“all alongingly the way”: Ontology and Longing
in bpNichol’s The Martyrology

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Abstract

bpNichol’s (1944-1988) long poem, *The Martyrology* (published between 1972 and, posthumously, 1993), is a work that is comprised of text, illustrations, and musical notations. Its sheer length, both in time of composition and page range, as well as its reach, in its thematic inclusion and incorporated written styles, constitute its demanding and comprehensive form. Critics have neglected to examine the poem as a work preoccupied with the philosophy of ontology—the study of being—through a literary mode of longing. Instead, *The Martyrology* is treated as a work that is substantiated by history and mythology, as opposed to the ubiquitous theme of the existence of personal and poetic selfhood.

The efforts of this thesis are dedicated to identifying *The Martyrology* as an ontological long poem—or, a poem that longs for its ontology—through the following operations of being: journeying, semiotics, and corporeality. In combination, these three facets of the poem assemble a more appropriate and totalizing understanding of Nichol’s text. *The Martyrology*’s language is of chief concern to this thesis—repetition, puns, etymology, spacing, enjambment, and orthographic convention and deviation are all examined in an effort to consider and claim an ontological perspective for this poem. Continually, all 9 volumes of the poem rely on language that is expressive of journeying, semiotics, and corporeality in the formulation of linguistic and poetic identity. *The Martyrology*, then, longs to investigate its ontological impetus to long.
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Dedication

To

The Second Body

(wherever she may be)
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Introduction

In a personal essay entitled “some words on the martyrology march 12, 1979,” Canadian poet bpNichol (1944-1988) writes: “what is a long poem? perhaps it is simply a long life or some trust in the durational aspect of being alive” (236). By exploring the generic components of the long poem and its seemingly inherent interest in notions of living, livelihood, and, most accurately and fully, ontology, Nichol’s life-long poem, The Martyrology, is a text (or texts) that attempts to elucidate the correspondence between its own poetic structure as a long and ceaseless work and its preoccupation with its own standards of existence and non-existence. Repeatedly, the poem revels in its spatial reach (constructed in 9 books of text, image, and musical notation) and temporal longevity (published between 1972 and, posthumously, 1993), yet takes umbrage with its very length and inability to cease:

  drift then as dreams
  my life is lived
  moment to moment the changes flow around me
  it goes on too long

("Auguries," The Martyrology, Book 2)

Nichol acknowledges that the poem and the poet’s life, indeed, go “on too long.” The Martyrology acknowledges the internal anxiety within a long poem that declares itself to be poetically too long.

Yet in the poem’s sheer length, Nichol utilizes The Martyrology’s expansiveness to imbue the work with a reliance on language that signals the poem’s own awareness of its issues with expansion, longevity, and ontology: “to someone no longer here / all speech
become a reaching over distances” (“Clouds,” The Martyrology, Book 2). Speech—language, utterance, and The Martyrology, itself—becomes an opportunity to combat absence and deterioration. As “speech become[s] a reaching over distances,” the long poem becomes an account of the poet’s usage of language through his own ontology, his own poetic life of language. Nichol, too, allows the long poem to engage with an emotional longing, both in that it recognizes and attempts to address absence; similarly, Nichol seeks to recognize and address his own personal longing towards the poem itself, fearful that expansiveness inherent to a long poem could shift and possibly withdraw from the poet’s ability to adequately participate in the poem’s expressiveness—that is, the poem threatens to exclude the poet himself: “it is my own longing / as it was then i could not feel it / felt” (“Auguries,” The Martyrology, Book 2).

Amongst many concerns, intentions, and possibilities, The Martyrology is a long work that negotiates the tenuous relationship between finite and limited personae/speakers and that simultaneously declares opposing commentaries for itself: “i’ve come to equate life & the poem” (The Martyrology, Book 5, Chain 3) and “a life / the poem reaches towards its own end / conclusion / drawn back” (The Martyrology, Book 5, Chain 8). In another interview, Nichol states: “you’re also writing this thing which could exist beyond you […] In that act of the thing, you’re writing towards its end and its non-end” (“Syntax Equals the Body Structure”: bpNichol, in Conversation, with Daphne Marlatt and George Bowering” 296). The Martyrology continuously recognizes and denies its formal limitations and conceivable end. Nichol’s structure of the long poem, then, endeavours to investigate both the poet’s (and personae’s/speakers’) and the poem’s own response to existence and non-existence.

The long poem draws from a prosperous and extensive literary history. Robert Bringhurst acknowledges long poetry’s sheer tradition and scope, suggesting that this form of
writing invokes a relationship between human history and the thinking, writing, and existing accomplished within the enormity of this range: "Poetry itself has been here a lot longer—as long, I suppose, as things have been thinking and dreaming themselves, which might be as long as things have existed, or maybe somewhat longer" (“Poetry and Thinking” 156). The Martyrology is supported by a vast trajectory of various long writings. The journey and trials of Odysseus in Homer’s The Odyssey form a rich foundation for the comparable devices in Nichol’s work. Odysseus is routinely meant to conceal or reveal his true nature, and this is repeatedly done through the expression and withholding of his name and the covering and showing of the bodily scars and wounds upon his body that serve as further evidence of his personhood. When Odysseus and his men are captured by Polyphemus, Odysseus deceives the Cyclops by purposefully renaming himself:

'So, you ask me the name I'm known by, Cyclops?
I will tell you. But you must give me a guest-gift
as you've promised. Nobody—that's my name. Nobody—
so my mother and father call me, all my friends.’ (408-411)

Odysseus and his men then desecrate the lone eye of the beast by piercing it with a flaming stake, a scenario conveniently swelling with the destruction of the body and the self at the site of the eye/I. The Epic of Gilgamesh, most notably used as a source of The Martyrology’s mythology and in the pun “giggle mesh,” is another ancient long poem that details the journeys and establishment of self of its main figure. As Gilgamesh and Enkidu prepare for a long departure, the former provides comforting counsel in the event of possible death: “’Let your courage be roused by the battle to come; forget death and follow me, a man resolute in action, but one who is not foolhardy. When two go together each will protect himself and shield his
companion, and if they fall they leave an enduring name” (77). One’s name is metonymic for the whole individual—it signals and represents the identity, characteristics, successes, failures, and journeys of the mentioned individual. Gilgamesh’s advice is a relational construction of meaning—the camaraderie of individuals protects and records the name of the fallen individual. The lineage is maintained through language, through naming, through the living body of the witness, as it journeys from one person to the next.

The modernists T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams form a contemporary heritage of Nichol’s, particularly Eliot’s circular poetics of ontology and Williams’ documentation of humankind in and amongst the workings of the modern city as individuals feel the insuppressible need to communicate to one another. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” in *Four Quartets* conflates the movement of language (that is, the transference of speech through writing or the music that relocates to the listener’s ear from its instrument) with the evidence of existence. Being is substantiated through speech and listening, the giving and receiving of language:

Words move, music moves

Only in time; but that which is only living

Can only die. Words, after speech, reach,

Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,

Can words or music reach

The stillness, as a Chinese jar still

Moves perpetually in its stillness. (175)

This passage is as much about long poetry as it is about the establishment of selfhood. The interplay between Eliot’s constant erection of opposites—aurality and silence, form and non-
form, movement and stillness—is later defined through ontological pairings: “Caught in the form of limitation / Between un-being and being” (175). Similarly, the ability to produce and interact with sound and language and the subsequent silence that overcomes the individual form a motivating and existential concern for the entirety of *The Martyrology*—life leads to death but death is evidence of life; martyrs are resurrected in their death through recorded speech and recollection. Williams’ concern lies in human connectivity, that discordance and contention might serve as deterrents to self-expression and personal longevity: “My surface is myself. / Under which / to witness, youth is / buried. Roots? / Everybody has roots. / We go on living, we permit ourselves / to continue” (*Paterson* 43-4). The switch from the singular to the plural (which is similarly Nichol’s constant, pronominal relationship between Me/We) is an acknowledgement of the subjective within the collective. The individual informs the plural, and the plural strives towards constancy. Continuation is a reaching through speech; it is indicative of the ontological propulsion of the individual. Long poetry substantiates the speaker’s intention of engaging with a language that informs connectivity between subjects and constructs a repertoire of prolonged ontological poetics.

Nichol’s Canadian, thematic companions include Robert Kroetsch, Douglas Barbour, Helen Hawley, and George Bowering, among many other long poets. And though those mentioned employ a diverse set of long poem techniques, in comparison to Nichol and even between themselves, apparent equivalences should be noted. Kroetsch’s work routinely couples the rural with the philosophical; section 6 of “Seed Catalogue” links authorial action with the mobility of prairie roads. Like Nichol, Kroetsch suffuses the symbol of the road with a literary tradition. To traverse such roads is to inspect, prod, examine, and inspect an inherited trajectory of writing while also forming one’s own tradition: “This is a prairie road. / This road
is the shortest distance / Between nowhere and nowhere. / This road is a poem” (39). These sites of travel are the avenues in which the poet proceeds; the non-locations of “nowhere” treat the road and the poet’s paper as a liminal space:

    This is a poem I didn't write. And not because I wasn't writing.  
    And not because it isn't a poem. I'm beside myself, purely as a way  
    to anticipate the past. Endings have stems and blossoms. ("Excerpts from the Real World" 219)

A destinational objective is moot, for that terminus results in a blossom, a beginning of growth. Douglas Barbour’s opening words to A Poem as Long as the Highway also treats the journey as a continuous act: “Yet the road / like the poem progresses, / through particular landscapes / to a certain truth.” The closing lines of the collection respond to the book’s opening, offering a reprise to the sought truth:

    Learning is not
    direct

    in ratio to distance
    travelled

    we can not learn
    enough

    journey
too far.

Long poetry is an expression of written distance. Effort, time, and longing evidence this distance. The open space of the final stanza has the word journey indented, and a silent invitation of the previous stanza is extended. Learning cannot be exhausted; similarly, the openness beckons the idea that we cannot “journey / too far” either.

Helen Hawley’s “Grasshopper” situates long poetry within the discourse of travel and the connective intent of communication. The verb “hop” mutates into the noun “hope,” engendering the act of journeying with community: “Hop / beginnings or movements suggest hope” (199). Hawley’s hopefulness, like Barbour’s truth, is that language has meaning for its users. It transfixes as it transforms, it heals as it hauls, it hopes as it hops. Though human disconnection and translocation are addressed, Hawley’s text details the corporeality of humans as they travel and simultaneously recognize their apparent dissociation:

how we long to talk to each other how we
reach out and we slip
past each other on a different track you
locked in your bus and I locked in mine
passing each other on empty prairie roads

Hop
hoping to embrace my people again I can only

drive past them. (202)

The speaker longs to speak through the long poem, to reach, to perambulate upon these lines and tracks of speech, and to hop and hope. Bowering’s conceit, like the previous three poets’, marks a personal and ontic meditation on language’s function. Language composes history, and the narrativization of historicity—both individual and collective—is itself a text that can be affixed to the poetic individual: “History, history, its range adds to our being, / not our knowledge, history / is a shadow of myself cast upon the stream of time” (“Allophanes” 218). Language is a device that binds the past with the present, the non-being with being, meanwhile insisting on the commanding and authorial claim it has on self-expression. In Heideggerian pronunciation, Bowering situates the expressive act in the continuous present, for this is the domain of the journeying, existing individual: “The language / is not spoken, / it speaks” (237).

Of the Canadian critics who have commented on and attempted to address the many complexities of The Martyrology, Stephen Scobie, particularly, suggests that the “most acute problem faced by the long poem is that of structure: of maintaining some kind of coherence whereby the reader may continue to hold the whole expanse of the work in her mind as a single poem” (bpNichol: What History Teaches 108). Scobie proposes that these notions of maintenance and continuation are only accomplishable through “a mythological and/or historical narrative” (108) within the long poem and not the emotional longing through ontology of a given subjectivity: “The entirely personal or subjective world of the poet’s own emotions and perceptions is not enough in itself to sustain a long poem” (108). Scobie’s claim
is that *The Martyrology* is only sustained through the narratives of mythology and history and that subjective longing is, in itself, inadequate and a limited interpretation of Nichol’s poem. Rather, as Nichol himself states, the very ontological propulsion of existence and a poetic response to one’s existence serve as a proper and sufficient impetus for the long poem: “drivin’ long / writin’ poems that come out song / sound tracking a life” (*The Martyrology*, Book 5, Chain 1).

Roy Miki, in his introduction to the anthologized collection of essays entitled *Tracing the Paths: Reading ≠ Writing The Martyrology*, discusses Nichol’s generic form of the long poem as a text that includes myriad styles, awarenesses, and poetic conventions in an attempt to fully enter into a discussion on ontology and, its alternative, extinction: “To enact the condition of mortality, a poetic form has to be flexible enough to accommodate chance, accident, unpredictability, and the mere fact of existence” (16). This matches Nichol’s words earlier quoted in the essay “Syntax Equals the Body Structure”—that, through the writing act of something that is formally long, the form is equipped to investigate its own standards of poetic inclusion—i.e. its own concerns—and at what length it wishes to continue to speak about its own inclusions and “mere fact of existence.” Shirley Neuman’s readings are linguistically minded, and her essays often scrupulously decode and dissect the complex patterns at play in Nichol’s poem; similarly to Miki, she explores *The Martyrology*’s tendency to emotively discuss its own form, and also the notion of poetic movement and development inherent to the poem. Nichol writes:

```
what is it makes up the poem

journeynal
```
a longing work

[...]

feelings & the way you say them

all alongingly the way

(The Martyrology, Book 5, Chain 9)

Interpolating Nichol, Neuman writes: “Journynal: a journey and a journal, all a lifelong work of longing” (“‘Making in a universe of making’ in The Martyrology” 56). Thus, Neuman suggests that notions of travel, the poem’s own poetic furtherance and continuation, are linked to attributing meaning and poetic intent to the poem’s sprawling reach—that is, to journey is journal, and to long is to write a long poem. The long poem’s necessity to long emotionally—be it for the journey, the distance traveled, the poet, the reader, the poem itself, or the poem’s intention to voice accurately the speakers’ longing—is similarly the poem’s attempt to enter into discussion with creativity, certainly, but also ontology and the threat of non-ontology, extinction. Neuman’s understanding of semiotics defines language as something that “is an experience of engaging the world” (54) and not simply a reaction to experience. The priority of being is to find meaning through action, through expression, through the sign: “however random and arbitrary the conjunction of signifier to signified, language nonetheless is material and productive of meaning” (53). The gap in scholarship on The Martyrology has neglected to investigate the bodily (material) nature of Nichol’s language, how this language attempts to reconfigure itself through modification (puns, homophones, visual play), and how his long poem necessitates a journeying act (both in theme and its significant size as a single work) to establish its ontology. Though his critics have been attempting to decode the enormity of this
work for four decades, there still exists an oversight of the project as a whole—its continual mutation from Book 1 to 9 is an observable indication that the work refuses to remain stagnant. Instead, it endures through duration, it remains corporeal through incorporation, and it continues by updating its generic conditions. By examining *The Martyrology* from the understanding that it longs to investigate and proclaim its own ontology as a way to journey towards continuously additional states of being, the existential attributes of this long poem can find their pronunciation. Perhaps, then, the propulsive structure of a long poem is its very imperative to long.

