level of the word in a struggle to communicate and to share with the reader the experience of the creative act.

Chapter Four Graphic inserts, layout, and the physical construction of texts in the work of bp Nichol

Nichol truly did love all kinds of writing.

Douglas Barbour
bp Nichol: in memoriam

bp Nichol's explorations include his fascination with the "degree to which changes in any aspect of that machine" (the book) "hinders access" to narrative. Further, he observes, "it is surprisingly easy" to introduce changes to the structure of a book that subvert its original function: "subtitle a book, 'volume 2' and the front cover becomes transparent and the back cover resonates with ambiguity" (Unit, 42). Nichol plays on the reader's shock and surprise when the internal layout of the "book-machine," its external physical construction, and the reader's preconceived conceptions of a 'book,' collide. Nichol believes that part of the resistant response to his work results from the reader "simply running up against his or her own conditioned responses" (Book-machine, 91). For Nichol, changes in the construction of the book's internal narrative structure (sentence order and word order), and in the construction of the book's external physical casings (pages and binding material), mirror changes in twentieth-century understanding of literature.

As Nichol observes, "writers are, in various ways, struggling to include in their work those realities revealed to them emotionally and physically by the shifts in awareness brought about by scientific and psychological discoveries." According to Nichol, the book preserves an "old linear centrality" that is in the process of replacement by "a new emphasis on the single page as a radically modifiable surface" (Book-machine, 103). Nichol believes that "books . . . speak, smell, move, surround, transform themselves and complicate their initial features; the page can metamorphosize into modular units of itself and the entire book can be disbound" (Portico, 67-8). According to Nichol, the book is "always potentially a field of dynamic relationships" (Unit, 42) where, as Frank Davey observes (of Nichol's texts), "the reader's turning of each page is potentially a significant event" (Here, 10).

bp Nichol's own improvisations begin in his earliest publications within the tradition of concrete poetry. Concrete poetry, which attempts to appreciate language for its tangible, material nature rather than its referential function, offered Nichol an approach that abandons conventional concepts of language as a tool to convey meaning and which, instead, regards language as intrinsically meaningful. Frequently, concrete poetry discards syntax and its structural means of articulating the relationship between the various parts of a poem. The reader is then often free to enter the text and discover or create meaning more on her own terms. For Nichol, concretism offered an avenue of expression that freed him from the inhibitions of language. In addition, concrete poetry at times employed other resources - sight, sound, touch - to (sometimes) create meaning. We can see this in one publication by bp Nichol (co-

authored with David Aylward) which makes a 'statement' about urban pollution by using so much smudgy ink in its production that the reader cannot handle the piece without getting his/her hands dirty.

The effect of the ink, dirtying the reader's fingers, suggests at least a few parallels to the state of mind of a reader upon entering the text and the result of the engagement - both to the text and the reader. A reader must 'get her (intellectual) hands dirty'; that is, she must engage the text in order to come to any understanding of it; or, she brings her own intellectual 'contaminations' to the work and so both she and the text are mutually 'smudged.' A certain religious element suggests itself, too, in that many religions smudge their members during important religious ceremonies. In any case, Nichol suggests that it is impossible to enter into a text without some kind of impression 'smearing' both the text and the interlocutor of the text. Further to this kind of 'physical' experimentation, the explorations of many concrete experimentalists, including Nichol, have spilled beyond the page into other mediums, involving aural and visual productions, in efforts to break free of perceived limitations of print.

Within the confines of the page, however, Nichol's work offers an exciting and dynamic invitation to the reader to discover for herself the rules of the poem (if they exist) from the form that is given. As an example, Nichol's early 'Cycle' series utilizes certain structural principles to create the form for the poems as they evolve.

Rigid permutations in the structure often underscore the meaning that the words contain. *Cycle #22*, "*drum anda wheel*." (Figure 4.1, right), manifests the rhythmic drum roll of a wheel and a drum.

