

Grenier's "Scrawl"

By Stephen Ratcliffe

Robert Grenier's most recent writing may well be the last word on what's new in American poetry today. It may also be impossible to read, since Grenier's latest works are written by hand — his hand's own all but illegible "scrawl" — in four colors, Faber-Castell "uni-ball" black, blue, green and red — therefore impossibly expensive to print, therefore all but unavailable to anyone who would read them. (The impossibility, or I should say difficulty, of reading Grenier's works is intentional, though not "planned" as such, as well as inevitable, since his writing explores how the physical "dimension" of words on a page might bring them closer to the volume/mass of other "non-verbal" things, and how the form of the typewritten poem as a machine-made product might be broken.) Grenier's book/box *rhymms* exists in a single copy, 90 (8 1/2 x 11") pages of 4-color hand-written poems xeroxed from Grenier's notebooks of the last several years. Without a binding other than the box, the pages may be arranged in whatever order one wants — provided that is one can find the book, which isn't in fact likely. With color Xerox running \$1.79 per page and the covers (box) at \$5.00 apiece, the cost of producing a single copy of this book comes to \$161.10; given current practices for publishers' markup, the retail cost of such a book might come to four times that, or approximately \$650, expensive indeed for even a "rare book" of poems. Even if *rhymms* were produced in quantity, the cost of color Xerox at today's prices would go down to no less than \$.50 per page, making the cost of the 90 page book about \$50. In order to get that reduction in cost for Xerox, the print run would have to be at least 40,000 copies, which would bring the cost of producing 400 books to approximately \$22,000 — well be-

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yond the means of any small press likely to be interested in such writing as Grenier's.

(As an alternative method of getting his text out to the public [eye], Grenier has enlisted photographer Ken Botto to take slides of his work; Botto has taken some 500 slides so far, and there have been some ten "viewings"/"showings"/"readings" of those images to date, most recently at New Langton Arts in San Francisco, on November 6, 1995.)

Let me move from the economics that has thus far made Grenier's work inaccessible (to the reading public) to the economy of the work itself, which is tied to the inaccessibility of what it is on the page. The form of Grenier's composition — letters "drawn" in a scrawling, cranky, idiosyncratic hand; a hand writing words that "imagine" the fact of the hand writing those words; a hand that in writing words "imagines" those words, eye/hand coordination seeking out shapes, following letter "values" as these reconfigure (as much as Grenier's mind may think) what to write next — makes it all but impossible to read: read with the eye (silently), read with the lips (aloud). Words written on top of other words cannot be easily deciphered, nor can the overlay or superimposition of one word upon another be adequately vocalized in any way that would register the exact simultaneity of visual/verbal text(s) — the words "my heart is beating" being placed, like a palimpsest whose components haven't disappeared, directly on top of the words "I am a beast" — a simultaneity that is in fact registered on Grenier's page.

The visual text waiting to be read/sounded becomes a text of the world. Grenier's words mean to enact that world in words, make (see) it happen literally here, on the page. As he writes in a poem to Larry Eigner (here "transcribed"/"translated" into type):

not "handicapped"
empowered by his
ability to
tee - pee
type — ##
see the world
thought/dwell
shape the page

The shaping of the page in this case fills it, makes a poem that is itself the place (page) it occupies. A poem that is absolutely *in place* and absolutely *about/of place*:

Tree
and
this tree

is Absolute
in its

light
+ color
and
+ color

What is going on is an act of attention by and in writing — to the moment in the world the person “sees”/“knows”/“believes” to be the moment he imagines, which is to say transcribes. (The title of Grenier’s book/box of handwritten — in black ink — poems, *WHAT I BELIEVE Transpiration / Transpiring Minnesota* (O Books, 1991) suggests something of his epistemological concerns and his concerns for the practical physics of writing things down.)

Grenier’s words make pictures of the things he “sees” in the world — the things his words “see”, words as figures in the act of attention he brings to bear (in words) in *r h y m m s*:

ON TOP OF
Little Sun Temple
On-Top-of
THE REAL SUN
The Real Sun

which draws the sun (“translated” as oblong circle) setting in the west over the Pacific near his home in Bolinas, a western-most point of land north of San Francisco, a place rocked by earthquake 90 years ago (1906), a place local inhabitants know to be separate from and separating from the rest of the continent and country. As a man raised in Minnesota, who traveled first to the east, to school in Boston (Harvard) and later to teach in New England (Tufts and Franconia), then west as far as it is possible to go without launching forth into water, he makes the site of writing (looking west) count both literally, as what is going on around him, and analogically, as Donne’s poem “Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward” may be said to stand for a person’s own last forward-looking journey into time. The oblong

circle (red) meant to mark the place of the sun — “Little Sun Temple” also red/read — locates the fact of the world tangible, in ink that is itself an act of writing, on the top (or left) half of the page. The other side of his notebook calls physically to mind another moment of sheer (transparent) perception:

A corns
what

ALONE

Thought

Watercourse

Anyone

— “Acorns” (red), “What / . . . / Thought / Anyone” (green), “Alone” (black), “Watercourse” (blue) transcribed in the verbal dimension as if to make the time of writing equal to the possibility that writing can be made to register what it “sees” and is, thus, about.