Smaro Kamboureli inextricably couples Nichol’s concern with selfhood and the expression of its myriad facets and characteristics through the genre of the long poem, stating: "Self and genre in *The Martyrology* often figure as each other's substitutes and supplements" (“there's so much i': Self and Genre in *The Martyrology*” 115). Kamboureli positions self and genre in a mode of relational reliance, wherein Nichol’s poetic selfhoods, both actual and artistic, are defined by the formal composites of the long poem, and vice-versa. The ontological imperative is thematized by the poem’s textuality:

we mourn nonetheless

thrust into insistence by the pressure of a life

a death

miss you/miss you/miss you

cannot stop this insistent act

of breath

of speech
each line a life

everything resides in

we are lief

unlucky

cast up on this shore

the new found land another age longed for (The Martyrology, Book 6 Books, Book VI: The Grace of the Moment)

Writing and journeying are both propulsive, transportive acts; breath and speech are insistent acts, and the process of writing these acts into poetry finds its impetus by the thrust of life and non-life in their own formed relation: “thrust into insistence by the pressure of a life / a death.”

With a brief substitution in orthography, Nichol aligns poetry with existence, placing both in a near-synonymic bond: “each line a life.” The word ‘life’ is then contorted into the anagram ‘lief,’ referencing the Icelandic explorer Leif Erikson; resultantly, “we are […] unlucky” in this task of the explorer, spilled onto lands of unfamiliarity and newness. In Nichol’s closing words, though, this age, perhaps of travel and growth, and despite the non-luck and potential, is “longed for”; as the thrust leads into breath, speech, and unlucky travel, both the longing for said movement and the long poem itself are reached and obtained.

Nichol proffers endless configurations of these major themes—ontology borne out through the long poem as the poetic figure, meanwhile, utilizes the longing in the writing act to insist upon his/her status as an ontological figure—throughout the entirety of The Martyrology. Through ceaseless repetition, Nichol acknowledges the compulsion of re-writing: “you can see the way it moves now / shorter lines evolving into longer statements of place or time / the history of the poem recapitulated” (The Martyrology, Book 3, V). Recapitulation—borne out
within the enormity of *The Martyrology* through the recurrence of line drawings, punning configurations, musical notation, and an intentional self-quotation through referentiality—emphatically affirms the poetics of ontology that found the project on the whole. The insistence on existence—be it the existential concerns of Nichol the man or Nichol the poetic figure—motivates the entirety of *The Martyrology*, in that the poem is a record of Nichol’s own and observed ontological engagements. Not unlike Kamboureli’s amalgamation of self and genre, Frank Davey states that the long poem is reliant on the ontological repetitions and preoccupations found in writing: "One of the recurring metaphors of recent Canadian long poems is the autobiography of the writer [...] Life-structure here becomes poem-structure; life-event becomes recurring image" (*The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* 13). Specifically, if, in Davey’s words, the long poem is the autobiography of the poet, Nichol advances this sentiment by also encompassing biographical attachments to other entities. Nichol is ubiquitous throughout *The Martyrology*; throughout its completed 9 books, Nichol is enamoured with and concentrated on his active role as a son, sibling, friend, lover, husband, father, thinker, poet, illustrator, voice musician, all as historical, present, and future roles of Barrie Phillip Nichol. But *The Martyrology* accomplishes (at least) one other major effort in this configuration of life-structure as poem-structure. Nichol’s poem is largely engaged with enhancing the life-structure of language itself through the writing act. With the myriad forms of punning, word play, visual/linguistic/musical interplay, etymological increases and decreases of language bearing more or less language, Nichol is concerned with revealing the animation of language as a life-structure through the long poem. Though it is true that Nichol presents the “autobiography of the writer,” it is likewise an aim of Nichol’s to present an
autobiography of language through the formation of the long poem. Often, the developments of both are advanced in tandem.

*The Martyrology* substantiates the existence of the poet and his language through its long form; in its length, reach, and expansiveness, the work exhibits Nichol’s aim in providing the long poem an ontological claim of selfhood. In some closing remarks to Eli Mandel’s opening lecture at the Long-liners conference of 1984, Mandel and Robert Kroetsch both emphasize the interchangeability between Nichol’s existence and writing, the latter poet chiastically creating a circular relationship between Nichol and his own work:

Mandel: Somewhere there was a marvellous moment when bpNichol was born and began writing immediately. [Laughter.]

Kroetsch: Began writing and was born. [Laughter.] (“The Death of the Long Poem” 24)

In either configuration, self and genre or genre and self, *The Martyrology* is an explanation of selfhood and is itself explained by selfhood. The intermingling of the long poem and its contained ontological concerns establish *The Martyrology*’s chief impetus—as Nichol says, “the poem become[s] the life work” (“Sons & Divinations,” *The Martyrology*, Book 2).

Language is an occasion to claim existence for an authorial being; the long poem, specifically, is the form to express the writerly/linguistic qualities of existence and genre while utilizing sheer range and longevity, in duration and page length.

*The Martyrology*’s construction and form define the long poem as a genre utilized for exploring and defining autobiography, selfhood, and ontology. Specifically, the subsequent chapters deal with three components that outline Nichol’s understanding of identity:
journeying, signature (through semiotics), and the body (and its deterioration). These three facets of identity—and in no way are these exclusively how Nichol defines identity—assemble a triptych of interrelated themes from which Nichol continually forms and reforms the poetic construction of selfhood throughout all books of *The Martyrology*. All three are indicative of the poetic self as it establishes its identity through poetry. As an expeditional process, as well as a metaphor for literary movement through writing and reading, journeying demonstrates the propulsion and action of an individual. The compositional length and reach of *The Martyrology* invite the poet and the reader into an excursion of literary expansion; breadth and development of identity mark an advancement and proliferation of the self. Kamboureli directly relates the long poem’s ability to be accumulative and assimilative with the construction and enlargement of selfhood:

> More than any other Canadian long poem, bpNichol's *The Martyrology* illustrates the long poem's plurality of genre. The acknowledged distrust of generic origins in *The Martyrology* declares that the formal plurality of Nichol's poem is grounded in the self and, by implication, in the linguistic utterance on which the self relies for its formulation. (*On the Edge of Genre* 147)

This plurality of genre is the plurality of the self, affording the myriad reconstructions of Nichol’s poetic identity to populate the text. Linguistically, this is evidenced in the constant renaming strategies throughout the books. Through semiotics, each new naming instance is an identifiably signatory moment; from the saints of language in Book 1 in Nichol’s ‘st’ word games to the letteral reconstitution that occurs when various letters (b, p, d, n, i, h, specifically) are stand-ins for the poet, *The Martyrology* proffers innumerable refashionings of the speaker’s personae. These graphemic figures become signatory possibilities for the poet; they, too, are
representative of the body of language and the body of the poet. This corporeal quality of language is another substitutive process, similar to journeying and signing—just as the journeying poet is represented across his vast landscape of long poetry and as the letter and word games continually coalesce into signatures of the poet, Nichol establishes language as a bodily metaphor in which the *corpus* of poetry is related to the poet’s own *corpus*. The body is a vehicle for journeying and writing, and, therefore, it is inextricably linked to the writing act. Long poetry’s plurality of genre welcomes in these notions of journeying, nominality, and corporeality as necessary facets of the establishment of ontology.

The work of this thesis, due to its own limitations, cannot examine all the books of *The Martyrology*, though perhaps Nichol’s long poem deserves such attention. Consideration is specifically paid to books 4, 5, and 7, and brief intimations and discussions make use of the remaining books. Each chapter privileges a particular book in order to remain dedicated and cohesive throughout a potentially dizzying analysis. When discussing the various concerns of each chapter—journeying, semiotics, and corporeality, respectively—the ontology of self and language is the unifying vehicle of this thesis. These three characteristics of Nichol’s ontological poem are ubiquitous, surely, but, for the sake of steadiness and sanity, these three particular chapters have been selected as worthy representatives of Nichol’s prominent themes. Journeying, semiotics, and corporeality are presented widely throughout Nichol’s whole project; perhaps it is helpful to think of their presence as enacting what Heidegger calls a “continuous endurance” (208). Each chapter of this thesis is but a moment of observation given to this poem’s continuum.
Chapter One, ‘Movement in Book 5: Journeying towards Ontology,’ opens on the premise that *The Martyrology* is a text that privileges journeying as a process towards selfhood, and that, specifically, the long poem is equipped—in its length through page and time—to allow the author ample opportunity to reach a destination of language through poetic self-exploration. As Nichol states in Book 6 Books, language imparts an avenue to the language user, an avenue that Nichol adopts to explore the intricacies of selfhood in the act and process of journeying:

> why not the y **not** the z
> in the unwritten alphabets ahead?

[…]  

biography when geography's the clue

locale & history of the clear *you* (*The Martyrology*, Book 6 Books, Book III: Continental Trance)

The “unwritten alphabets ahead” intimate towards ontological possibility in an act of movement; the directional promise of discovery in the ephemeral destination of “ahead” provides Nichol with an expeditional target of a written alphabet—that is, whatever conceivable form *The Martyrology* takes. The geographical locale elicits the “clear *you*”; the various stations of this long poem are locations for ontological moments of establishment.

Chapter One specifically focuses on the formal qualities of Book 5, a text that utilizes *Chains*, twelve sections with footnotes strewn about, allowing (or forcing) the reader to
encounter other sections of Book 5 out of a standard or typical order; these Chains represent decisions that the reader must make while working through Book 5, and the reader can “continue thru the chain of ideas” or can “diverge & follow the chain of ideas the various numbered options represent” (“A Note on Reading The Martyrology Book V”). Throughout this winding and meandering course, journeying is a propulsive activity that seeks ontology; as Book 5 proffers reading choices of paginational direction and location, Nichol’s poetic intent in this book is to allow the poetry to constantly traverse into a terrain of self-scrutiny and -inspection: "If Nichol's poetics constantly offer new chains—i.e. Book 5 of The Martyrology—that intersect and glide from one textual and temporal region to the next, they also glide from one 'self' to the next” (Tostevin “Paternal Body as Outlaw” 79). Movement—as a poetic act invoking a journeying language—serves as Nichol’s method for reaching both a sort of poetry that is capable of discussing ontology and various selfhoods in the act of writing. Journeying becomes a procedure or poeticization; the long poem becomes a documentation of the poetry’s longing for and movement towards ontology.

The aim of Chapter Two, ‘Semiotics of the Long Poem in Book 4: Confronting Multiple Signatures,’ is to emphasize Nichol’s intention of conflating poetic and linguistic signatures with The Martyrology as a long poem. His semiotics are born out of puns—both visual and aural—as they specifically engage with the etymology of language, anagrams, and, finally, the syntactic advancement and spatial relationships between letters and words as full grammatical units. Afforded the ability to play with language through his puns—and by play, Nichol often invokes alphabetical rearrangement, reversibility, and circularity as a sign of language’s versatility, movability, and transportability—The Martyrology’s engagement with the orthographical and spatial mutability of language matches the poet’s multivalent signature(s).
From this, Nichol’s long poem is capable of encompassing multiple generic strands within the whole of the work as it establishes multiple signatures. Kamboureli, likewise, fuses the quantity of signature with that of genre: “Signing, then, records the various ways in which an author is inscribed in a text; it also accounts for an author’s use of, and departure from, traditional genres” (On the Edge of Genre 170). Semiotics becomes an establishment of ontology through genre; this chapter suggests that the subjectivity evidenced in signatory efforts is a recurrent and extensive claim of the long poem’s very reach and proportions.

Chapter Three, ‘The Corporeality of Language in Gifts: Book(s) 7 &,’ discusses the relationship that Nichol forms between his deteriorating physical wellbeing and the poetic intentions of his latter work; Nichol’s bodily discomfort became increasingly debilitating, eventually resulting in his premature and unexpected death at the age of 43, and The Martyrology’s poetics become aligned with the acknowledgment and poeticization of his imminent death. Morphology, particularly, adopts a duality in this context: as Barrie Phillip Nichol’s body undergoes a transformation—as his corpus changes, degenerates, and perishes—bpNichol’s body of work specifically identifies morphological writing as a necessary and suitable mode of production to reflect and ruminate upon his deterioration. The forms of individual words, their myriad homophonic renderings, their anagramic reconstitution, and the glyphic formulations of letters and words through etymology are all incorporated into Nichol’s morphology; these letteral and graphemic changes to words mirror and echo the bodily changes that his own body underwent upon the discovery of the spinal tumours that were enfeebling him for years. Nichol’s larger commentary on the state of long poetry, however, situates Book(s) 7 & in a position to long for and grieve over his approaching bodily and poetic death; The Martyrology has constantly oscillated between a poetry of
ontology through self-construction and a work that is generated through the poem’s namesake of a writing of martyrdom. While avoiding facileness, Nichol becomes his own martyr in the closing books of the series—the poet’s corpus becomes the poetry’s corpus. In this, a deliberate and considerate mediation on the state of language, autobiography, and the poet’s vocation come to the forefront of Book(s) 7 &.
Chapter One: Movement in Book 5: Journeying towards Ontology.

*By walking I found out*

*Where I was going* – Irving Layton, “There Were No Signs”

*Midway in our life’s journey, I went astray*

*from the straight road and woke to find myself*

*alone in a dark wood.* – Dante, *The Inferno*

Action, expedition, pilgrimage, movement—the long poem possesses ample space and time for journeying. The compositional process and the subsequent reading process are both committed to page count and duration. *The Martyrology* journeys through language on its way to poetic selfhood—the selfhood of the poet, the selfhood of language, and the selfhood of community members. Each poetic entry is a disruption of expectancy, in that the “primary narrative” is reconstituted as the poem increases: “Of course the alphabet is a narrative—that movement thru your ABC. And any word you write is a displacement of that primary narrative” (“Narrative in Language: The Long Poem” 392). In this same essay, Nichol describes his childhood conflation of journeying homeward with an alphabetical journey: “the fact that in Wildwood Park in Winnipeg the different streets &/or sections were named after the letters of the alphabet so that when I was first learning the alphabet I was also learning my way home” (394-5). Nichol lived in the “h” section of Wildwood Park—movement, then, led to a homecoming through language. Journeying is a process by which the long poem establishes its reach and its ability to evidence the actions and maneuverings of the self. Yet the self is also a composite of the community, the populace—so too, as letters form into words, and words into
sentences, *et cetera*. The interplay between the long poem’s expression of selfhood and the selfless, outward reaching towards community imbues the work with a propulsion towards the exploration of identity. Movement—as a metaphorical construct in Nichol’s poetry and also an indication of the writing and reading processes—provides *The Martyrology* with the occasion to explore the ontology of the poetic self, the communal whole, and of language itself. Long poetry documents the poetic longing of selfhood, in all of its singular, plural, and linguistic formats.