In this poem, a careful yet rigid arrangement of the words, "drum," "and," "a," and "wheel" visually structures the rhythmic march of the "wheel" and "drum." As each new line picks up the revolving letters of the "wheel" and "drum," the circular motion of the wheel is reinforced. The rigid vertical and horizontal word placement reinforces the idea of the drum's steady beat. The repetition of the opening line, "drum anda wheel," in the closing line further bolsters the idea of circularity and rhythm in the poem.

```
drum anda wheel
anda drum andaw
heel anda druma
ndaw heel andad
ruma ndaw heela
ndad ruma ndawh
eela ndad ruman
dawh eela ndadr
uman dawh eelan
dadr uman dawhe
elan dadr umand
awhe elan dadru
mand awhe eland
adru mand awhee
land adru manda
whee land adrum
anda whee landa
drum anda wheel
```

Figure 4.1 drum anda wheel

Another Nichol poem, "*Christine's Washday*," visually enacts the drop of clothes into a washer and the gradual, rhythmic churning that meshes the clothes into one, indistinguishable "WASHWISH." The placement of the "wish" and "wash" on either side of an up-

```
wish                   wash
Wish                   wasH
WIsh                   waSH
WISh                   wASH
WISH                   WASH
WIS       HW            ASH
WI       SHWA            SH
W       ISHWAS            H
       WISHWASH
       WASHWISH
```

Figure 4.2 Christine's Washday

ward-jutting "HW" suggests the position of the clothes when "Christine" first drops them into the washer around its central agitator. The gradual change, from the lower-case lettering of the words "wish" and "wash" as they enter the washer from their separate sides of the agitator, to the upper-case blending of the words to become "WASHWISH" at the end of the cycle, visually mimics the gradual blending of clothes during a wash. Nichol further captures the sense of the washer's gradual blending and churning action in the line-by-line permutation and incremental transformation of single lower-case letters on each side of the poem to entirely upper-case letters by the poem's end. The "wish" and "wash" begin as separate clothing items, typed entirely in lower-case letters. The agitator's first turn begins to blend the items ("**W**ish" "was**H**"), one letter at a time, ("**WI**sh" "wa**SH**"), until they become the indecipherable wet mass we see upon looking into the washer: "WASHWISH." The capitalization of the letters starts from the outside of each side of the poem and works inwards, visually mimicking the water's rhythmic splash up and out to the sides of the rotating washer.

But Nichol draws on other linguistic resources here too. The assonance and alliteration of both the consonant and vowel sounds in wash and wish, especially the aspiration in 'sh,' further support the idea of the blending of items in the washer. Both of these poems carefully underscore the semantic intention of the words through

both internal (grammatical) and external (visual) structuring. These poems become quite playful: they are both highly constructivist. Other pieces strive for an emotional response from the reader.

Some of bp Nichol's best work to combine the materiality of presentation with the weight of semantic meaning appears in the 1967 collection entitled *bp*. *bp* includes *Journeying & the returns* (book), *Letters Home* (an envelope of visual poetry), *Borders* (a poetry recording), and *Wild Thing* (flip poem). In *Journeying & the returns*, each poem appears as either a single card or construction. One such card, "turnips are," is printed on turnip-coloured paper. A one-line poem, "pane/rain/pain," appears in four shades of blue reinforcing the emotional charge of the sentence and the transparency of glass and water.

bp Nichol invites even the 'containers' of books to become part of the activities of the text. In lieu of a conventional book 'cover,' *bp* comes in a box; so, too, do *Of Lines: Some Drawings* and *From My Window*. *From My Window* further invites the reader on a tactile and visual experience through its exploration of the visual impress of the colour blue, a striking graphic layout, its unusual boxed presentation, and its use of different weights and types of paper.

The external folder of *From My Window* is made from a sturdy, white cardboard. The title of the book and the author's name are the only markings on the

book's 'cover.' To access the 'narrative,' the reader must entirely remove the folder, which, in its unusual construction, creates a sort of three-dimensional box. The lid, 'hinged' on the left, can be lifted to reveal the contents. The reader must also completely remove the contents from the folder in order to examine them.