The “I” (“eye”) these poems/pictures can be said to locate is one the person is/sees as fact itself. We/Words are such stuff, the things or acts we/they register. “Three” (black), for instance, means to place “A” (red) “kestrel” (green) underlined (red) “A” (blue) [space] “seagull” (blue) “A” (blue) “pelican” (red) “fly” (black) underlined (green) in an arrangement that points to parts of the world those words imagine. Eight words only in that poem, three of them one letter only (“A”), three of them the common names of west coast (shore or oceanic) birds; “three” and “fly,” both in black ink, as if to state what happens in the poem’s “story” or “plot,” being action enough to make the poem “happen” (though it might well not be enough for the reader who would find a text like this to be slight, descriptive, “anti-poetic”).

Leslie Scalapino, in her introduction to the book/box entitled *WHAT I BELIEVE Transpiration / Transpiring Minnesota*, writes that Grenier’s work “is drawing which has no other translation (‘reading’) than its pictorial being (‘shape’) . . . Grenier’s poems are drawings which are ‘drawn’ as if from the other side of the paper. As if he draws with his left hand.” In a 1994 interview conducted in Boulder, Grenier himself says that “the *shape* of the letters of the composition is in fact what . . . it is about.” The thingness of his writing — the fact that it can’t be “translated” into type or “read aloud” (at least not in any consistent way that would yield “the poet’s voice”; it is possible to read it, first one way, then another way, then another way, the “thickness” of possible reading senses being one measure of its

interest) or even easily produced as a book — moves it backward, closer somehow to where it is that writing must first have come from, as if “the word,” as he says, “could actually be the manifestation, the apparition, of something.” That something is writing (in part), also “shapes” of “something else,” an act of putting hand to paper, physical in the sense that the body does it at that time, like cutting the tree or splitting its wood when it’s on the ground (sawdust) perfectly aware that that is what one is doing then, that literalness of activity becoming here the engagement with verbal process directly.

Grenier’s letters are words becoming letters, the hand-drawn “g” in “light” generated out of the hand-drawn “s” in “Sept 1” or the Arabic “1” in “Sept 1” echoed in the lower case “l” in “light,” in this poem:

Sept 1
perfectly
dry &
light

Although one may think of Rimbaud’s corresponding vowels — “a” black, “e” white, “i” red, “u” green, “o” blue — which leads circuitously to a symbolic equation between writing and the world, Grenier isn’t in any meaningful sense a symbolist poet, since his writing pictures posit letter values in “living” transformation, as (in time) life. One would do better to think of Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Chinese ideogram, pictures on the wall of a cave in the south of France.

Grenier’s letters also become exact (measured) by means of the color the pen draws each with, another reason his poems are so difficult not only to read/decipher but to find in print, the cost of reproducing them being so great —

no arbor	(green)
_____	(blue)
harbor	(blue)
hare on	(red)
such	(green)

— where the multiple rhyme-like links (attractions/oppositions in sound, shape and meaning) between “ARBOR” and “HARBOR” are enacted visually by the green and blue inks that demonstrate (schematically) the living color of each “thing” in nature, the blue line

suggesting both horizon and the line words position themselves in (on the page), the red of “HARE ON” like the red perhaps of its blood (beating) and the green of “SUCH” such that it spirals back to where the trees (“ARBOR”) weren’t. Or to take another example, how the blue, red and black inks of

drive off	(blue)
darkness with	(red)
thunder	(black)

figure the complex of acts (verbal, physical, psychic) caught in those five words, enacted as it were against the passage of such time as has in fact taken place, or, in Grenier’s act of writing, as if they *were* happening in the actual time in which such “things” *are* taking place.

Phenomena in the world is what Grenier means to write, unfolding in such time both as it does and as he notes it. “whoo” (black) begins a double (facing) page, placing (recording) the sound of wind as much as letters can, that is. And what follows across those two pages expands the present fact of that (wind, the sound it makes) back through time, transforming (by means of echo) wind itself to the wind Wyatt wrote (felt) in his own hand:

whoo	(black)
an en	(blue)
dless w	(green)
ind doth t	(black)
ear the sa	(red)
_____	[page break]
yle a pay	(red)
ce off	(red)
this world	(blue)
all life	(black)

The page “here” — I should say “*there, as drawn,*” since one must *engage with* the interwovenness of shapes in order to feel it — is instrument to what it plays, the splitting apart of words across its line breaks (“An endless wind doth tear the sail apace” is Wyatt’s line) meaning to register Grenier’s sense of the physical and also metaphorical world — a world “disordered” by its physics of fragmentation, in which the position of the observer determines what is perceived, and accelerated falling apart of our “cultural moment” — as

well as an acknowledgement of literary influence (the attention to fact of words/world in Williams, Creeley and Eigner come to mind) and of the arbitrariness by which letters may be divided into words. Why not the word "dless"? Why not see and here "ear" in "tear"?