In an examination of Nichol’s Book 5, Ann Munton suggests that the structural underpinnings of this collection depend on the construction of community as a site of connection. Nichol’s own desire for human association, correspondence, and intimacy motivate the design of the text: “he is concerned with community and the connections between people. Much of *The Martyrology* deals with Nichol as a member of a community: community of family, community of friends, and community of fellow writers. He is concerned with the connections made in life and those continued after a death” (“Coming to a Head, ‘in a head, ahead’ of Us All: Connecting with Book 5” 214). As such, Book 5 is organized into what Nichol titles as ‘Chains,’ individuated chapters that also contain numbered footnotes directing the reader to any of the other twelve chains; the sequence of the book, then, is disrupted, and the readerly event is self-determined. One exercises volition and agency by deciding to adhere to the numbered redirections or to ignore them entirely, preferring to read in a ‘standard’ fashion from start to finish. Munton theorizes on this organizational structure, suggesting that Book 5 is synecdochal for the entire project; the invitation of self-referentiality as a component of the participant’s experience, here emphatically proffered in the form of labyrinthine footnotes, parallels one of the entire aims of the poem as a whole. Book 5’s numbered footnotes serve as only one of the long poem’s appeals to invoke the reader’s participation in
perpetuity: “Connections are, then, the subject of *The Martyrology*, as well as providing a symbolic structure (maps and bridges) and a formal structure. Just as the books themselves speak to each other through repetition and expansion, so too the twelve chains of Book 5 speak to each other, their very form embodying this crucial relational notion” (214). Munton describes this self-referentiality as a formal, communicative process, leading to a “crucial relational notion.” The myriad forms of communication that populate *The Martyrology*—writing, speech, song, prayer, confession—are cause for alliance, association, and relation, be it textual or personal connection.

Munton identifies movement and mobility in the various chains of Book 5 as a metaphorical strategy for realizing Nichol’s affinity for communication; Nichol’s language often couples a journey with the eventual and desired destination of camaraderie—destination as people and not necessarily place, destination as connection and not necessarily location:

praying for
connection
some bridge between himself & the void that threatens
drivin' long
writin' poems that come out song
sound tracking a life (Chain 1, Book 5)

As Munton says, the longed-for connections are thematized as subject and structure in the work; in Chain 1, destinational trajectory is less vital than the twofold act of movement and documentation. As a motivating structure throughout *The Martyrology*, movement and documentation mingle and become reflexive of one another—the poetic continuation of pages
comes to match the self-referential moments within the work which seek to comment on and negotiate with the poem as a whole. Nichol writes that, in the movement (“drivin’ long”), a relationship can form between the production of poetry (“writin’ poems that come out song”) and the poetic response to the production itself (“sound tracking a life”). Nichol’s employment of the word ‘tracking’ has multiple meanings. Firstly, an aural pun: Nichol has already conflated sound with poetry, intentionally confusing the act of writing with the outcome of music, suggesting that the myriad forms of communication throughout *The Martyrology* are singly unified as enactment of expression. The aural pun of “sound tracking,” then, doubly suggests the relationship between music that accompanies a road trip (the soundtrack of the journey) as well as the sound-as-poetry following and replicating the ontological movement (the poetry tracking the life of the poet). The word ‘tracking’ is also etymologically connected to tracing and trekking, respectively suggesting the affiliation with copying and traveling (“track,” *New Oxford American Dictionary*). Nichol pointedly makes the connection between movement and documentation in the closing remarks of Chain 1:

```
between the birds

dull roar of traffic

[...]

i make these glyphs for you

chronicles of a journey

more the tracing of rhymes referred to

words

names
```
ways we have of thinking thru this world you gave us
without ties
we i's that write & writ all literature
of which my voice is now a part or
more a counterpoint in a vast theme (Chain 1, Book 5)

The opening lines suggest the proximity of travel, the “dull roar of traffic” indicating that movement is an inherent quality of this space. The speaker then goes on to integrate the act of written production—named through glyphs and engaging through the acts of chronicling and tracing—with the available “journey.” Nichol’s destination, as mentioned earlier, favours community rather than locale. The ‘i’ of authorship, of creativity, of literature, is combinatorial, incorporating the entirety of all who participate. Similarly, Nichol integrates the “relational notion” that Munton writes of by exploring the relationship between the individual and the communal; Nichol’s ‘i’ is included in the “vast theme” of literature that it is writing to, as it both writes from within (“now part”) and towards or against (“more a counterpoint”) its very vastness.

Nichol’s conflation of aurality and mobility also appears in Book 6 Books, particularly Book II: A Book of Hours, a subtext within Book 6 that is guided by numerical sequentiality in the form of 28 different sections of connected poetic entries marked by an hour stamp. Hour 15 deliberately echoes Chain 1, Book 5, with many of its essential puns and words re-utilized to continue Nichol’s themes of poetic polyphony and movement playing out across the project as a whole, specifically with the multiple expositions of ‘track’ previously mentioned:

1(2(conversations in another room
sound tracks

'can't leave them lying 'round'

'off the wall'

shuffle

over me

say hello to friends

CARRY ON (a conversation)

[…]

in the end

where does the poem live but in this din

in the midst of this accompaniment

so much a part of the intent

its written out of

audio densities i return it to)3)4 (Hour 15, Book II: A Book of Hours, Book 6 Books)

The vocality of those that are gathered in this setting indicates community, dialogue, and communication through transmittance. The myriad conversations are bountiful, and they are described with a language of mobility. Again, Nichol employs the pun of “sound tracks” to indicate accompaniment (which is later stated in the closing lines) through fellowship; to track
is to trek, or to “shuffle,” as he writes. The capitalized declarative “CARRY ON” is a forcible command to remain in motion; this is expanded into a second meaning, where the instruction is to keep the conversation itself in motion, thereby allowing the speakers and what is being spoken to intermingle and circulate around one another. At the close of this Hour, Nichol equates writing with sound, stating that the poem resides “in this din” and that they accompany and match one another in their not-so-separate acts of development. The structural numbers that open and close the Hour—“1(2 […] 3)4”—are musical in their own right; they serve as a conductor or band leader’s introduction into a piece of music, setting the rhythm and time signature of the piece. These numbers envelop Hour 15 in order to emphasize the sonic characteristics of this work in relation to the poetic characteristics through words; by employing the multiple voices afforded to him through the numbers and letters, Nichol is able to signal his close associations of music and poetry through these pairings. In the closing lines, the poem that is written is able to ‘return it to)3)4”—that is, Hour 15 stylistically begins in numerical (musical) form and journeys back to this form as language returns to numbers in the closing lines “to[2])3)4.”

Elsewhere in Chain 1, Book 5, Nichol further complicates his usage of the theme of motion, leading to a circling and dizzying cycle of puns; in this, the inevitability of conclusion is at odds with syntactical propulsion:

   ending on a definite note
   moves the poem forward
   like a foot
   a foot note (Chain 1, Book 5)
Nichol’s syntactical arrangement—endnotes leading forward or ahead to footnotes—is directionally advancing; yet by engaging in the readerly expectation of syntactical momentum, one encounters the discrepancy in the disordered arrangement. This excerpt is meta-referential for the non-sequentiality of the entire book; a footnote can easily disrupt any security of end or conclusion. More specifically, however, the suggestion is that termination results in continuation. Nichol situates the metrical movement in the poetic feet, thereby imbuing the act of writing and reading with travel, momentum, and energy. Frank Davey notes that a striking characteristic of the long poem is to uproot narrative sequence, and that the aim of the long work is to document these sources of motion and passage through continuation:

The very structures writers have used to replace sequential narrative—collage, symphonic form, geography, play, recurrent image—become, if successful, other kinds of narrative, sources of motion, energy, and surprise. The poem ultimately becomes a narrative of this energy, the energy of a structure going through recognition, recurrence, and connection. In part, the length of the long poem derives from the wish of the writer to follow this energy as far as possible. (The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem 8)

Davey’s comments further solidify the relation between form and content in the long poem, that the long poem, specifically, engages with the resemblance between these two items. To re-interpolate Nichol’s passage—“writin' poems that come out song / sound tracking a life” (Chain 1, Book 5)—the poetical expression manifests as poetry and chronicles the ontological process of poetry itself; the long writing resembles the long living of the poet.

Munton, in many ways, is fascinated by the circular and connective intersections between ontology and writing that Nichol both utilizes and proffers throughout the entirety of
Book 5, labeling it as a book concerned with its own status as an independent and dependent component of the entire long poem that is *The Martyrology*: "The very frame of Book 5 represents the pivotal nature of the book, looking as it does both back to the first four books and forward to the following ones, becoming both funnel and crux of the work as a whole, as well as focussing on the present of the writing and reading" (215). Book 5 is inherently unique amongst the various books of *The Martyrology* precisely because of its formal utilization of the ‘Chains’; the various footnotes that serve as alternative reading patterns or directives keep the reader internalized in the reading practice as if the book itself is desirous of solipsism or hermeticism. As Nichol, himself, states in “A Note on Reading *The Martyrology* Book V”: “footnote numbers actually represent reading choices. As a reader you can continue thru the chain of ideas you’re already following, or you can choose, at different points, to diverge & follow the chain of ideas the various numbered options represent.” Nichol’s endnote discusses chains as associative, linking, and successive methods in the reading process. Simultaneously, however, is Nichol’s secondary employment, for the word obviously implies imprisonment and restraint. The book’s structure is contradictory; Munton, however, addresses these contradictions by stating that Book 5, itself, is pivotal, both in its central position of the entire project and in its independent mode of directives and functions through the Chains. Book 5 inherently proffers two items of intent to the reader and the poem as a whole: firstly, it so often reflects on its own position within the larger, poetic context through its employment of mobile rhetoric and self-quotation, presenting it with a directional (and, of course, the ‘di’ prefix encompasses Munton’s insistence on the back and forward looking of the whole project) impetus and mode; secondly, it encourages the reader to focus “on the present of the writing and reading” (215) through the self-containment of the avenues and trajectories of the
footnotes, insisting the reader fully occupies the acts of presence and agency while reading.

There is a sense of containment in Book 5’s arrangement, encompassing, incorporating, and then possessing the reader in his or her movements, possibly endless, through the entirety of the work. Steve McCaffery notes the motional quality of the book and describes the act of reading as an inherently spatial maneuver:

_The Martyrology_ suggests writing as a spatial practice. For example, the multiple choices of Book 5’s chains promise perambulatory gestures, walks, digressions (sidesteps) etc. This dominance of spatiality seems guaranteed by the presence of fragments rather than wholes […] [This] suggest[s] its consideration as a major text of space rather than a poetic journal of lived time. (“In Ten[st]ion: Dialoguing with bp” 87)

Book 5’s spatiality, then, constructs a theoretical and paginational method of involvement and movement. McCaffery’s mobile language heightens the reading act as an exploration based on the method of movement; metaphorically, McCaffery notes that the different methods of travel available to the reader—citing perambulation, walking, and digression—imitate the different and numerous footnotes within the Chains. To speak in the metaphor of various movements is to correspond with the various movements the reader makes in the agency of choice—again, the movement from Chain to Chain favours destination as connection and not necessarily location. Though, to be clear, each footnote comes to _locate_ the reader in a specific placement within the physical arrangement of the text, the process is potentially interminable, thereby privileging the act of transference over the location of transference. As McCaffery says: “If
writing occurs as a spatial practice, then writing is always the practice of moving to something else” (89).

To further McCaffery’s words on movement, Munton also looks at Nichol’s application of directional investigation as a means for introducing the inherent relationship between pasthood and futurity, one borne out of a present, explorative impetus: "As time flows both ways for Nichol, so does his journeying; back for answers and connections in his past, to forward his life and literature into his and our future" (228). In Chain 3, Nichol again mentions ‘tracing’ as an action invoking script, but the arrangement of time brings the past, present, and future moments into synthesis:

journal entry: august 26 77
'i drive the martyrology daily
retracing lines i have already written' (Chain 3, Book 5)

Whether the actuality of the journal entry is verifiably existent is irrelevant; what is occurring, however, is a past textual experience being invoked through reading and being updated into the present moment. Initially, the correspondence between past and present occurs when the journal entry from the past (dated 1977) is quoted and assimilated into the present of Book 5 (firstly published in 1982). Yet the quoted line enacts a formation of time, in that repetition, like quotation, signals reconsideration. The act of ‘tracing’ within the action of a journey, first mentioned in Chain 1, finds a reformation as ‘retracing’ in the catalogue of a journal. Chain 3’s passage has a simultaneous appearance of similarity and dissimilarity to Chain 1’s passage. The roots of “tracing” and the etymological foundations of “journ” remain as constants in both sections; yet Chain 3 introduces a modification to both “tracing” with the prefix “re” and the
suffix change of “journey” to “journal,” resulting in a pun and further link between movement and writing. Chain 3 operates as a reiteration of past time in the present/future moments by its general reintroduction of pasthood (clearly denoted by the date stamp) through quotation and by its specific rearticulation of identifiable markings from Chain 1.

Davey notes that Nichol identified, in a notebook entry from 1976, a causal and linked usage through a triad of nexuses borne out of his contemplation of Chains: “he had identified three of these—a ‘main chain’ that concerned local Toronto events, a chain that was set outside the city, and one that spanned stretches of time and reconsidered early things he had written” (aka bpNichol 190). The first two items speak to Nichol’s consideration of associative, creative scenes—his positions as poet, sound performer, editor, visual artist, and friend are held in his latter home within Toronto and without the city limits, reaching to wherever his constant traveling took him to. His affiliation as artist to artistry, in whatever boundless form, shape, or sound it took, demanded integrations with people within their very spaces; as Davey notes, his main chain of association and camaraderie existed within Toronto but was expansive enough to include all matter of spaces outside of that given city itself. Davey’s third item, however, attests to The Martyrology’s specific propensity to be expansive and encompassing, particularly as a technique acted out through self-referentiality and self-citation. Davey notes that Nichol, in an attempt to combat a particular bout of writer’s block during the production of Chain 6, wondered whether earlier poetic works—Monotones and “Journeying and the Returns”—could be “‘filtered’ through Book 5 as a text being reread, or being reconsidered, or being rewritten as a ‘negative’ linguistic image of itself” (205). Davey proffers an elucidation of these three terms or tasks; particularly, the three of them find similarity in their attempt to be motivational and generative to the larger project as a whole:
To ‘reread’ was likely the creating of a new text that reads closely or deconstructively an earlier text’s words and sentences; to ‘reconsider’ may indicate a new text that responds to the earlier subject matter; a ‘negative’ was the method Barrie had used before of creating a ‘reverse’ of a text—a new text that has a relationship to its original akin to a film negative’s relationship to its positive print.