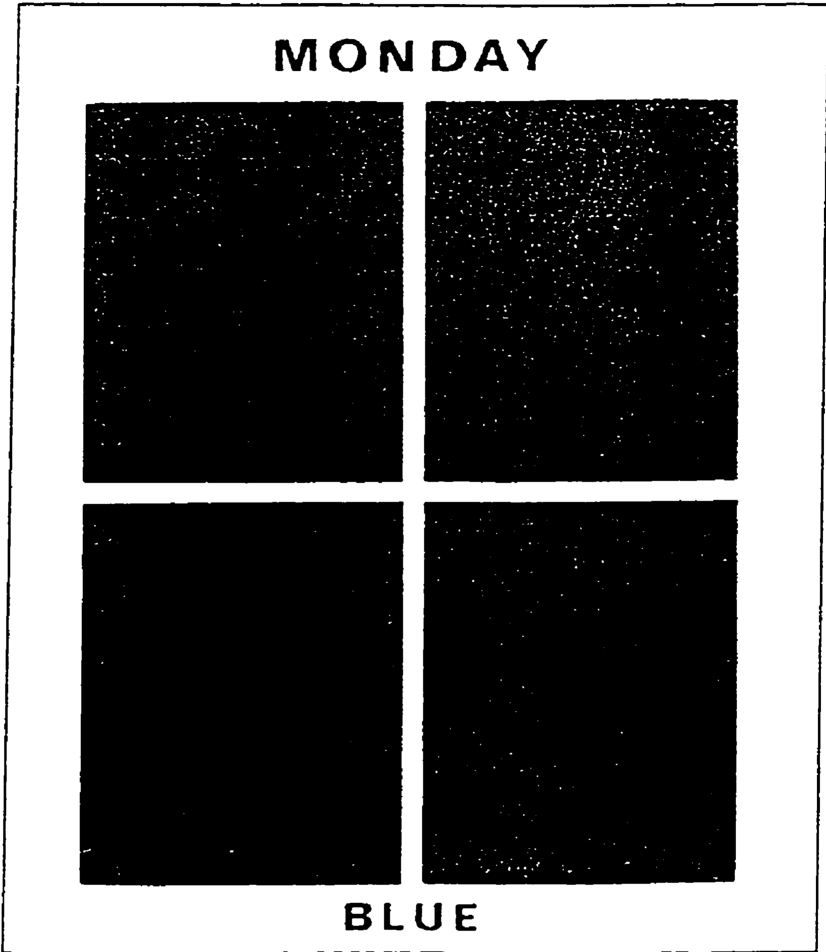


Figure 4.3 From My Window

Inside, the reader discovers a collection of ten, 6x8 cards which s/he holds in his/her hands to examine. All the cards are of a thick, heavy construction, creamy white in colour. One card declares, in capital letters, "FROM MY WINDOW." Another card reveals only the author's name centred on the page: bpNICHOL. Throughout the collection, the reader also encounters soft, white, nearly translucent, onion-skin paper. When the

reader lifts this delicate sheath (the slightest breath of air lifts the paper into the air), another card reveals itself. Here, MONDAY is typed in capitals across the top of what appears to be a window, white-silled, over-looking a spectacularly blue 'sky.' On the bottom of the card rests the single word, BLUE (this word is found at the bottom of every card). Each card also reveals a day of the week from Monday through Sunday. On each 'day,' the blue sky, glimpsed through the window, becomes ever-deeper, until Sunday's view, where it once again pales. As the reader lifts one card to access the next, another white onion-skin paper appears, which can easily slip out and away from the reader's grasp. These onion-skins create an effect of a filmy curtain over each scene which the reader must choose to 'pull back' in order to access the view. Sometimes, when the reader quickly lifts a card and the onion-skin unexpectedly flits up and away, the reader might, by metonymic association, recall a slight breeze lifting a curtain to expose a window. The 'play' of the delicate onion-skin paper, the creamy white cardboard, the milk-paint blues, and the simple statement, "from my window," combine to create a sense of invitation to the reader to share a moment's serenity, the author's calm, pacific view from his window. (The graphic replication in this thesis cannot hope to capture this.)

The beauty and tranquillity so carefully constructed in *From My Window* can also be found in other bp Nichol poems:

st*r

Still Waters

From My Window and the above poem (and two earlier poems found in chapter three) offer themselves as independently constructed units intended as much for visual consumption as for literal interpretation. Nichol also creates, in their disposition on the page, a certain serenity and quiet joy which he invites the reader to share with him. The poems from *Still Waters* also demand that the reader play a semantic role, as the gaps in the words that construct the poem, almost involuntarily, call to the reader to fill them in. The collection from *Still Waters* also offers early examples where individual word constructs become icons for meaning. Nichol perfects this technique in *Extreme Positions*.

bp Nichol's novel, *Extreme Positions*, uses words as icons scattered across the page to create various scenes of a story. The story navigates the reader through a semantically constructed landscape (owl, moon, tree) towards a tree, lake, and road to arrive at a house and field where the reader learns a story of love and loss. The lovers' shared moments, recalled in later chapters of *Extreme Positions*, are interspersed with poignant, emotional commentary: "remembered," "laughing laughing," "sad,"

"hysterical," "uncertainties." The novel abandons nearly all linear syntactical construction, depending on discrete word elements and their careful placement on the space of the page to aid the reader in discovering 'meaning' in the story. Nichol's complex internal and external construction is also often augmented by a sense of humour.