What Grenier hears and sees comes as closely as possible to be written. One poem is one world only: "crow" (black) followed on the page with three lines (blue) — actually the word "by," so "crow" actually flies "by" — one a curving as of the body:

the other a trajectory of its flight:

(Grenier's concentration on "one poem"/"one world" may be a development of the Romantic aesthetic of "moment," or of Pound's vortex of radiant "gists," "nodes" or "knots," a blowing up of minutiae through attention to particles (letters) in formation as these "loop" on the page, as long as one wishes or is able to attend to what is therein "given"/"said"). Two other poems of sound perception reduced to its essential components "hear" a moment in the world metamorphosed into a visual map in letters:

TWOO
WLS STaRtiNG
WWL BEfORe
SUNdoWN

Letters take on a life of their own "here" — again I should say "there" since the versions of the poems as I present them here are typewritten "translations," "inventions" that run the risk of reducing drawn shapes to their "meaning" "here" — the doubling of "o"s (blue) linking "TWO" and "OWLS" into the two-note chord their sound plays; the doubling of "s"s in "O [blue] WL [black] S [red]" and "STaRtiNG [red]" linking thing to act; "SUNdo" [red] followed by "WN" [black] registering the leaving of light from the earth (day) when sun sets.

Or take as a final example this poem about "owls," whose text, which reads (unscrambled) "TWO OWLS HOOT," is an almost impossible-to-figure-out scrawl of circles, lines, diagonals in blue, black, red and green, colored inks marking the territory of the page upon which such event has been transformed into language whose aim is to know the world literally, and make it know(n). As Grenier

said in his talk "Larry Eigner and the Task of American Letters," delivered at SUNY Buffalo in October 1994, the literal (words) and numeral (numbers) are the same "it": what is "literally" there — "you"/"this very thing you are" (Olson). Writing is metamorphosis, a transformation of the physical body and its experience into the physical body of words — a body we experience when we read writing or hear it read. In the act of reading writing *being* written, the shapes/"senses" of letters show Grenier what is thus there to be seen, as if language were, at times, a "sixth sense" participating along with everything else in whatever apprehension writing attempts to testify to, i.e., "contact" with words and world. As such, writing is also a "graphing-voice" via "breath," a realization of "things" (letters) on the "discrete manifold" of the typewritten page (Eigner) — or rather, in this case, "things" (letters) drawn as shapes through the "continuous manifold" of the "wrap-around" of notebook "place."

What exists in that "place" — Grenier's white, two-dimensional notebook page marked with blue, red, green and black scrawls — is an image of what Olson called muthologos, an image of "what is said of what is said." Words in such a place are more than "words" — the article "A," the article "THE" — because thinking (in words) and being are the same (and also different): as in Stein's portrait "Bernard Faÿ," there is *hope* in Grenier's "A," there is *hope* in Grenier's "THE," in language in which "A" is A and "A is B," not identical but also so. Asking how it is possible that "only imagination is real," "no ideas but in things" (Williams), Grenier's work stretches the capacity of language to invoke an "in-dwelling" apprehension/awareness of being alive — by which I mean also to include the capacity of the reader's mind who perceives that language to enact meaning, of and in the world, meaning in which "things" are both the same and different, both "made up" and "literally noted," true.

Sources

- Robert Grenier. *WHAT I BELIEVE Transpiration / Transpiring Minnesota* (Oakland, CA: O Books, 1991).
- . *r h y m m s* (unpublished collection).
- . color xeroxes from unpublished Notebooks.
- . "Larry Eigner and the Task of American Letters," talk given at SUNY Buffalo on October 6, 1994.
- . Conversations with Stephen Ratcliffe, 1994-95.

Towards a Poetics of Jouissance

By Carl Peters

— *i see myself as a writer who writes about the act of writing* —
bpNichol

bpNichol's poetry forces us to confront the authorial and polysemic first person pronoun *I*. In *The Martyrology*, the *I* is used as a kind of metaphysical, transcendental signifier — its position is not fixed. Self here is constantly being interrogated, re-theorized as language. Paradoxically, Nichol's idea of the creative and transformative power of the signifier is commensurate with Lacan's notion of the split subject and jouissance. I want to examine this relation in some depth, with emphasis on *The Martyrology: Book(s) 7* (which includes book 8) as well as Barthes' adaptation of Lacan's theory to a theory of the text. Additionally, I also want to point out a possible correlation between Jack Burnham's semiotic model (the naturalization of culture) and Barthes' poststructuralist theory of the text, with occasional references to Duchamp's ready-mades.