(205)

_The Martyrology_, at myriad points throughout its entirety, and comprehensively in Book 5, attempts to be accumulative and collective with its re-invitation of other Nichol texts and _The Martyrology_ itself; the attempt at all times is for the text to be oriented in language and in itself:

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ten years & more after the poem begins
the simplest letters lead me
i am brought back
thru language
    home (Chain 1, Book 5)
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And later:

```
take it all in
the bad & the good
the could have as well as the was
ask yourself what you're doing
when you're going in these words (Chain 4, Book 5)
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The opening epigraph to Book 5 by Jean Cocteau treats language as a navigable space: “The greatest literary masterpiece is no more than an alphabet in disorder.” The “simplest letters” lead Nichol home, a reference to Wildwood Park as well as an establishment of nostalgic impulses. Language serves as a map, two of which open and close Book 5, and its markers of reference and positioning.

Douglas Barbour, like Davey, notes that Book 5 is highly conscious and desirous of a self-textual accretion, one which prompts the poem, poet, and reader to anticipate the transformative act of referentiality: “One of the things that happens in Book 5, then, is that in its insistence on mapping new readings and mis-readings of the earlier Books, it argues through its self-transformations the (f)act of even one's own text as a space to be entered and traversed again and again. Re / versed. Per / versed. Certainly per / used for new possibilities of inscription” (“Some Notes in Progress about a Work in Process” 219). Barbour’s language, perhaps just as playful and unpredictable as Nichol’s, suggests that the process of return, through journeying and re-journeying, yields new discoveries, novel territories to roam, fresh findings to encounter. His pun with “Re / versed,” citing that to go backwards is to verse or write again, suggests that language changes upon a re-visititation; through its perusal, a text can become perverse in its erratic or unpredicted shifts, versatility, and mobility.

The poetic, journal form that Nichol utilizes throughout The Martyrology is the utanikki. George Bowering, in an article mainly responsive to Book 6’s section “Continental Trance” but also concerned with Nichol’s project as a whole, suggests that “[u]tanikki are diary writings, usually associated with a long journey, or with family members […] In addition they make one continuously aware of the flow of time—as little images of life are blinked open, their immanent vanishing is noted” (“bpNichol on the Train” 15). Nichol himself ruminates on
his categorization of the poetic form, proffering two particular explanations in “Syntax Equals the Body Structure”; the first is as such: "And since, in a curious way, the saints were language, or were my encounter with language, the possibility of the journal form of the utanikki form also opened up—I was writing my history of the saints, my history of my encounter with language" (275). Under Bowering’s own definition, it is logical that Nichol’s encounter with both his saints and language is dual and binary—the ephemerality of the figures of martyrs is both subject to the ontological opening and vanishing that Bowering accounts throughout the flow of time, mainly Nichol’s understanding of historical time.

Nichol’s second explanation of the utanikki discusses another dual or vicissitudinal quality, one which is continuously interruptive: "Essentially, what you get in the utanikki is a mixture of prose interrupted by poetry, interrupted by prose, interrupted by poetry, interrupted by prose, and that linkage goes on. Though that is obviously not precisely what happens in The Martyrology, what does happen is a constant formal interruption" (275). The process of vacillation, which Nichol defines as a “constant formal interruption,” is most discernibly identified in the Chain structure of Book 5, for the poetic chains, themselves, are cause for interruption and linkage. The volition required of the reader when encountering the various Chains becomes cause for either adherence or repudiation, leaving the individual in an undetermined gap; traversing through the readerly demands of the Chains is infused with pauses of selection, variety, agency—again, the poem is erected as map, as cartographical election.

In “bpNichol on the Train,” Bowering conflates, biographically and poetically, Nichol as man and poet, suggesting that The Martyrology arises out of the poet’s own personal proclivities and happenings: “He travels a lot, as a poet and as a Nichol. Over the whole of his
adult life much of that travel has been in long train trips. While he travels he writes. His journals are also journeys” (8). Bowering’s observations elucidate the relationship Nichol shares with travel, thereby suggesting travel becomes a necessary reliance in the poetic texts. Shirley Neuman, too, locates the conflation between journeying and journaling within Chain 9, which inextricably compounds travel and writing with the portmanteau ‘journeynal’:

what is it makes up the poem

journeynal

a longing work

[...]

feelings & the way you say them

all alongingly the way (Chain 9, Book 5)

Neuman defines the word as “Journeynal: a journey and a journal, all a lifelong work of longing” (“‘Making in a universe of making’ in The Martyrology” 56). Nichol forthrightly names The Martyrology as a log or scribe presently concerned with propulsion: “carry the poem forward / journal / the utanikki” (Chain 3, Book 5). This passage allows The Martyrology to characteristically claim, concurrently, poem, journal, and utanikki by means of identification. The act of carrying suggests that the written work, imbedded in the pages and lines themselves, possesses and bears the transportive speaker and his ontological station. Also mentioned in Chain 3 is another iteration of the affinity between existence and language:

life

the poem

parallels from which words flow
connections that are made
aid you in your journeying (Chain 3, Book 5)

“[L]ife” and “the poem” are formulated as parallels of one another from which words emanate; the coupling of ontology and language leads to the act of journeying. And journeying assumes a destination, surely; yet Nichol resists the arrival of destination, advocating for movement as justifiably pleasing in itself. Similarly, Chain 8 recapitulates the relationship between “life” and “the poem”:

a life
the poem reaches its own end
conclusion
drawn back
into the round of voices
speech & print
words sprint for immortality
'we all die anyway'
human

[...] we meet again in the great noise among the languages the breathing
end of one dream
beginning of another (Chain 8, Book 5)

In the parallel relationship between ontology and language, expiration and finality are resisted; instead, both recirculate and arrive at the sound of voices and of written language. Speech and print coalesce, arriving at mobility in the form of the punning portmanteau of “sprint.” This passage metonymically replicates the operation of the larger Chain structure of Book 5. Language and the reading process arrive at an end, yet the end is temporary, dismissed in the possibility of rounding to a starting point, a pre-journey positioning. In typical Nichol wordplay, vocality is favoured over locality; the subjects encounter one another at a site of sound and breath, as orality indicates ontology. Yet the passage simultaneously depicts a musical performance of sound poetry, obviously evidenced by Nichol’s participation in the troupe The Four Horsemen. This is a portrayal of a round in a musical cycle in which many voices stagger their respective start and end points, causing the polyphonic layering of voices and the sounds, utterances, and clamour created by the separate entities working in unison. In the function of a round, voices stratify and indicate to the performers when successive phrases necessarily begin and end; in the simultaneity of multiple markers of ingress and egress, “immortality” and death themselves are correspondent. The “end of one dream [or voice, poem, Chain, ontological position]” inherently and perpetually formulates the “beginning of another.”

The interchange between the various fixtures at work—journeying/journaling, genesis/completion, historical time/future time—becomes a surety of propulsion. The formal composite of Book 5 insists on the correspondence inherently transmittable between the reach
of the poem and its limitations; often, then, when the imminence of limitation—routinely in
the form of death and non-language—approaches the text, the text retreats back into itself to
re-locate a sense of momentum:

tho i hang back from the full feeling
wonder 'is this real?'
its real when i talk to you
speak the saints by name
call my friends forth
into the instant of the poem
make connections from form
back into content (Chain 3, Book 5)

As the historical moment (“tho i hang back”) encounters the present moment (“into the instant
of the poem”), the precipice of finality is reached—but a propulsive opportunity is recognized.
These final two lines are a display of invocation or summoning; community is again
constructed as a site of connection, and form returns the poem “back into content.” The saints
and friends of The Martyrology are requested, and in this congregational space of instance, the
poem is connected or chained to its propulsive action. As Lola Lemire Tostevin addresses:
“Nichol’s poetics constantly offer new chains […] that intersect and glide from one textual and
temporal region to the next” (“Paternal Body as Outlaw” 79). The discursive function of the
chains, Tostevin suggests, links and reconciles disparity—borne out of temporal, emotional,
linguistic, and transportational distances. The discourse of the poetics—the course of the
poetics—becomes an expected state of reciprocity:
there is a strong sense of history throughout his writing, but the story behind the
history always refers back to language, the physicality and musicality of language
moving though the moment of writing, moving through time making his sense of
timing atemporal, the moment, the reciprocal envelopment of past and future.

(Tostevin 78)

Interchange, as a correspondence between the many binaries constructed in the text, mobilizes
*The Martyrology* as a unifying and coupling act.

Chain 3 presents two particular assemblages of ontological and non-ontological
consequences; again, language becomes a site of community, bringing together camaraderie
and poetry:

thinking of the lives

the deaths of friends

i've come to equate life & the poem

in touch at last with the real mysteries (Chain 3, Book 5)

Despite the inclusion of disabled camaraderie, poetry presents Nichol with an occasion to
espouse existence; stanzaically, the definition and sentience of the individuals are recalled
through the death of these friends, finally leading Nichol to return to existence as the
propagated constituent of poetry. A slight ambiguity appears in the following excerpt, in that
ontology and non-ontology are given rather equal positioning; the two, in their inextricability, give pause to one another and confound with one another’s essence:

work my life with my own hands as best i can
accepting the help friends grant me
granting them what help i’m able
more able than i sometimes believe
i believe this life goes on
i believe this life ends
& God i ask nothing more than what those two limitations extend (Chain 3, Book 5)

Both the continuation and the cessation of life are defined as “limitations,” but perhaps Nichol’s wordplay elucidates the possible ambiguity in this impasse. Though the lines “i believe this life goes on / i believe this life ends” nearly structurally equal one another, Nichol ultimately favours ontology as a motivating force through language. Though life may end, its end becomes the composite of the word “extend”; the end is subsumed and elongated in the word “extend,” essentially prompting a furthered ceaselessness with language begetting more language.

This cognate manner of punning, which relies on engulfment and enlargement, occupies the establishing gestures of Book 5 as a whole. The opening to Chain 1 reads:

a road
a rod
a walk along

a long day

a dying night

an art

a log

a journal that is right

here

ere i begin (Chain 1, Book 5)

The cooperation from line to line depends on this interaction between form and content mentioned explicitly in Chain 3, each subsequent stanza birthed by its predecessor. The primacy of the letter ‘a’ is insisted upon in these few lines, establishing the fundamental reliance on language at the onset of Book 5 as, triply, a conclusion to Book 4, an inception of a new poetics of chains, and a necessary and inevitable continuation of *The Martyrology* proper. The word ‘road’ misplaces its vowel in its counterpart ‘rod,’ and the vowel appears thrice in the third line, the word ‘along’ quickly detaching into ‘a long’; the word ‘day’ misplaces the vowel again at the beginning of ‘dying,’ materializing in indefinite articles, as it also has in every preceding line, introducing each major noun until the conclusion of this section. The word ‘night’ locates the letter ‘n’ from within ‘along’ and ‘long’ at its own beginning, quickly shifting it to the end of the other indefinite article ‘an.’ The word ‘log’ synonymously morphs
into ‘journal,’ and the section closes with the slippery location of ‘here’ reverting to the past tense marker of ‘ere.’ Nichol beckons the reader to traverse these lines, follow the markers of meaning and playfulness. Particular attention must be paid to the couplet “an art / a log.” Nichol has partially named his text—The Martyrology. Yet what is also present, through slight omission, is the word ‘analog,’ demonstrating the near-infinite analogs that Book 5 and the poem as a whole proffer. Specifically, however, is the analogous relationship between travel and writing that is continuously insisted upon—again, to journey is to journal. Brian Henderson writes:

That The Martyrology opens many vistas, prospects, and roads for the reader journeying through it is indicative of the central image of that work, and much of Nichol's other writing as well: the pilgrimage. Travelling is a movement of discovery as well as of abandonment, and though it must take account of past occurrence and provokes speculation about the future, its essence is participation, observation, imagination—for the journey is always present, happening immediately, though problematically. ("Soul Rising out of the Body of Language: Presence, Process and Faith in The Martyrology" 111)

Traversing these lines leads to the substantiated dependence in textuality, recording, journaling, writing—destinationally, the journey leads to the journal. Nichol states that, in its presence and consistence, the journal is stationed ‘here,’ not unlike Henderson’s observation that “the journey is always present.” Henderson later goes on to remark that Nichol’s play with time again relies on the primacy of presence: “Memory and history, though about the past, always occur in the here and now” (120). Memory, history—even poetic and artistic tradition—prevail and manifest in the present tense, though they once found their situatedness
in the past; perhaps, then, relegation leads to restoration. The journal greets Nichol “ere [he] begin[s],” both ontologically and artistically, in a present here-ness (or hear-ness); the author and the text continuously, then, “meet again in the great noise” (Chain 8, Book 5).

Chapter One established movement—the physical journeying of the individual and the syntactical advancement of language through the writing/reading acts—as an activity of being. *The Martyrology* continuously insists on integrating these myriad methods of travel into language’s function of confirming its own and the poet’s ontology. Chapter Two will expand on long poetry’s tendency to name its subjects and authors through this movement in the recording of multiple linguistic signatures available to the poet.
Chapter Two: Semiotics of the Long Poem in Book 4: Confronting Multiple Signatures

*i signs
*i signifies
*i sings – The Martyrology, Gifts: Book(s) 7 & , “read, dear”

The Martyrology is an elusive text that facilitates constant variability and flux. From the portraits of the saints in Books 1 and 2 that dissolve and reformulate into different portraits to the song book and passion play of Book 9, Nichol privileges the eclectic and enveloping nature of what the long poem affords him. In order to construct a poetic selfhood through long poetry, Nichol employs a paradigm of constantly shifting semiotics. By way of signature, The Martyrology relentlessly configures the author (or his multiple selfhoods of subjectivity) in a textual and readable way—that is, Nichol adopts countless iterations of his poetic self and deposits them throughout the work as evidence of his ontological presence. Paul de Man, in his explanation of semiotics, describes it as a “study of signs as signifiers; it does not ask what words mean but how they mean” (1516). This distinction between the what and the how of linguistic meaning favours the processes and methods by which signatory meaning is provided to the reader. de Man also states that semiotics is a procedure of constant revelation through reading, that it is reliant on a constant and multiple process of updating its given form during any point of the reading act: “The interpretation of the sign is not […] a meaning but another sign; it is a reading, not a decodage, and this reading has, in its turn, to be interpreted into another sign, and so on ad infinitum” (1518). Nichol’s signs develop meaning precisely in how they shift from one form to the next. As an establishment of selfhood through autobiography, his signs are substitutive in their movements. The substitution of one variant of signature to the next is an exercise of transfiguration through re-presentation. By way of syntax, spelling
conventions, etymology, anagrams, and, most roundly, puns, Nichol widely permeates the text in an effort to exhibit his selfhood. Long poetry’s enfolding of multiple generic strains becomes a direct mirroring of these multiple signatory displays.

In his understanding of the long poem, Frank Davey suggests that its generic intent is to abound in dissimilar functions, tropes, expectations, and possibilities, when compared to other facets of long writings. The long poem, then, is tasked with introducing a novelty that is absent from previous iterations of the long poem genre; through its self-mobilization, one of the long poem’s crucial characteristics is to move or propel itself into a new type of language: "this is the central task of the long poem: to drive right past St As Is into new territory, into new languages, into surprise. To write long poems that are not, in sign, in image, in structure, like earlier long poems" (The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem 19). Utilizing Nichol-esque wordplay, Davey creates his own Saint in his manipulation of the word ‘stasis’; the long poem is meant to disregard this Saint, abandon the “as is” and progress from inactivity into accretion. This proclamation of total newness is, for the long poem, an inherent impetus reliant on a discourse of movement; not only does the long poem document a process of distance, depth, and length in theme, but the long poem propels itself towards a generic reliance on movement—out from one and into another. Davey later states that the inclusivity and absorption of the long poem allows it a sense of malleability and pliability when it considers what to integrate: "I expect the long poem to encroach further upon fiction […] And to encroach elsewhere. For the successful long poem exults in new signs, thefts, adventures" (20). Davey’s description carries with it a sense of cunning, that the long poem, at once, seeks adventure and surprise, and can be accused of (or lauded for) thievery and encroachment.