Nichol's text, *Of Lines: Some Drawings*, offers an example of his humour and complex textual structuring. This collection comes in an off-white cardboard box, approximately 10"x10," and one inch deep. The reader opens the box to discover a collection of sixteen large cards. The cards are unnumbered, so the reader can choose how to progress through the cards. Each card confronts the reader with a gray penciled line, drawn from corner to corner on the beige card. At the bottom of the card, a comment appears, presumably about the drawn line. As the reader progresses through the cards, Nichol's irony and humour become increasingly apparent. One card reads, "Line #1." Another card reads, "Drawing of Line #1." Still a third card reads, "Drawing of Drawing of Line #1. Five lines are drawn in total, although it takes fourteen cards to create them (the remainder of the cards act as commentary on the original five lines, "Drawing of . . . ," or consideration about the lines, "Line Drawn As A Response To An Inner Pressure To Draw Another Line While Resisting The

Urge To Call It Line #5"). The reader cannot help but smile at Nichol's reflective remarks on the purpose of his lines as s/he moves through the collection.

Other texts display equally unusual layout and construction: *Two Novels* requires the reader to always enter the text backwards (or upside down): the novel also requires that the reader cut out part of the text and paste it into place; *A Christmas Vision in the Voice of St. Nicholas* arrives in pieces and offers a diagram on how to put together the enclosed cardboard elements in order to view the 'vision.'

This 'book' arrives in a 6"x10" envelope which contains differently-sized beige cards. One such card instructs the reader, "the vision combines & reads in the following sequence" (Voice); the reader cannot help but notice that, although two 'visions' are offered to the reader, the title claims that only one vision exists.

The examples in this chapter disturb the "old linear centrality" and aptly demonstrate, as Nichol proclaims, that the page can be a "radically modifiable surface" (Book-machine, 103). *From My Window*, *Of Lines: Some Drawings*, and *A Christmas Vision in the Voice of St. Nicholas*, show that books "complicate their initial features," the page will "metamorphosize into modular units of itself," and the entire book can be "disbound" (Book-machine, 103).

Initially, the work of bp Nichol can strike the reader's eye as child-like and playful, even simplistic. For the most part, his graphic elements are crudely hand-drawn; he employs comic-strip elements (which are not generally considered the 'stuff' of intellectual explorations); and many of his texts (with the exception of *The Martyrology*) are deceptively short. More, there is often a distinctively hand/home -made quality to his work that initially belies the intellectual content and challenge the pages contain. At the same time, these characteristics also make bp Nichol's work 'difficult' to access. The reader cannot passively absorb the textual content, or pass unnoticed through the material elements to an easy 'meaning' beyond the text.

bp Nichol has been perhaps one of the most innovative and influential writers of his generation. In addition to possibly one of the most challenging long poems of late twentieth-century Canadian literature (*The Martyrology*), he wrote poems, essays, novels, produced stage and radio plays, musicals, television scripts, children's stories, and edited books and magazines. Even today, nearly ten years after his untimely death, his work stakes out ground on the frontiers of the new, revealing an experimental vision in a wide range of forms and traditions. Small wonder, then, that in 1986 fellow writers from Canada and around the world joined together to honour Nichol with a *festschrift* that honoured his life and work.

Nichol sought new means of expression, both on the page and elsewhere, to refind the power and capacity that he perceived language had lost. According to Frank Davey, Nichol risked, and sometimes "even invited condemnation by the conservative critic for triviality, banality, obscurity, wordiness, formless, ness, privateness" (Here, 214). Yet, his writing remains, and continues to act upon all who read it. Still, Nichol described himself as only an "apprentice" to language, and always saw himself as "discovering," "exploring," "examining" the possibilities that language contains. He gave to poets and to poetry a freer rein for sensibility in his expansion of the materials for poetic production. He aided in a return from seeing language as a transparent, unconsidered medium to one requiring careful examination and understanding.

In this process, Nichol's work often yields an almost unbearable beauty, serenity and calm. It is always entered into with a readily recognized sense of a potential for play, play both in and with the textual elements on the page, and across the text - and always with the reader who engages him. Yet Nichol remained humble about his explosive, explorative art, hoping, at best, to present "a text in which the reader creates his own path," and "creates his own narratives, his own linkages" (Discussion, 156). He placed himself, if anywhere, beside his readers: "I place myself there, with them, whoever they are, wherever they are, who seek to reach them-

selves and the other thru the poem by as many exits and entrances as are possible"

('Statement' in *bp*, 5).