Book 7 extends Nichol's deconstructive examination of self through language: Book 7 — more so, I think, than the others — represents the poet's impassioned attempt to expel himself from his text. The erasure of self progressively builds from beginning to end where the final texts of Book(s) 7 (and 8) are printed free of the book's spine. Book 7 is a further articulation and exploration of one of the most fascinating theoretical projects of *The Martyrology*: the bond between signifier and signified is let go in an effort to transcend language and its defining and descriptive function: "To go beyond THE WORD/ exercise control over it? no/ NO NO — BEYOND THE/ WORD. not to merely control/ it but to overcome it, go be-/ yond the point where it is/ even necessary to think in/ terms of it." Nichol's *I*deal to overcome the defining and descriptive authority of the word

requires the construction of a substitute language; for Nichol, this constitutes, in Barthesian terminology, the language of bliss rather than pleasure.

Book 7 is represented to us as both a text of pleasure as well as a text of bliss. The former is "the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria [...] that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading." The text of bliss, however, "imposes a state of loss [...], discomforts [...], unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions [and] brings to a crisis his relation with language" (Barthes 1975, 14). Barthes also notes that "pleasure can be expressed in words, bliss cannot" (21). Bliss is formed at the interface between the two edges of a text, the readerly/ conformist and the writerly/ subversive. The gap, fault or cut which both Barthes and Nichol celebrate is the nearest they get to bliss; loss is the signification of bliss reinscribed as *want*. "The cut," as one scholar observes, is tantamount to "the redistribution of language" — the site of Nichol's "be-/ yond" where "old definitions change as language rearranges all the nouns and names (Wasserman 101 and Bk 7 respectively). Nichol's bliss, as indeed the reader's, involves the rearranging of language, of the text, which, as a result, reconceptualizes the other.

What is essential in Nichol's attempt to remove himself as author/ity from the text is his repeated claim that the poem is unplotted, unplanned. The poem takes on a life of its own — it becomes form — living form, and eventually, "the author is omitted by his structure" (Bersani, 39): "There is some larger mediation that seems obvious," Nichol writes. "An inference or moral perhaps. I only know the poem unfolds in front of me, [...] more in control than me. It's not that the poem has a mind of its own but that poetry is its own mind, a particular state you come to, achieve" ("You Too, Nicky," Bk 7). And, as the poet recognizes, the real magic of poetry is "partly syntax, partly mystery"; mystery is a constant presence despite what the poet himself intended.

The text of pleasure is an indispensable structural component of (the text of) bliss, its prerequisite, and is formed, in part, by a certain way of reading — a poetics of reading; as Nichol puts it, it is "an attitude of reading," something "you come to, achieve." Reading as a creative act, at this level, undermines conventional readerly practices; multivalency is a fact of bliss: "sure connectives gone/ [...] you no longer count on/ reference/ poetry's/ its own form of obscurity/ [...] the problem is/ how to read it." The distinction between pleasure and bliss, the consistency of self and its loss, is pronounced and kept

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intact in Book 7. The gaming or play which erupts between the two causes "jouissance" — the "source-re/ the mystery of poetry/ that i am caught up in/ carried out on/ the word/ of God/ of mouth/ of honour" (St Anzas V) — "[Caught] up in/ carried out on, be-/ yond."

Consequently, reading is tantamount to divining in Book 7 in much the same way that the geomancy of the (Toronto Annex) streets in Book 5, for example, was the basis for Nichol's Martyrology/ mythology. Reading as divining provides a condition for bliss: "letters of a law/ i strive to learn st/ rive the word apart/ [...] the night sky/ 's a page we read from/ like the childhood game/ 'connect-the-dots'/ and forms, figures, names/ a pear/ [...] the fruit of our seeking." Like the Duchampian ready-made, Nichol's deconstruction of the word forces a break between the word's signifier and signified; this break or cut opens up the word to multiple signification and hence bliss. In "striving" to defamiliarize his text, Nichol "arrives" at an apprehension of the word's "inner alchemy," (from Hugo Ball), its mystery, the "source-re," of poetry, which, to carry this idea one step further, is always aligned, for Nichol, with process, the act of writing/ reading itself, the act of "wed[ding] letter to letter to spell anew" (Nichol 1985, 94). The notion of "be-/ yond," furthermore, is redefined as a *source*:

raw puns elevate me
lift me closer to the mystery
divine word to divine
the pen twitches above the page
dips down
a flow of language tapping in
keyed or written as written
[...]
the deliberate construction of
chance, a range meant
[...]
the
unknown encountered &
embraced
("St Anzas V")

The reader of Book 7 is what Barthes would call an *anachronic* reader, that previously mentioned reader who is lifted out of a comfortable practice of reading and forced to recognize and confront a crisis in language: its instability. The two edges of language noted earlier, the conformist and subversive edge, recur in Nichol's text.

The *anachronic* reader (or "producer" following Barthes' analogy) performs and creates (within) this edge, this cut. The *anachronic* reader is a contradiction; as Barthes explains, this subject "simultaneously [...] participates in the profound hedonism of all culture [...] and in the destruction of that culture" (Barthes 1975, 14): "truths the mouth shapes despite itself/ [...] we are made new, made over/ even as the old order falls/ a part a round/ us" ("St Anzas V").