Both of the aforementioned passages also articulate the long poem’s utilization of the sign, something Nichol exploits and harnesses, in word and action, throughout the entirety of \textit{The Martyrology}. Davey doubly mentions that the sign of the long poem, at its most core intention or utilization, is to proclaim generic divergence and departure. Hence, a given long poem, in its state as a long poem, signals that it is departing \textit{away} from other, previous long poems. In doing so, Davey suggests that the long poem becomes “successful” in its “adventures.” Brian Henderson, too, acknowledges that \textit{The Martyrology} as a long poem encounters the sign in language, albeit in a form of pilgrimage seeking sacredness: “For Nichol then, it is a \textit{journal} journey. It is through the landscape of letters and words that the pilgrim moves, encountering saints and signs of the sacred” (“Soul Rising out of the Body of Language: Presence, Process and Faith in \textit{The Martyrology}” 112). Henderson’s comments largely derive from Nichol’s Book 4, as this book displays Nichol’s employment of language that is largely infused with notions of signature through music. Nichol, himself, suggests that Book 4’s repertoire coalesces into a sensual totalization of participation—reading \textit{The Martyrology}, at this point in its chronology, demands a visual, aural, and oral involvement. As the poet says: “By the fourth book I had managed to bring together the eye, the ear, and everything” (“Interview: Caroline Bayard and Jack David” 180). Nichol displays this arrangement of sensuality in the following passage, playfully incorporating references to his nominality and the musicality of the individuated letters:

\begin{quote}
the d will out  
as the b drops thru its  
half note  
configuration
\end{quote}
i is singing scale

i hails you

[…]

the oral hang-ups change

a concern for listening (Book 4)

Nichol references his first two initials, b and p, with the letters d and b—the letter d is a mirror of the letter b, and the letter b, besides suggesting Barrie, can be turned upside down to form the letter p, suggesting Phillip. Similarly, the three letters all represent half notes on the bass and treble clefs in musical notation. The letter b, for example, simultaneously refers to the second letter of the alphabet, the first letter of the name Barrie, and the various b notes in half measure on the scales. Further, the letters d and b embody a vertical mirroring as well as a horizontal mirroring, thereby connecting to the lines later written: “i found / myself caught up in a) mirror image / (no way to notate the break” (Book 4). Placed beside one another, the lower-case letters d and b form a visual palindrome. Further is the fortuity of both notes serving as the exact middle notes of each clef—d for the bass and b for the treble. Depending on the notes’ placements on the scales, the stems of each half note form the various alphabetic shapes of b, d, and p. The letter i, in the lines “i is singing scale / i hails you,” also signals the poet’s name, in that the i is the only vowel to appear in all three of the poet’s names—Barrie Phillip Nichol. Specifically, the i, which is bpNichol, sings his name, borne out in b’s and p’s, across the reaches of the notational clefs.

Nichol later transforms the characteristics of his name to claim his own personhood:
sense out of nonsense
N of sense

(which is me)
i spell out changes
realign essentials
as i thot to
sing a balance sing (Book 4)

Nichol imports the N of Nichol into the reconstructive move of “nonsense” to the “N of sense,” thereby involving himself in the transition from unmeaning to meaning. Besides being evidenced in the selected rhetoric—transitioning from nonsense to sense—Nichol also proclaims and justifies his own inclusion, suggesting that he, as poet and signifier through N, is deserving of this stanzaic positioning. Similarly, the following line maintains the identical aim of authorship in name through the authoring of the lines themselves; “i spell out changes” recalls the i of Barrie Phillip Nichol, and it also stands as self-commentary on the line itself—the i of bpNichol is present in these various signifiers, and the i also commands these changes to authorially occur. Nichol, as poet, governs the conveyance of these changes in the signified, shifting nonsense into the N of sense and “questions to answer / answer’s an A / B / ginning” (Book 4) and the following alphabetic enumeration:

i want the world
absolute & present
all its elements
el
Suddenly, every N/en represents Nichol, every b/B/be/being/Being represents Barrie, every p represents Phillip, and every i represents the entirety of Barrie Phillip Nichol. In the various mirrors he has erected in but a few of these recent passages—“p q” and “b d,” which are not unlike the relationships he designs between M as an upside-down W and H as a sideways I—letters beyond b, p, and n continuously typify the poet. q and d represent a mirrored or disguised Nichol. The poet claims ownership over his lines by leaving his signature, in any arrangement or rearrangement it may wish to take.

Nichol has discussed this recurrent word play (or, perhaps, letter play) in comments made in correspondences and interviews with Mary Ellen Solt and Ken Norris. In “A Letter to Mary Ellen Solt” Nichol writes: “the key word was women i looked at it & saw ‘w’s omen’ & it struck me that W’s omen was that it contained more than itself that it flipped over to become M […] the omen or portent was that i was reading words as sentences that said things about single letters” (116). These same sentiments are echoed in his interview with Ken Norris, suggesting that the letters of a word can be treated syntactically, allowing individual
words their own trajectories: “It led me into a lot of things, eventually into Book IV of *The Martyrology* where I’m reading words as sentences that say things about single letters” (“Interviews: Ken Norris” 241). In the same interview, Nichol expounds upon his poetic process of discovering the doubleness of puns, in which an established letter or word is both a visual symbol and a linguistic conveyance of meaning (and the discussion also raises the third characteristic of sonicism through visuality). Nichol continues his discussion with Norris by situating his own poetry in a semiotics achieved through shifting, visual puns—the semiotics of ancient runes, in particular, allow all letter instances to embody visual meaning:

I really came more to terms with what I think of as the runic potential of the alphabet, which is to say that an ‘a’ is the signifier for an ‘a’ which is the signified and it is itself, so that when you mark down an ‘a’ you are not describing the name of something, you are creating something in the world. At that level of the visuality of the single letter you are creating in the very pure sense of the word, you are creating thingness. (240-1)

The word ‘runes’ is, etymologically, Old English in its current form (*rūn* ‘a secret, mystery’) and Old Norse in its historical form (*rúnir, rúnar* ‘magic signs, hidden lore’) (“runes,” *New Oxford American Dictionary*). Nichol, himself, plays with the hidden signs inherent through a runic-style of referentiality in his punning; as the movement of vowels, in particular, comes to create or de-conceal discrete and separate words, new meaning is signaled by new (through modification) words:

& the lines become as long as the tongue can

/ carry without breathing in
images shift

  blue sky turning back to grey

it is the wind moves it

it is a language the celts knew & spoke of

runes
  (the running e's)
  pass as vowels thru energy

consonants as nouns

vowels as verbs

what are the sentences that form
words they're made of
syntax of alignment i want to see (Book 4)

This passage is a theoretical presentation of how Nichol’s vowel use signals shifting changes in words—that is, the displaced vowels create the shift in meaning brought about through a syntactic advancement. Movement, both as a propulsive energy and a syntactic furtherance through and towards meaning through reading, punningly appears in Nichol’s reimagining of
the word ‘runes’; though it is defined through its etymology as a secretive, mysterious, magical, or hidden sign, Nichol syntactically examines the word as a movement of vowels, a movement that is spurred on by its own activity, transference, or running.

Often, then, the visual pun of a given word, when treated as a syntactical unit, is discoverable through strategic spacing, line breaks, and enjambment. All three techniques disassemble an assumed wholeness inherent in a complete word, eventually allowing words to be fractured and splintered into smaller components which still maintain linguistic coherence (prefixes, root words, and suffixes) as well as accidental and discovered words that are not intentional composites of their larger wholes. A syntactical explication of the following passage will indicate what Nichol is accomplishing in the disassembling of whole words and the shifting of vowels from one dismantled word to the next:

to do what one does
with honour
is the all

ist heal-
l

ling

lang

u age
's h
on
our
hour
the days are marked by their divisions
purpose
less divisive in
the long run
lung ran
lang ren
tall (Book 4)

Beginning with the first stanza, Nichol imports an ontological wholeness through action. The entirety of a life—regardless of its span or duration—results in an accomplishment. One’s action indicates fullness and totality, in that the ontological imperative suggests that being is the summation of what has been done. One’s actions throughout the course of an individual’s existence are defined as absolute and complete: “to do […] is the all.” The innate proposition is that existence is dependent on action—it becomes the signifier of a life lived; to act, behave, speak, or simply do with an accompanying honour is indicative of an experiential and existential wholeness. Nichol’s following stanza begins to manipulate the previous stanza (both in meaning and linguistics) with the shifting emphasis created by word spacing and enjambment. “is the all” becomes “ist heal-” with the space between the first ‘s’ and ‘t’ syntactically shifting to the left by an increment of one and the final ‘l’ of ‘all’ extending into the next line after the dash. The English verb “is” transforms into the German verb “ist,” also a singular, third-person verb. The additional ‘l’ in the rendering of ‘healing’ is faithful to the replication of the double ‘l’ in the previous stanza, but it signals the poetry’s desire for addition, extension, and elongation. “ling” simultaneously references a diverse range of poetic
options. The enjambed spelling of “heal- / ling” ushers in this notion of the extension and continuation of the previous line. It also occupies multiple, morphological positions, simultaneously serving as a referent to two separate nouns, a diminutive suffix, and two etymological links: one, to the word ‘long’ (“long,” New Oxford American Dictionary), through Middle English and Middle Dutch, and the other to ‘lingua,’ Latin for ‘tongue.’ Through the supplanting of vowels, this passage proffers four separate variables (and one returning variable); sequentially, they appear as such: “ling,” “lang,” “long,” “lung,” and “lang.” The Saxon languages use the word “lang” frequently as a cognate to the English ‘long,’ obviously the next in Nichol’s ordering. “long” is altered into “lung,” a source of breath and a metaphorical source of speech, not unlike the reference to the tongue in “ling,” and the cycle closes with a return to “lang.”

The majority of these analogs are corporeal in their linguistic genealogies and utilization in this passage as a whole. As Nichol mentions, the composition of The Martyrology, this sensuality of the project, is insistently indicative of one of language’s major uses: “some new beginning / sensed here / amid the sensory sensation of / speech / these words” (Book 4). The inevitability of birth, growth and extinction, both as the biological process of existence and the linguistic transmutation of all components of written, spoken, pictorial, or musical speech, are a series of actions done by and to the body; when language is presented as “lang / u age,” the imperative act of existing through time, evidenced by aging, highlights the effable length required to indicate the act itself. Time (“hour” and “days”) marks the passage of the body through existence. As the word “runes” was earlier transformed into “the running e’s,” the identical verb is presented in two different tenses; the progressive verb is here expressed in the present and past tenses. As the body and language move, the changes occur to the aging
individual and the transfigured verbs; the “long run” then affects the following line, “lung
ran,” again situating breath inside the utilized breathing apparatus of the individual. Breath and
changing speech become indicative of the body and language user.

Nichol’s understanding of these sites of speech—the lungs, the tongue, the song, the
poem—indicates a fluency of mutation between what is voiced and what is written. Often,
these sites syntactically alter and blend into one another, suggesting a continuation and
transmutation of expressive locales (both bodily and writerly) and techniques (poetry, song,
speech, image). Despite the speaker’s demise, the language ventures towards its sustainment:

the i dies finally
merges with the land's scape
scope increases
the folded page
writes its way into
the longed for

beginning
story
new
song
round
as the lips form (Book 4)
The subjective voice finally dies, perhaps dies with finality, yet is revitalized through transformation; the i is enveloped by the land, which modifies into a folded page, one which then impulsively begins to write upon itself; story becomes song, and the musical, vocal work of a choral round leads to formed lips, ultimately intimating at a circular perpetuity. Nichol replicates a comparable process of transmutation when discussing generic melding, echoing Davey’s aforementioned comments regarding the long poem’s tendency to encroach upon other literary trends:

reading B.S. Johnson earlier this week, discusses Scott's shift from narrative poem to novel, what he saw as the death of the long poem, puzzling its resurgence, its popularity in recent years, i realized the lines had disappeared between the forms, that the novel & the poem were merging finally, a clarity, freedom to move as i choose (Book 4)

Again, this similar language—the subjective i as it concludes or begins with finality, the process of merging and shifting, longing and the long poem, the increase and resurgence of language, the punning and paired language of the “new song” and the “novel & the poem”—accentuates the process of continuation in each instance or section of The Martyrology and also, most necessarily, the process of signifying constancy from one section to the next.

Nichol also imbues the feet of the individual with a poetic source of production, similarly to his sites of orality and breath. The speaker traverses the poetry, in Nichol’s usual and punning way, on prosody’s metrical unit of the foot; the streets, corridors, and passages, another evidential pun indicating a part of literature or song and also an avenue for travel itself, indicate the syntactical and linear pathway for the language to span across the page. This
movement upon the foot, as a writing experience, echoes Michel de Certeau’s understanding of the cityscape as a textual location, one in which the inhabitants unknowingly write atop the streets they traverse upon: “They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it […] The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility” (“Walking in the City” 93). The body’s foot imports itself onto the streets as a utensil capable of textuality, indicating a multifarious pathway of signatory scribing:

the buildings rearranging themselves daily
the city no enemy ever took
because the streets shift even as you walk them
doorways change
familiar only to the saints who lived there
recognized dwelling signs no stranger’d ever see
they went crazy on this earth
only language retaining the multiplicity they were used to (Book 4)

Certeau’s passage reflects the city-dweller’s alienation from the city itself, suggesting a civic unfamiliarity accompanies an individual throughout the contours of the space. The language that is imprinted is doubly indecipherable to the author and the reader—that is, the condition of occupying both stances within the cityscape. In Certeau’s metaphor, a sense of dislocation motivates the walkers throughout the space they find themselves in. Yet, whilst navigating the
city in a bewildered state, the walker creates a text in a digressive and discursive mode, leaving behind the entrails of confusion and uncertainty. Those walking are unaware of the creation of text as a result of their own movements; thus, the legibility of signatures of every individual housed within the cityscape is unauthored and unreadable.

Nichol describes the city as being in a state of vicissitudinous shifting, wherein the city’s components are in flux during the body’s navigation. The “buildings [are] rearranging themselves daily,” “the streets shift even” as they are walked upon, and “doorways change.” The city resists the occupation of its inhabitants, renouncing the ease and feasibility of their participation; it wishes, seemingly, to reject the walker’s attempts to comport him or herself throughout its form. In Nichol’s understanding of the city-as-language, these lines speak of the linguistic mutability and fluctuation of language itself. Etymology provides an historical construct of language, yet words undergo reduction and accretion through morphology, words introduce adaptation through translation processes, and words experience extinction and resurgence. If the city rejects its walkers—if language repudiates its speakers—then the individual must re-learn how to navigate such spaces. The activity of change, loss, shifting, supersession imposes a requisite onto the city dweller; a state of maintenance and adjustability provides a purposeful attentiveness for the dweller, the language-user: “purpose can / become conceit, shift beneath the feet, the line of speech that's called / political, the signified slides below the signifier, gets lost in what's / expedient, the strength of english” (Book 4). Nichol possesses an approving attitude towards the city walker, unlike Certeau; for Nichol, language is legible, decipherable, and approachable. Even though language walks away from the user, the user can elect to walk towards language. Certainly, language alternates, exchanges, and transfigures, but this is a provocation towards the language-user; Nichol asserts that the
language-user must be willing to make a comparable, responsive exertion of willingness to alternate, exchange, and transfigure, both in his/her poetic proclivities of production and tendencies of acquisition (of reading and studying).

Acknowledging that “the duty of a citizen” (Book 4) is to inhabit the city expectantly, Nichol urges the language-user to maintain a vigilance of upkeep—to orient and re-orient, as necessary, to perpetuate the inhabitation. Finality—as it conceptually relates to the demise of a city space for the usage of the public figure or even a concluding hope for *The Martyrology* itself—abates and diminishes the more that Nichol produces in writing. Postponement, however, is a more accurate tendency that Nichol writes towards. The long poem ventures towards an overabundance, an unreadability (due to excess), and a ceaselessness, all of which attempt to suspend an ending. This postponement is a process of deferral, by which the movement through these streets of language evades a terminus:

```
i am thinking it is better left behind
this city they no longer had a use for
make my way thru the shifting streets
along these sheets of paper to an ending

it is not over

it is never over (Book 4)
```

Even though the city’s usefulness and accessibility reach an expirational point in time, with its
inhabitants seeking to depart, Nichol conflates the city space with the space given to the poet; the avenues and corridors the citizen traverses through simultaneously erect themselves as the margins and lines the poet works upon. The city shifts, like the functional key upon the typewriter, providing its user with two (and more) modes of operations, morphing and blending into different options of service for the user. As the streets blend into the sheets of paper, an ending is ultimately promised; but this is undercut immediately with Nichol’s proceeding lines. There is an ambiguity with Nichol’s use of the singular pronoun ‘it,’ in that the word can signal the two preceding, singular nouns: ‘ending’ and ‘city.’ Simultaneously, then, this city is not over, and an ending is never over, or vice versa. As the near-homonymic relationship between ‘streets’ and ‘sheets’ suggests a coalescence, the thematic relationship between the unending city and unending poetry blend, impactfully, into one another. The linguistic relationships that Nichol forms in his wordplay suggest fluency between one word and the next, certainly, but also the expectation of an ending and the immediate renewal from the resisted conclusion:

to write my way thru the books of the dead
let the process take me
thru
    into
the books of the living
& i move now
out of 3
    into 4
or 1

some new beginning

sensed here

amid the sensory sensation of

speech

these words (Book 4)

The corpus of the city and the physical books of *The Martyrology* lead ‘thru’ and ‘into’ one another; the dying cities and books pre-suppose the futurity of living cities and books. Nichol suggests that the signatory qualities of pasthood, evidenced by expiration and extinction, *eventually* foreground and allow the substantiation of further presentations of signature.

Primarily, Nichol’s saints are a conception of language in its material and movable forms; in this, the originary quality of an ‘st’ word is transfigured into poetic meaning simply by the typographical introduction of spacing. ‘st’ words become language’s realization of its own signatory status. Through a linguistic shifting, the lowly and banal ‘st’ words are heightened to a position of nominal referentiality, representing, predominantly, two processes of conversion. Firstly, Nichol’s poetic impetus in discovering the saintliness of language awakens St. Orm from his previous station as, merely, the word ‘storm.’ This first conversion invokes a redemptive quality by bestowing nominality onto the ordinary quality of the various ‘st’ nouns of the whole work. These words are allowed to access their own properties of signature, ultimately providing Nichol with a new beginning in language. Secondly, Nichol goes to great lengths to provide the individual martyrologies of the assorted Saints; in this aim, which is a primary concern in Books 1-4, the supposed deaths of these saints of language are
subverted with the emphasis of their living status through Nichol’s own language that populates The Martyrology. Death is undermined through a process of repurposing:

'you are dead saints'
given back into the drift of print
of speech
born anew among the letters
a different tension
different reach
of logic
of the mind's playing out of
reason (Book 4)

To drift is to shift, speech becomes one’s effort to reach, and the language bears its future iterations. Nichol’s language is genealogical and expectant of future progeny. When investigating his own familial heritage, he also comes to document the reproductive qualities of language bearing more language: “i am / the evidence of / their lovemaking / their spoor” (Book 4). A signature, then, is evidential of a current state of being and a past state of being; Smaro Kamboureli indicates: “Signature functions as a sign that oscillates between the author’s presence and absence in the text” (On the Edge of Genre 170). Signature stands as the instance of self-presentation and self-proclamation, demonstrating one’s beginning originating from one’s ending.

At the close of Book 4, a substitutional form of signature presentation occurs, where the
interplay between text and image becomes another form of self-presentation:

begin again

that way among the tensions

the interplay between the letters

[....]

not in the saints’ names

which was beginnings

but in that space between

the s & t

among the shift of what at first seems arbitrary

‘to go beyond the point where it is even neces-

/sary to think in terms of words’ (Book 4)

This initial interplay issues an ability to “begin again,” formatively reaffirming the reconstruction of words into new words through all of his usual means—puns and spacing, most pointedly. But this final quotation, a journal entry of Nichol’s from April 7, 1964 which also serves as a slightly altered epigraph to Book(s) 7 &, suggests that Nichol seeks to progress past the mode of written language. This is previously verified in the altering images of the saints themselves from Books 1-4, but the conclusion of Book 4 presents a rendered image of Nichol, beyond the various visages of Nichol that occupy the front covers of all of the texts. Nichol is presented with simple line work, the poet’s eyes are closed, and his head and chest spurt from the ground. It is a humble and simple image, and it comes to represent a different
form of signature. The lone image of Nichol moves him beyond the necessity of language, fulfilling a small prophecy his closing words intimate at. But at the bottom of the page, the poet returns to language; ‘january to december 1975’ closes the entirety of Book 4. These are dates of composition, indicating the months that spanned from one beginning to one conclusion, one month shy of an entire year. Yet they also read as graven words of the poet’s existence or even Book 4’s existence; jointly, the text and image appear as a tombstone might, with the time stamp of survival beneath the bust of a (dead) man with closed eyes. The text and the image dually demonstrate Nichol’s presence and absence, assembling the poet’s and the poem’s exhibition of signature.

Chapter Two acknowledged the semiotic role within The Martyrology—multiple signatures invoke and promote generic undertakings within the reach of long poetry. The polymorphic qualities of selfhood reflect the same characteristics within long poetry; it is a form that develops out of the inclusion of various generic strains. A shifting selfhood through semiotics indicates a continuous act of reformulation and recalibration. Chapter Three will discuss the corporeality of the human form and how it is linguistically represented in poetry to establish the ontological casing of the individual.
Chapter Three: The Corporeality of Language in Gifts: Book(s) 7 &

_the body of the poem_ – _The Martyrology_, Gifts: Book(s) 7 &,

“bp: if – August 30, 1988”

Gifts: Book(s) 7 & is a work that accumulates many of Nichol’s other poetic projects and one that was assembled posthumously, albeit with Irene Niechoda’s discovery of Nichol’s scrupulous notes and details for the book(s’) construction. Its inner title page provides a list of the book’s innards: _ASSUMPTIONS, ST. ANZAS, MONOTONES, and SCRAPTURES_. In addition, the ghostly incorporation and presence of Book 8 exists through loose, spineless sheets of poetry under the titles “bp: if” and “body paranoia: initial fugue.” Niechoda’s afterword to this collection details all of these characteristics of the book, noting the astute awareness Nichol had as the condition of his body, mainly his severe and incapacitating back pain, began to dominate the eventuality of producing anymore writing; as it is, these loose and unfastened poems are a “final outrageous gesture [which …] merges the process of his writing life with the materiality of the book” (“Gift / Gifts / Giving: _An Afterword_”). The spineless additions, included under the consideration of their ephemerality and possible loss, become a pun of cognizance and expectation. Nichol’s language has knowingly puned on the existential attributes of its author since Book 1; but the tactility of the form of _The Martyrology_—bound books—finally matches the vulnerability and imminent deterioration of the poet’s body. At the same time, the poet’s body paranoia becomes the poetry’s body paranoia; the demise of Barrie Phillip Nichol’s _corpus_ might lead to the demise of bpNichol’s _corpus_.

The inner title page also includes a cascading poem using ‘bp nichol’ as its linear arrangement with accompanying words that form a vertical poem, one that returns to the
linear, horizontal structure in its final words. The o and l of the poet’s name produce the following words: “old definitions change as language rearranges all the nouns and names you.” The physical nature of the page’s words is accentuated in an effort to read the epigraph. ‘bp nichol’ appears to firstly be a standard signature of the poet. Each letter, though, generates a column of text to be read from top to bottom, not unlike the eastern Asian languages of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, for example. This demands an additional reading direction before the final line under the l returns to the left-right orientation begun by the poet’s name.

The lines that derive from the o and l suggest that the processes of change and rearrangement beget more language; specifically, Nichol’s epigraph begins with a signature, leads to an expansion of that signature through language, and then concludes (by returning to the horizontal language of ‘bp nichol,’ thereby paralleling the signatory structure) with a return to nominality in the act of being named through language.

The phrase “language rearranges all the nouns and names you” completes two specific tasks as they relate to nouns and names. Nichol uproots the standard and archetypal understanding of the noun as a ‘person, place, or thing’ by treating every part of speech—be it a verb, preposition, gerund, et cetera—as a thing itself, and hence a noun, a material thing that can be carried around and positioned. All language is a thing; all of its units are a thing. Thus, “all the nouns” refers to all of language, all of The Martyrology, which, in its rearrangement, results in being continually named. Of course, a name itself is also always a noun, capable of referencing a person, place, and/or a thing. Nichol’s equational pattern in this epigraph shows as much: signature begets language (a rearrangement of signature) which begets signature. What The Martyrology has posited since Book 1 is that signature constitutes ontology. Specifically, signature becomes the metonym of ontology through the multiple processes of
change Nichol utilizes—puns, associations, syntactical shifts, linguistic or symbolic
translation, and homonyms. The word ‘metonymy’ arrives in English through the avenues of
Latin and Greek, and its etymon is “change of name” (“metonymy,” *New Oxford American
Dictionary*). The many signatory markers are in a constantly substitutive role; therefore, the
changing of names is acted out through continual refashioning and refining. This opening
epigraph to Book(s) 7 & synthesizes Nichol’s concerns with the transformation of ontology
through signatory language. Roy Miki makes a comparable observation: “In *The Martyrology*,
bpNichol has discovered an extended form that can be as open as a life is—open to change, to
modifications, to mutations, according to the patterns a life assumes as it is lived” (“The Lang
Poem” 80). Miki’s comments call attention to the adaptability and re-calibration of Nichol’s
long poem when it seeks to pattern itself on its writer’s proclivities, intentions, concerns, and
fascinations; *The Martyrology*, as an art log, records the poet’s ontological totality. It seems
Miki has—as has Nichol in Book 5, Chain 3—“come to equate life & the poem.”

The corporeality of language—perhaps as an expansion of language’s spirituality—is
significant to Nichol’s tendency to write homonymic/homophonic poetry, for the syntactical
advancements in such lines rely on a change to the bodily or physical construct of language
and its spelling conventions. Judith Butler distinguishes the soul from the body through
Christian and Cartesian narratives, suggesting that the body is defiled and rendered as a space
of impurity: these two narratives “understand ‘the body’ as so much inert matter, signifying
nothing or, more specifically, signifying a profane void, the fallen state” (“Gender Trouble”
2491). Butler’s passage suggests that gender disparity discards the female body as the edenic
relegation and the lesser I of the Cartesian model. The body, then, serves as the evidential site
of the soul, and the soul impresses itself onto the body’s contours in an expression of selfhood and identity:

The figure of the interior soul understood as “within” the body is signified through its inscription on the body, even though its primary mode of signification is through its very absence, its potent invisibility [...] The soul is precisely what the body lacks; hence, the body presents itself as a signifying lack. That lack which is the body signifies the soul as that which cannot show. (2496)

The interplay between these inner and outer spheres is afforded to the autonomous being. For the body to convey its own internal impetus, Susan Bordo, through Foucauldian language, describes the use-value of the individual body in the following way: “The intelligible body includes our scientific, philosophic, and aesthetic representations of the body—our cultural conceptions of the body, norms of beauty, models of health, and so forth” (“Unbearable Weight” 2374). Both Butler and Bordo formulate the body as a site of utterance and of language. Nichol perpetually substantiates the corporeality of language through its own lack; Nichol’s variant of the expression of the soul is the expression of language’s longing—its longing to continue, its own linguistic expression of selfhood, and its recurrent corporeal transformation. The sound of a given word—its audible pronunciation—is implicitly connected to its letter arrangement; and when the letter arrangement is modified yet the sound remains constant (or near constant), the alphabetical characteristics of words—both in an initial and secondary rendering—indicate the poetry’s affinity for advancing the reaches of language’s anatomy and structure.
The Scraptures poems maintain a tendency to document the mutability of language through homophones and anagrams. This section’s titularity, itself a portmanteau consisting of ‘scrap’ and ‘scriptures,’ represents an apocryphal nature to language and its roots—that scraps of language can become scriptural, that etymological beginnings may be discarded as they advance from genesis and develop into revelations of expanded meaning. The second section of “Scraptures: 7th Sequence” begins with the anagramic relationship between the words insect and incest; the latter word, taken metaphorically, describes the poetic approach that these Scraptures works take. Words that mix, merge, meld, and fraternize with one another produce linguistic progeny that are closely related in origin: “insect. incest. c’est in. infant. in fonts. onts. onts. pontons. la / lune. la lun.” This literary inbreeding emphasizes the morphology of Nichol’s language, and a poetic genealogy emerges in the lines’ syntax. This “incest” produces an “infant,” which is language, contorted and reconfigured, in a written script (“fonts”) which ultimately evidences existence (in the “ont” root for being); being is subsumed in the bridge (“pontoons” indicating a syntactic passageway for language to travel) before closing with the arrival of the moon. The sequential nature of Scraptures marks the generational and generative action that language takes; each word is pulled through the line’s syntax, producing offspring that are always composites of their previous states and sources of production for their anticipated states.

The opening couplet of the fourth section of the same work reads: “an infinite statement. a finite statement. a statement of infancy. a fine line / state line. a finger of stalemate. a feeling a saint meant ointment.” The condition of infancy is again named, the word finding its etymology through Latin and Old French and meaning “unable to speak” (“infant,” New Oxford American Dictionary); the primacy of language’s etymology, playfully executed in
these associative word relations, produces more language connected to its respective sources and outcomes. As letters appear, disappear, and reappear along the syntactical arrangement of words, each can be considered a body part of the body’s whole; the phrase “an infinite” later spawns “a finite,” “infancy,” “a fine line,” “a finger,” and “a feeling.” As alphabetical parts substitute themselves in and out of the perceived wholeness of a word—and, in Nichol’s work, wholeness is constituted by a lack of spacing between letter groupings as opposed to any language’s firmly established lexicon—these poetic lines serve as a self-referential application of their own status as a malleable form of poetry and also a commentary on the act of producing language through writing. The characteristics of size and shape of a script’s font take the form of “statements” along a “line” of poetry; the linearity of a poem’s organization—metaphorically cognate with an individual’s time line of existence—matches writing with the author’s life. The “font” of the second section is phonetically represented in the amalgamation of these words in section four, as is the “onts”; their reappearance is applied through their separation. Nichol presents the sonics of font/onts in the word “infancy.” And in the closing fragment, the f and the o are again split into the words “feeling” and “ointment.” Language (font) and being (onts) are applied to the body as a salve; language’s saints appear, and Nichol punningly intimates at the salvation inherent in the correlation between language, being, and the body.

“Scraptures: 17th Sequence” is a profuse source for Nichol’s identification with the bodily (and spiritual) distress evidenced in Christ’s suffering during the crucifixion. Without requesting sympathy or utilizing melodrama, the sacrificial qualities of Nichol’s writing and personal existence amalgamate in this particular section. As George Bowering writes: “It is really hard, when you are writing about bpNichol, to stay away from Hagiography” (An H in
the Heart – A Reader XI). Yet Nichol’s opening gestures are subversive and dissenting from those of the scriptures proper, instead undoing Christ’s claims of timelessness by playfully privileging language games through chiasmus:

the religious man practices reversals

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{O} \\
\text{O} \\
\text{alpha} \\
\text{ahpla} \\
\text{omega} \\
\text{agemo}
\end{array}
\]

the reversed man practices religion

Like Douglas Barbour’s comments about the self-referentiality of Book 5, Nichol again employs this pun of rewriting through manipulation: “Re / versed. Per / versed. Certainly per / used for new possibilities of inscription” (“Some Notes in Progress about a Work in Process” 219). The religious man practices re-versing, re-writing—the religious man writes again, and again, and again. The Grecian graphemes as well as Christ’s fulfillment through a divine nominality—that is, Christ’s alignment with and repetition of the book of Isaiah’s passages in the book of Revelation—are both underscored in Nichol’s allusions and dexterity. The syntactical interplay between the religion and reversals permits a simultaneous constructive
and destructive effect; religion allows reversals, and reversals allow religion. If religion here is to be understood, generally, as a belief in and adherence to something of supreme value, perhaps language is Nichol’s supreme value: as he says in Book 1: “saint orm / i throw up these poems / out of the moment of the soul’s searching” (“The Sorrows of Saint Orm”). The ability and determination to write stands as a religious act, for it is, as Nichol’s continuous and long attempt attests to, an elongated process of engaging with and through language. As a calligraphic verb, to reverse is to make into verse again—it is to re-script, re-scribe (describe), re-author, and return (with the Latin word verterei, the etymological source of verse, meaning “to turn”) (“verse,” New Oxford American Dictionary).

The alphabetical bodies of these first and last letters have the distinct advantage of the graphemic shape of the Greek language. Letters have their respective symbolic shape (the physical glyph or shaping of the character ‘α’), their familiarity in word form (the word ‘alpha’), and the corresponding number of their numerical system (the Greek numeral equaling 1). Thus, “alpha” concurrently identifies as Α/α, depending on the letter case, and the number 1 in Greek numerals. Its root is found in the Phoenician alphabet, its first letter being “aleph,” a letter that appears as a sideways A—which would have significance for Nichol because of his affinity towards the relationship between H as a sideways I—and has a hieroglyphic counterpart in the shape of an ox’s head (“alpha,” New Oxford American Dictionary). The word “ox” appears in “Scraptures 17th sequence,” albeit in a divided rendering—the mock and imperceptible reversal of O/O at the opening of the poem as well as the myriad utilizations of X, initially written as “CHRIST become an X.” The letter X firstly has its root in the process of chiasmus—the Greek letter Chi (X/χ) serves as the root in the literary term, signifying the act of crossing or making into an x (“chiasmus,” New Oxford American Dictionary).
Syntactically, the chiastic structure forms a diagonal relationship between the first and second premises of each phrase:

- the religious (a) man practices reversals (b)
- the reversed (b) man practices religion (a)

Or, in the dismantling of words into prefix and suffix, Nichol forms the cross-relational posturing of language’s relationships to itself in one of the many “Assumptions” poems:

```
{ ology

martyr

body into body into body into

[...] and write at the in instruction

de con X ception
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Chi also serves as the root for Christ, and this itself is the source of the abbreviation X-mas for Christmas—hence, “CHRIST become an X.” The two lines that surround this passage also form another chiastic phrase: “names and signatures […] X as the man signs who cannot write his name.” The interchange between names and signatures, brought about in the latter phrase,
indicates the ability to replace through writing—X is not Christ, but X represents and typifies Christ. Certainly, the letters and graphemic symbols of X and Christ are entirely dissimilar, but they epitomize and embody one another. Substitution, then, is a substantiating act; signifying is a significant practice.

The cross of crucifixion is identified as being nameless—blotted out through the heaviness of namelessness, denied through erasure: “as tho to be without a name were to take up the cross, so that a man who / is part of the nameless, is part of the mass, carries the cross further, or is / more weighed down by it” (“Scraptures: 17th Sequence”). If chiasmus demands a continuation and discontinuation through syntax, then the omni-directionality both does and undoes; that is to say, the close of one line is the opening of the next, and so on. “Petra Improvisation” states: “puns that go nowhere / connections that begin & end.” A given passageway through a returning syntax has already been simply plotted as A, B, B, A, with A and B representing the first and second premises of a given statement. To return to these given points in reverse order marks a movement, certainly, but the destination is pre-determined to be the opening site. As Heraclitus states: “In the case of a circle’s circumference[,] beginning and end are common” (61). The Alpha is the Omega, and the Omega is the Alpha. The cross of crucifixion—and the X within the crucifixion—is a multitudinous pun. To re-invoke the above passage from “Petra Inversions,” the pun goes nowhere, because its end is its beginning; but it is also true that the pun goes to the end and to the beginning, which very well may be everywhere. This cross/X is likewise utilized in “body paranoia: initial fugue – August 30, 1988” to refer both to the sanctuary of Christ’s protection and, through enjambment, the radiography that would reveal a tumour in the author’s sacrum:

shadow on
This passage provides an authentic and fearsome understanding of Nichol’s own body, and it was written less than a month before his death. Frank Davey writes: “The x-rays surprisingly showed a clearly visible shadow across his lower spinal column” (aka bpNichol 280). In the graphic nature of Nichol’s actual X-ray, the shadowy markings represent the deterioration of his body and the imminence of his death; there is no salvation in the X-ray’s identification. This sort of body mapping is of a deleterious marking—at the risk of sounding crude, X marks the spot of extinction. Similarly, the X’s in “Scruptures 17th Sequence” come to demonstrate the covering of a person’s eyes in death; the simultaneous pun of the expiring eye/I indicates bodily and poetic death:

I I
know(s)

it is the face
it is the realization of the face

it is the facing
it is the realization of the facing

the split eyes

what the eye seizes as real is fractured again and again
To face, to confront, to address—this passage indicates the agony in bodily recognition; the eye witnesses the I’s collapse. This section represents an internal looking, an introspection, an interior viewing; Barrie Phillip Nichol, the man confronting the source of his pain through X-ray images, examines the interiority of his physical anguish with his own eyes. The external body examines its innards, and the origin of incapacitating pain is made real through Barrie’s viewership. The internal body is made visible to the external body through these scientific means, and the internal I is made visible to the external eye through these poetic means. Nichol presents his diagnoses as texts or images that can be mined, explicated, and scanned (and perhaps Nichol is aware of this double meaning).

Nichol’s final use of X in this poem indicates a laconic rendering of selfhood through replacement; where X is a substitute for Christ and for the man “who cannot write his name,” Nichol then proffers a further equational relationship: “X—nameless.” Signature is absent, and the finality in such an equation is sharp and abrupt; namelessness is indicative of death; namelessness is akin to wordlessness. In the titularity of the “bp: if / body paranoia: initial fugue” poems, Nichol’s first two initials are present—but, in both variations, his certitude and presence is dubious. The ‘if’ marks an uncertainty, a stipulation, a condition, a presumption; bp equals inconsistency and apprehension. In “bp: if - September 10, 1988,” ontology and non-ontology are balanced and are essentially equal to one another: “free to live / free to die.” Barrie Phillip is displaced by body paranoia, an ominous and legitimate distillation of the poet’s depreciation as a corporeal man. These two nominal replacements are distinctly different than “You Too, Nicky,” for example. By Book(s) 7 &, Nichol’s nominal alignment with poetry and titularity is one of flight and loss of identity (Fugue originates from the Latin root fugure “to flee” (“fugue,” New Oxford American Dictionary); it is a term used in
psychiatry indicating a loss of selfhood and identity coupled with a spontaneous need to move or travel; lastly, it is a musical term wherein a contrapuntal composition—contrapuntal being a playfully convenient word for Nichol—is established at the beginning of a piece and is then reintroduced in successive parts of the piece) instead of purposeful travel and recording, as proposed through the utanikki. The “bp: if” poems are marked by a degradation of verse and bodily form:

so if the poem's line
the body (that metaphor)
it falls apart—right?

awkward bits

[...] the body of the poem the leading pair o' graphs at the foot of the press bed the sub-head in that medical book "if you die" (bp: if – August 30, 1988)
Language simultaneously details the loss of cohesion through imminent death and a
dismembering of the poetic body. The opening stanza, in its metaphorical conflation of the
poet’s body and the poetry’s body, acknowledges the degeneracy inherent in the shared
relationship—most obviously, if the poet expires, so too must his poetry. The poem becomes
disembodied, as if stanzaic breaks mark the breaking of the physical body; paragraphs are
separated into more x-rays, the subheading of a medical textbook indicates the internal
cerebrum of the poet’s tormented worry, and the initial fugue ends on the incomplete passage
“if you die.” This closing line treats death as an ambiguity, something that is not certain and
eventual, as if death can be challenged. Yet, the line closes the poem, brings it to its own
literary termination. As the body falls apart, the resounding pun in this final stanza is that the
poem is heading towards its death—that is, heading (as a bodily verb) in the direction of the
perceived conclusion.

In “You Too, Nicky,” the body, like language, is inherited, and its martyrdom is
transferred through genealogy:

All of us are born out of someone. Too many of us spend a lifetime tied
to that moment or trying to live it down. But family, as what you came
from, what came before you, lives in the body like an organ you only
know the shape of thru x-rays or textbooks (I)

Existence originates from and is a continuation of pasthood; selfhood is a prolongation of the
familial selfhood, and this is housed in the body. Historicity can be read by its graphic and
textual components, like the documentation through the x-rays and textbooks that provide
medical and empirical insight. The sequential formulation is that the body produces the body, family produces family, texts produce text:

We, all of us, move forward thru time

at the tip of a family, a genealogy, whose history & description disappears behind us (I)

This familial utanikki posits a different movement—genealogical instead of geographical. The Nichol name, the entirety of its familial tradition, is named in the You Too, Nicky—that is, such a gesture incorporates the ancestral body of a family’s history. Taken in this way, Nichol’s specific form of the utanikki is a selfless act—instead, it is a maintenance and perpetuation of the family name as opposed to the individual name. The three bodies form an interchange, and the poet’s, poem’s, and family’s corpuses all inform (and form) one another:

there are other journeys, other poems, other plans that do not realize themselves.

living among family you are changed. it is the way your vocabulary increases.
you occupy certain nouns, are caught up in the activity of certain verbs, adverbs, adjectives. syntax too. tone.

the language comes alive as you come alive and the real mysteries remain (VII)

The self is given into the fold of the familial unit; similarly, language is modified in relation to the other ontic and linguistic beings—vocabulary is generated generationally. The comparison to the components of grammar—that one’s actions mirror the characteristics of a given function of language—matches the user with his/her environment. Language acquisition and
utilization are facilitated and encouraged by the space and its previous set of language users; the familial environment enables the augmentation of language for the newest user—a young Nichol aligning himself with the selfhood of nouns, the activity of verbs, the trajectory of syntax, the characteristics of adjectives, these many bodies of language.