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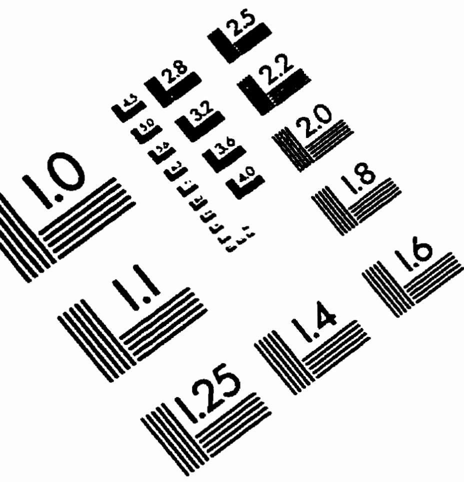
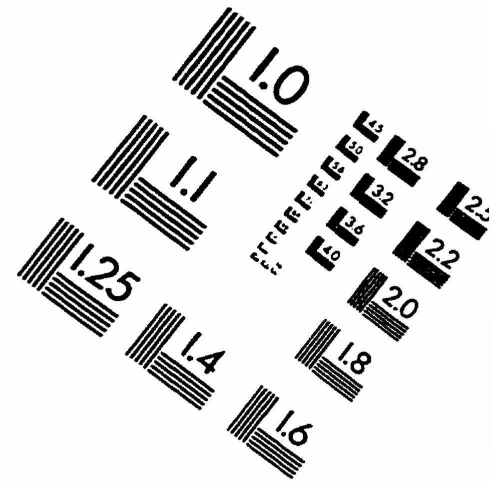
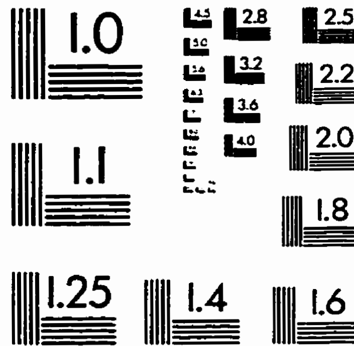
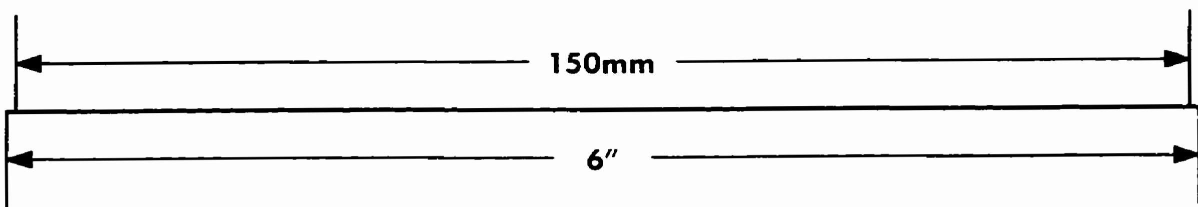
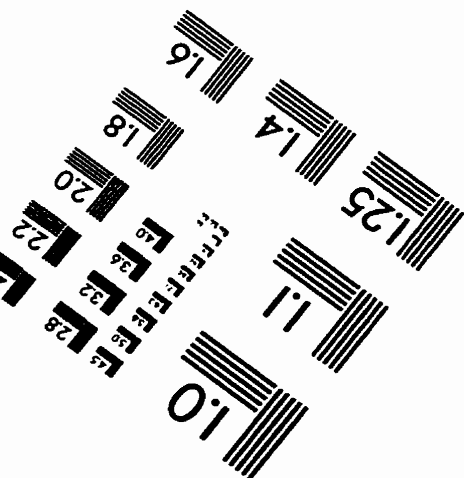
IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)

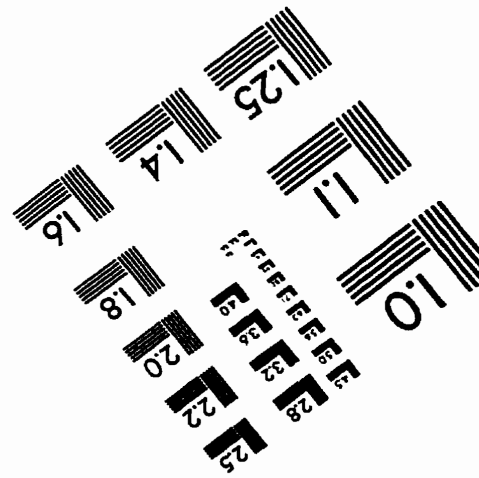












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