Nichol's linguistic/ grammatical deconstructions in a very subtle way contribute to the destruction of culture by displacing reference: poetry "is its own form of obscurity." His relentless interrogation of the pronoun "i," the assertion that poetry articulates "the fundamental mystery of otherness" ("otherness understood in terms of the divine, of "Godness"), is commensurable with what Jack Burnham has called the "naturalization" of culture. In regards to this semiotic operation, the element of "wonder," if not *awe* ("the shudder of poetry"), is restored to the text through the (magical) efficacy of the art-making process — the activity of language, of sense, production — "the immediacy of this ekstasis." What Barthes sees as the "destruction" (or de-creation) of culture perpetuates the mystery which Nichol perceives as being crucial to poetry and inherent in the word itself. Several "stanzas" in Book 7 (and 8) are worth examining further in order to show how Nichol's linguistic "rearrangements" (translations) illustrate what Burnham might see as the naturalization of culture. First, however, a review of Burnham's thesis is relevant here.

Following Burnham's thesis in *The Structure of Art*, the survival of the art impulse depends upon what he calls the naturalization of culture. Burnham's phrase, "the naturalization of culture," is derived from Claude Levi-Strauss' definition of magic as "the naturalization of human actions" (i.e., the written gesture as aesthetic gesture); inversely, "the culturalization of the natural" is taken from Levi-Strauss' definition of religion — "the humanization of natural law." Nichol offers an additional re-articulation of Burnham's paraphrasing when he asserts that art renders the unfamiliar (in this case "natural law," the unknowable) familiar, accessible through ritual, magic, and even religion. This description is closer to Burnham's notion of the culturalization of nature. Nichol alludes to the naturalization of culture, however, when he notes that art also makes the familiar (the knowable, the ordinary) unfamiliar (extraordinary, unknowable).

The naturalization of human actions (or the naturalization of culture) stems from "a work activity [process] or the conjoining of elements as they appear through a sign" (Burnham 1973, 66). The

naturalization of human actions represents "the humanism we hold on to so tenaciously" through ritual and process, the activity of language production; content "is not what we enjoy about art, rather it is the [apprehension] of ritual superbly performed" (66). Ritual enables us to perceive in nature "[that] design of an intelligence" which Nichol re-conceives and interprets as *divine experience*: "from as an expression of dilemma/ conceptualization placing you on the brink of/ dissolution/ [...] we are (as pronouns) each other/ nouns divide/ hide behind that name we are given" ("This is a Love Poem"). *The Martyrology*, and the kind of reading process it enacts, is analogous to a journey or quest "behind" and "be-/ yond" the "name we are given."

To elaborate on this, the naturalization of human actions has "its own sweet logic," which, as Burnham points out, helps to keep us in contact with our boundaries facing nature ("Monotones XCVIII"). In terms of reading/ writing *The Martyrology*, naturalization is isomorphic with ritual, process. Nichol is constantly reminding us of the need for "all this talk of doing/ to be included with the doing [...] moments when the reach is the grasp" ("sun/day/ease").

The naturalization of human actions (the naturalization of culture) is also attained through the willful construction of *mystery*. Indeed, Nichol's recontextualization of the pre-texts for *The Martyrology* contributes to Book 7's resacralizing project: source is made into *source-re*.

The use of *source-re*, of mystery, is intrinsically bound to an apprehension of the plural self — its many disguises. The personal pronoun *i* is the real object of inquiry here. This examination of self is clearly suited to the poem's open-ended, "processual" structure; the text's multiplicity "is grounded in the self and, by implication, in the linguistic enunciation on which the self relies for its formulation" as well as signification (Kamboureli, 95): "me-ning is always/ i deational" ("The White Stone Wall"). "Me-ning," self construction, is achieved in language; we might even say that "Adamically," and relating to Nichol's conception of the sacred in art, language is the archetype from which the self is derived and that the activity of sign production signifies the divine — is, in fact, "divine experience."

According to one scholar, Nichol's *i* is an "elliptical" albeit a paradoxically "abundant" self (Kamboureli, 96). The fact that Nichol's *i* occurs for the most part in lower case is worth noting; this visualization and apprehension of the pronoun immediately distinguishes itself from a fully self-present entity. Further, this deconstruction allows Nichol to manage the transition or transformation of "the sin-

gular *i* to the plural *we*" by foregrounding the question: "vague pronoun reference a life becomes/ who does this *i* refer to?" ("Scriptures: 11th Sequence"). An adjacent text provides this answer: "*i* am these words/ these words say so" ("song for saint ein"). Nichol's insight points to Lacan's theory of subjectification. Lacan argues that the first person pronoun is realizable only as a linguistic category — language speaks the subject. However, Nichol holds out for some apprehension of a complete self: "somewhere *i* exist/ separate from this page/ this cage of sound & sense." The pronoun *i*, like the text itself, resists definition; it adheres to what Lacan calls the system of the signifier.