Yet the expiration of the body is an inevitability, and besides this genealogical turning that Nichol makes towards the familial and expectant nature of the *utanikki*, the form of the poem routinely demonstrates the shared disintegration of poet and poem. “Scraptures: 8th Sequence” reads as a pronouncement of termination, quite actually a death cry, with its use of capitalized typography and language that further disassembles the unity of a functioning body:

**NOW THIS IS THE DEATH OF POETRY. i have sat up all night to**

write you this—the poem is dying is dying—no—i have already said the poem is dead—dead beyond hope beyond recall—dead dead dead

Speech, expression, song, breath—all of these components evaporate into disuse. The dislocation and fracturing processes that Nichol repeats throughout this book indicate the erosion of the poet’s faculties in the event of his own death—the collapse of one body is the collapse of its work:

so now i can tell you the breath is dead that brought forth the song (poem) long time gone old dear old poem yur a long time gone and i can-not do more now anything to bring you (him) (it) back […]

the form is dead that brought it forth

The long poem is a “long time gone”—its history, its totality, its inheritance evade Nichol in these doubting hours. The processional relationship between a narrative’s components
(traditionally in the form of beginning, middle, and end) are similarly lacking consistency and uniformity: “it is over beginnings and endings say nothing not / even middles used to.” Poetic and descriptive disjunctions abound, and the surety of The Martyrology as a whole becomes elusive. This art log is fully becoming a martyrdom of the logos: “the poem imprisoned me […] i could see no further into me beyond the poem […] I / HAVE NO TONGUE NO EYES […] you have become / closed to me.” This sort of ontological curtailment—from writing and the corporeal frame—manifests itself as a denial of action and self-control, and it ultimately intimates at a poetic solipsism. As the body denies the individual, and as the poem denies the poet, these essences of poetry—sound and vision—deny and are denied from the poet.

In the final poem of Book(s) 7 &, the poet espouses a concluding asceticism:

erase the body

erase the heresy of the self

the false prophesy of the flesh

erase the pulling self-aggrandizement

the uns lakable thirst for recognition

the wilful neglect of human need

the temples of self-love

the lies of ideology

erase even this (Assumptions)

The words dually speak to the expiration of his corporeal being and the resultant loss of his
body of writings; a recession of the poet’s form anticipates the absence of the poet’s efforts. Selfhood is cast off as heretical, and flesh is abandoned—the poet’s language formulates his own imminent martyrdom. The phrase ‘tabula rasa’ is enumerated thirty times to conclude the poem and the book, as if this litany or mantra encapsulates the departing endeavours of bpNichol. This is like the closing words of Book 2: “once what’s begun is done,” a line that finishes and remains unpunctuated, as if the words do not finish; this is like the emerging effigy at the close of Book 4, in which the saintly illustration of Nichol sprouts from the earth with his eyes fixedly closed; this is like the posthumous naming of bpNichol Lane on the map that brings Book 5 to its cessation. The Martyrology has always been ending, and it has always been starting. It is simultaneously being erased to signal its restarting within its ending; it can be raised through its erasure. The Martyrology is “n’t ready to die” (bp: if – September 1, 1988).

Chapter Three conflated the poet’s corpus with the poetry’s corpus, thereby marrying the living act with the writing act. The body is the site of sensuality and phenomena, and the livable experiences are continuously transferred into the produced poetry. The tactility of the book as artifact similarly confirms the body-state of the individual; likewise, the shapes and configurations of letters indicate a graphic and physical quality to language. The corporeality of language becomes yet another indication of long poetry’s occasion for establishing selfhood.
afterword / after bird / laughter whirred et cetera

Only words
can fly for you like birds
on the wall of the sun.
A bird is a poem
that talks of the end of cages. – Patrick Lane, “The Bird”

Reference, acknowledgement, quotation, epigraph—these are methods of invocation (to include through vocality) and incorporation (to include through the body). To allude is to include. Recall—to call again or to record all? To begin one’s own poem with another’s in the form of an epigraph is to embrace the adducability of congregated languages.

At the close of Book 6 Books, Nichol concludes with AFTER BIRD (improvising), a coda which consists of 8 brief sections of ornithological poetry. bill bissett is quoted in the epigraph; in bissett’s lines, the hand that releases the bird leads to an emancipation of both the human and the animal—freeing the latter frees the former. If allusion is inclusion, perhaps Nichol’s usage of bissett then leads one to invoke Don McKay: “just like you and me but / cageless, likes fresh air and / wants to be his longing” (“Field Marks (2)” 27). And if allusion is inclusion, and if Nichol’s usage of bissett leads to McKay, perhaps these three can gesture towards Patrick Lane: “A bird is a poem / that talks of the end of cages” (“The Bird” 16).

These four poets alone, in their conflation of poetry as bird/bird as poetry, speak of the deliverance and liberation throughout this metaphor; specifically, Lane’s expiration of cages promotes the end of long poetry’s generic constraints and obstructions. Poetry that talks of the end of cages ends cages through its talking. Frank Davey writes that the chief assignment of
long poetry is to venture “into new territory, into new languages, into surprise” by the act of purposeful and intentional venturing (The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem 19). Eli Mandel, too, infuses the long poem with a constant generic death. That is, long poetry is bound in paradox—paradox of abundance and shortage, reach and limitation, freedom and constraint: “From its beginning, wherever that might be, it is an affront to the denials it apparently intends to affirm. In other words (and the long poem always insists on the other words) it exists as a poetics that denies its existence” ("The Death of the Long Poem" 19). Hence, it is a poetry that speaks of ending cages while utilizing the stanzaic cage of organization; it is a poetry that longs to be cageless yet also wants to be caged in its own longing.

The epigraphs that inaugurate many of The Martyrology’s volumes are abundant—Gertrude Stein, Jean Cocteau, David Jones, William Caxton are but a few, and Nichol liberally takes from esoteric sources of Batak, Christian, and Korean proverbs. As a demonstrable method of Nichol’s and the text’s readerly reaches, epigraphs are a stable and consistent cue of the long poem’s method of inclusion. An epigraph indicates what the long poem longs to include within its own limited/limitless scope, and it surely creates temporal markers of longevity; that is, time is elongated when a poem instructs its readers to read presently while also maintaining a vigilant awareness of literary pasthood. The long poem invites language into itself as a way to establish its own ontology; its invocation of other works is an observable indication of its own form and incarnation (the root invoking an ingestion of flesh/carné):

your time of thot
you start with that person in front of you
dialogue
acknowledgement of being
the 'real' you get into poetry is
the 'real' of speech
the fact you try to reach
pleasure some other body from your own
all this talk of
form or
meaning
an investigation
gleanings from the act of
poetry (*The Martyrology*, Book 5, Chain 3)

The textual, dialogic moment available through reference and quotation is a substantiation of the poem’s ability to converse with outside works through inclusion, invocation, ingestion. This formed relationship of adoption confirms the long poem’s desire (through longing) to indeed absorb through reach, to discursively interact with other works, to construct meaning through association.

Discursiveness—embracing both the discourse shared between converseing individuals and the meandering movement of a journey—is a generic necessity of the long poem, as it looks to form the textual correspondences with itself and other included works. Smaro Kamboureli argues that a reader’s awareness of these channels of connectivity fuse one text with another; when reader and genre operate in tandem (originally Latin for ‘at length’ (‘tandem,’ *New Oxford American Dictionary*), an amalgam of unity forms between reader and referenced, included, encompassed writings:
Although such long poems as bpNichol's *The Martyrology* and George Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* cohere when one reads them, that coherence is assigned to them by the reading act. It enters the poem together with the reader; it is not inherent in the poems. In fact, coherence occurs, is marked, only when the contradictory genre systems of epic, lyric, non-epic narrative poetry and non-literary discourse operating within the long poem posit their various interrelationships.

*(On the Edge of Genre 45)*

Kamboureli notes the combinatorial quality of long poetry—through its size and range, it is allowed (perhaps even obligated) to integrate disparate genres, techniques, patterns, tropes, methods. The mouth of long poetry is a consumptive locale of ingestion. The orality of long poetry is declarative in its inclusion, gluttonous in its assimilation, for “it announces a dialogue of genres” (Kamboureli 46). In the fifth section of AFTER BIRD, Nichol likens the sonicism of the poet’s mouth with that of a songbird’s beak, meanwhile detailing the excess of long poetry’s possibilities:

only the lips
and what spills from them

like a beak or
what's in back of the rote
learning
the spare o’s

the blue j’s  (Book 6 Books, AFTER BIRD (improvising))

Individuated letters are punningly presented with adjectival descriptions—o’s are excessive and j’s are marked in colour yet are also dispirited or saddened. “lips” is anagrammatically reformed in “spills”; the consonance of “beak” and “back” situate language and sound in the bird’s mouth while also directing one to the historicity of language through learning; and spelling conventions are playfully rearranged, dismantled, and homophonically depicted in these ornithologized letters. These birds, these words, are described as an assembled group, not unlike Kamboureli’s description of long poetry’s generic tendency to be all-accepting:

and how they cluster then

in these white remnants of the trees

turn the leaves

over

page after page

calling  (Book 6 Books, AFTER BIRD (improvising))
In unison, these birds gather in the arboreality of books; through age after age, the acts of calling, echoing, and vociferating invite an inherited language all in.

Christian Bök’s *Eunoia* is, among many things, a collection of poems and visual games dedicated to the individuality of vowels. The collection is divided into two sections: EUNOIA (meaning ‘beautiful thinking’ (111)) and OISEAU (meaning ‘bird’). Both are the shortest words to contain all five vowels in English and French, respectively. The first section contains five long poems each composed of words that only contain the chapter’s nominal vowel. Instead of the saintliness of language motivating the poetry in the form of bisected ST words, Bök finds the venerability and indispensability (in terms of standardized spelling requisites) of individual vowels as the impetus of these works. “Chapter I” opens under the primacy of subjectivity through writing; Nichol’s allegiance to the musicality of language and his understanding of written symbols as a signatory glyph are surely echoed in Bök’s introductory lines: “Writing is inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink / this pidgin script. I sing with nihilistic witticism, / disciplining signs with trifling gimmicks” (50). Bök’s pidgin poetry—homophonically his pigeon poetry—is generated under vowel/vocal constraints. Certainly it “is inhibiting” to produce within these developed limitations, but these inhibiting factors paradoxically enable his productivity; utilizing a, e, i, o, and u as the poetic essence in these inhibited methods is also the verification and confirmation of a given poem’s success. Language’s orality is confirmed in the thematic utilization of ornithology: “Midspring / brings with it singing birds, six kinds (finch, siskin, ibis, / tit, pipit, swift), whistling shrill chirps, trilling *chirr / chirr* in high pitch” (52). The expressive verbs of speech are composed of English’s subjective pronoun, thereby forming a convenient relationship between the lingual and communal act of expressing selfhood with language that reflects ontology. Two passages
open sections of Book 1: IMPERFECTION: A Prophecy. Preceding part 1 is the combination of idioms: “straight / as the crow flies / arrow”; part 4 opens with a quotation from a Cornish-English dictionary: “’bran, crow / bran vras, raven / bran dre, rook’.” The mere presence of these animals is a continual representation of these themes of reference, acknowledgment, and generic dialogue. These avian epigraphs substantiate long poetry’s integrative aim of correspondence; like the constant emphasis of the bird’s inclination and instinct to sing, long poetry desires this continuation of vocality. Bird is the word, and the word whirred, and the word chirred.

In the second section of Eunoia, more pronounced allusions and gestures to Nichol appear. The poem “Phonemes” names saints and martyrs as the residents of poetry. As a genre that entails continuance, long poetry is defined by its perpetual endurance:

   a riddle that grieves
   a king; a truth that crippled minstrels

   must bewail in epics,
   like staunch martyrs whom Furies spurn;

   O (untempted Saint,
   who lends this typewritten utterance

   its fervency
   — an endless cycle of perseverance). (88-9)
The descriptions of said saints and martyrs summon notions of dedication, reliability, and diligence; to be staunch and untempted indicates an allegiance to their holy roles. Utterance—here an encompassment of all vocal and written speech—“is an endless cycle”; pronouncement requires devotion in its constancy, for long poetry is authenticated in its own longevity and endurance. The poem “H” is dedicated to Nichol, and Bök arranges the letter in a columnar fashion. Bök elaborates on its coordination: “‘H’ is a visual sonnet constructed from the favourite letter of bpNichol—and the structure of this image is modelled upon the rhyme scheme found in the poem by Arthur Rimbaud [a poem present earlier in the section which Bök translates]” (113). The visual poem, too, convincingly emerges as, simultaneously, a brick road, ladders, and train tracks, all instruments of travel and mobility. Literary references are modes of voyage and expedition—quotation, epigraph, allusion stand as these transportive devices in which language meets other language; it is the bearing out of Nichol’s long reach of speech.

The extension of that speech informs Chain 9 of Book 5, which is populated with birds, their thematic eggs and ova plotted throughout the chain to continue the long poem’s gesture towards journeying, music, stanzaic nesting, longing, and homecoming:

listening

looking

swallows fly home to their nest above the front door

[…]


the music in the night does not fill the air
it is part of a fuller sound
birds bedding down
calling back & forth or
murmuring to themselves

[…]

finally the birds are still
stars now visible as
the last light of
the sun is
gone
one band of light across the south horizon 'city'

[…]

the bird fluttered to the side of the road (*The Martyrology*, Book 5, Chain 9)

It is language that is being described here in its conversational proclivity; words call back and forth and murmur to themselves—this is the very essence of epigraphs, references, and quotations at play with one another, and this is the very essence of long poetry’s enhancement
and absorption. Long poetry, in its expansiveness and tract (referring to the word’s myriad meanings—sizable area, the bodily digestive tract, and written treatise—as well as its phonic connections to traced and tracked), encircles the superabundance of catalogic language; it is the “fuller sound” that allows congregation between one text and another, one self and another, one journey and another:

reach to
reaffirm thru
speech
relationships between the self & others  (Book 5, Chain 9)

Long poetry is a gathering, an assembly, a body of congregants (ingredients), a joining of journeying language.

At the close of Chain 9, a 73-line palindrome appears. The word palindrome means “running back again” in Greek (“palindrome,” *New Oxford American Dictionary*). Its structure necessitates perfect repetition and self-quotatation; the hinge is a mirror of establishment and referentiality of the poetic selfhood. As language meets its centre point, it continues forward through the lines yet maneuvers through trodden words. In its circularity, it is Bök’s “endless cycle of perseverance”; it is Nichol’s *Journeying & the Returns*; it is when Irving Layton writes: “It is, after all, death which makes art imperishable” (“On the Naming of Streets” 112); it is nostalgia, returning to the H. It opens (and closes) with the following: “come to the beginning at last / a line at a time / worked backwards.” Its hinge, the middle of its journey, is the body of language:
the mind / the heart / the nerves / the blood / the hand

so many things the body wants to say
to you

Long poetry speaks of its speaking; its body, its components, long to articulate, pronounce, and declare: “the poem continues […] the poem continues.” Immediately preceding the palindrome is Nichol registering that the initiation of the palindrome itself—this formal, dual pilgrimage and return—supplies laughter: “woke smiling & laughing / sensing some solution.” To journey and to return or to return and then journey are equivalent acts; they are replicas of one another, they are rhymed activities, and they are references of one another. After the birds perch alongside the road, laughter whirred.

afterword / after bird / laughter whirred et cetera
Works Cited


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