Nichol's autobiographical writing gives way to the "pataphysical dimension which informs his examination of self and text. His recurring *i* is indispensable to it's/his disappearance; autobiography is transformed into mythology: "[the] hardest things about using autobiographical detail in the long poem," he comments, "is to get the reader to accept it as what it is: words in a book revealing exactly the amount of information necessary for that moment of the composition [...]; *autobiographical information changes our reading of the text & thus distorts it* (Kamboureli, 100; my emphasis). Hence Nichol's determination to "take the time to tell you everything." The conjunction between "telling" and the act of writing provides the basis for Nichol's myth-making project, "immediate ekstasis" — "the shudder of poetry" ("sun/day/ease"). Writing disperses an already displaced self; this is explicit in Book 7: "Sometimes *i* talk too much of it, like a magician/ explaining/ his best trick [...] And the real magic, which is what the language can/ achieve, remains a mystery [...]" ("You Too, Nicky"). Here again language speaks, not the author: "*i* disappears into the drum of/ consciousness" and "the point is/ the reading" ("St Anzas III" and "X").

What Jacques Lacan calls the Real resists symbolization in language; the Real is the register of "jouissance," bliss. Barthes has shown that the real object of literature's desire is jouissance; "it considers sane," he comments, "its desire for the impossible [the Real]" (Barthes 1987, 466). Burnham has argued that it is the quest for the unattainable (the *Ideal*) which is worked into the ordering process of the creative act itself — in other words, the ordering process *is* the creative act. Nichol raises the crucial question in "Talking About the Sacred in Writing," and it is appropriate to re-address it here: Why an emphasis on *process*? In the following paragraphs, I offer a definition of Lacan's three registers — the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real — in order to come back to this question and examine more carefully the

precise relation between Nichol's emphasis on process and the Real.

Key to Lacan's construction (or deconstruction) of the self is the notion that the subject is a signifier. Before him, Freud asserted that the subject carries "otherness," what Nichol sees as "the fundamental mystery of otherness," within itself. Theorizing primary process, Lacan attests that the unconscious is constructed at the moment of the subject's entry into language. This process, Lacan contends, is introduced by what he calls the "mirror" stage of psychical development. The Imaginary, conceived in terms of a "spatial configuration," originates from the experience of the image. This specular image generates the illusion that the subject is coherent and whole, an illusion, furthermore, perceived by the subject as an *ideal* image. Lacan argues that this recognition is essentially a misrecognition — wholeness is perceived where lack exists; the self is thus defined by lack: "its very assertion/ creates distances" ("The White Stone Wall"). Subjectification, in other words, like Barthes' theory of the text and *jouissance*, is contingent upon the gap or fault between assumed unity and *actual* lack. In terms of *poststructured* texts like Nichol's, lack is a precondition for multiplicity — loss is transformed into pleasure, if not bliss, "showing me this other world/ the landscape lay *behind*" — "be-/ yond" ("early morning variation"; my emphasis). The Lacanian topology of the subject contributes to the apprehension of contemporary texts, an apprehension primarily focused on the transformational power of the (self as) signifier, the "i that is many" ("SLIP").

The subject's existence in language is defined by Lacan as the Symbolic register. Fredric Jameson, in "Psychoanalysis and the Problem of the Subject," cautions us against conceiving the Imaginary and Symbolic in terms of binary oppositions. It is important to note that both are relational to each other. "The Symbolic," as Kaja Silverman notes, "establishes the differences which are such an essential part of cultural existence"; the Imaginary, on the other hand, makes it possible to recognize correspondences and homologies (Silverman, 157). The subject is always a relation in a context, a context constructed and formed by language. Language production, the activity of reading and writing, is perceived by Nichol, for instance, as a fundamentally transformational process; as he so often attests: "I love what happens in the moment of language" ("SLIP"). An examination of language is the examination of self. Once more, this assertion is explicit in Book 7: "the language comes alive as you come alive and the/ real mysteries remain" ("You Too, Nicky"). His deconstructions are really constructions — connections made between the reader-as-

author and the divine, the real mysteries which Nichol so often relates.

As noted above, the subject's apprehension of its so-called *ideal* image at the Imaginary stage of psychical development is a fictional construct whose "defining characteristics — focus, coordination — it does not share" (Silverman, 158). The subject's sense of alienation, an inevitable consequence of this fundamental misrecognition, is compensated for by those objects "perceived as its missing complement" (158). At the Imaginary stage, the perceived object stands in for the "absent presence" of the mother; the Symbolic register, by contrast, is defined and dominated by the Father (signifying Other). Identity is provisional: "mother tongue/ everything sprung from you/ [...] borrowed language/ body/ time/ [...] how much can i claim as mine" ("St Anzas V"). The Symbolic is structured by (1) the acquisition of the pronoun *I* (ensuring the division of the subject into many — "i that is many"), and (2) the continuing alienation of the subject by the Other (which is also language itself).

Writing on the works of Marcel Duchamp, Gianfranco Baruchello's insight applies equally well to Nichol's text. "Thus in his works," Baruchello notes, "you find yourself dealing with an ego that's more or less *provisional*. It's an *I* that's not presented or represented as [...] a part of the person, [...] and it's not at all the *I* that defines the person; what defines the person is his *activity* to take his distances from the *I* [...]. [W]hat we see is a whole series of parallel states of existence" (92-94; my emphasis). Again, Nichol's decentering of the individual and authorial *i* provides the basis for the reader-as-producer to manifest; this represents a radical repositioning of roles. The reader's repositioning ("activity") establishes the ego; Nichol's decentering poetics *naturalizes* the *i* rendering it plural: "the mind's struggle with/ ailing mental realities/ the real i ties into/ faces/ and every one of them my own" ("St Anzas V"). Nichol's *i* is a remarkably allusive *i*: "the i shared/ its very assertion/ creates distances."

That the unity of the subject is subverted and replaced by a structure of relations is further articulated in Lacan's graph of desire, which also best illustrates what he means by the term *Real* (*Ecrits*, 315). The graph of desire is intended to show the many relations that constitute the identity of the subject; it indicates that the basic path defining the self follows from the barred or split subject (signified by the notation $\$$) to the "Ego Ideal" (signified by the notation $I(O)$). This fundamental trajectory is contingent with the subject's interaction with the Other (O), "and thus represents the process by which

the self takes on an identity" (Lee, 139). The realization that language structures the self is explicit in Nichol's text: "words/ [...] as they are/ objects in the world we live in/ carry us far/ ther/ a/ way/ from/ each/ other/ than/ they/ should (text following "This is a Love Poem"). Once more we see the pronoun *identified* as a signifier in Lacan's schema. "What the eye [*i*] seizes as real," for Nichol, "is fractured again and again" ("Scriptures 17"). The *real* is fractured by the symbol, by language. Yet, it is this same symbol which we seek to reconstruct the *real*. Poetry is the most efficient instrument for this.

The upper half of Lacan's graph schematizes the dialectic of need and desire, desire defined as a defence against jouissance and represented by the notation (small) *d* (*Ecrits*, 322). An important Lacanian insight is that the self "is a subject only from being subjected to the field of the Other" (Lacan 1981, 188). This theory of subjectification is linked to the experience of alienation through lack. Lacan's contention is that [language and loss] are mutually functions of each other: "except to say this combination of words is me/ these signs as long as these books exist" ("Talking About Strawberries All of the Time"). Linguistically contrived, the human subject is a relational and therefore elusive, provisional self: "changing because you changes too, me or i, / assumptions of/ what i knows of i's itself/ this or that me/ cumulative accumulation of i's dentity" ("Monotones C").

Lacan situates the Real in the realm of jouissance. Language forces the subject to surrender jouissance; pleasure takes the place of bliss, pleasure understood here "as the sort of satisfaction (desire) [...] inseparably linked to fantasy" (Lee, 141). Desire, in turn, is motivated by — a manifestation of — fantasy and lack. Any object which is perceived by the subject as a substitute for lack is defined by Lacan as the *objet petit a*. The *objet a*, as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan attests, perpetuates "a hole in the middle of perception" which points to loss, lack. Jouissance thus exists as a relation between the (barred, split) subject and the *objet a*; in other words, jouissance exists between two edges: self and loss. Paradoxically, the compensation for loss is the person's ability to *name*, "[the] Real is given structure by the human power to name" (Bowie, 133). Nichol's emphasis on process is linked to the creative and transformational quality of that human power.

Renaming is crucial to Nichol's art, a process, moreover, related to reading-as-divining. By divining I mean "the attempt to elicit from some higher power [...] the answers to questions "be-/ yond" the range of ordinary human understanding" (Niechoda, 151). Reading, at this level, creates a link between the individual mind and oth-

erness (Godness, in Nichol's sense of that term). The spiritual ("pataphysical") dimension of this correlation to which Nichol refers is realized in the activity of language production (and is not language per se); it is exactly an activity (reading or writing) which Nichol perceives as sacred (Nichol 1988, 234). Language's "pataphysical/ sacred reality is inherent in the materiality and therefore mutability of its form, of the text. The power to name brings language down to earth: "only the words/ their compressions/ breaks/ like a mind/ adamizes/ brings eve down" ("Diatribes"). The consequences of our entry — our Fall — into language are the distortions we manifest in our reading: that's our bliss. Nichol's project includes the resacralization (the "naturalization") of these distortions through naming, renaming, and invocation the act of writing perpetuates: "these marked surfaces define, defaced,/ divine presence a pressure/ which the pen's tip'll trace" ("St Anzas IX").

Naming establishes one of the fundamental insights of Nichol's text; given that fact that the *i* in *The Martyrology* is also the pronoun of the saints — themselves linguistic constructions, "rearrangements" — suggests that the content of the self cannot be separated from its form. "It is constructed," as one scholar put it, "the moment it enters the field of [the Other]" (Kamboureli, 104). The alleatory reality of the self is signified by the mere proliferation of *i*; furthermore, this (also signified by the proliferation of textual form and genre in *The Martyrology*) extends the *i*'s signifying power. Once again, naming gives way to invocation which the act of reading/ divining/ writing relates, "because to speak the tru names/ presumes the power to invoke" ("Scriptures: 7th Sequence").

Barthes, in "The Death of the Author," asserts that the author is at last subverted. Barthes' essay was first published in the mid 1960s. It's clear that poetry is still exclaiming this assertion. Everything, eventually, comes down to the reader; to paraphrase Duchamp, it's the reader who makes all the difference in the long run.

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Readings and Reviews

The Coherences of Chaos

FEAR & PHILOSOPHY BY STEPHEN-PAUL MARTIN (DETOUR, \$8.95)

Reviewed by Andrew Joron

Stephen-Paul Martin's stories appear to be constructed in the same manner as fractal patterns: he begins by relating a simple event whose coordinates are easily locatable on the graph of everyday life. Processed by Martin's fractal methodology, however, such ordinary acts and occurrences quickly become amplified into psychedelic swirls of narrative, unpredictable but non-random, driven forward by the discontinuous logic of a media-saturated, bitterly antagonistic society. In "Frame Tale," the first story in the book, Martin explodes or, more precisely, "fractalizes" a banal conversation in an art gallery:

"I don't like this one very much," he said.

"I'm the one who painted it," she said.

Her words were like an abandoned eight-lane highway, like a bear in a small suburban zoo in Oregon, like a frisbee floating six feet over someone's outstretched hand, a small canoe concealing guns on the Nicaraguan border, a robot doing someone's job, a box of unsent letters, a fifteen-page report that gets a "D" in high-school physics, someone's basement filled with bubbling tubes and twinkling alembics, a wolf badge kept in a massive eighteenth-century carved oak dresser, a labyrinth drawn from memory on a greasy luncheonette napkin, a sum made from a falsified past, a poplar filmed in Paris, nineteen words crossed out in a debutante's diary near Annapolis, a baby whale whose mother has just been killed, a missing pronoun, a case of laryngitis kept in check with homemade soup, a group of one-celled animals in a petri dish in Munich, a bayonet flashing near the Golan Heights in a beautiful sunset, a silhouette of a silo caught in a photograph in Kansas, or like the sound of change in someone's pocket.

"Oh!" he said. "Well, you know, I don't really know that much about art. Maybe there's some sort of hidden meaning in this picture and I just can't see it."

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No formalist game, Martin's procedure is motivated by a radical social critique. Here, formal experimentation becomes a way of both foregrounding and defeating the ideological system's attempts at self-enclosure. Martin's narrative method, while "making ideology visible" as engaged writing is supposed to do, is not simply reflective of social contradictions but ingestive of them, swallowing reality itself as the most potent hallucinogen. Martin has, in this book as well as in his previous collection *The Gothic Twilight*, developed a style of writing that I am tempted to call "critico-ecstatic."

The tales in *Fear & Philosophy* are therefore not mimetic but metamorphic. Appropriating the "music" of political economy, Martin's fiction is reminiscent of Alfred Döblin's frenetic stories of 1929 Berlin, in which narrative is structured by harsh, jazz-like rhythms. Whereas Döblin's prose gathers its energy from the sound-effects of industrial capitalism, Martin's prose, embedded in the integrated circuit of the global marketplace, takes on the structure of tribal-trance drumming. Narrative events in *Fear & Philosophy* stand in a relation of ecstatic intercommunication which, like a fractal pattern, is self-similar at every scale:

... and for this moment only, passing on to the next, and then again for that moment, and that moment only, passing on to the next, and then again for that moment, and that moment only, passing on to the next, and then again for that moment, and that moment only, passing on to the next, and then again for that moment, and that moment only, passing on to the next, and the words are getting softer wandering widely over the world, electrical patterns of motion dancing wildly over the world, words like waving fields of hands in breeze, or undersea plant-life, like fetuses rocking slowly side to side like an unborn sea. . . . (from "Feeding on the Wind," pp. 62-63)

In the fictions of both Döblin and Martin, the contemporary mode of production—especially the mode of reproducing consciousness—is made visible at every aesthetic level, including the level of character construction. Döblin's writing belongs to the Machine Age, Martin's to the Information Age. Whereas Döblin's Berlin-story characters are clangorous collages, subjects pieced together from jagged bits of industrial debris, Martin's characters glow softly with virtual light: they possess the flickering contours of television ghosts, assuming even the identities of recognizable media concoctions such as Superman and Lois Lane. Indeed, Martin's people are figures in both the literary and numerical senses of the term: they behave as screen-

traces, capable of being manipulated by remote control. This is why, perhaps, they seem prey to an inordinate passivity, getting hired, getting fired, suffering infidelity and boredom, falling from tenth-floor windows only to pick themselves up and return home smiling.

If this seems fanciful, it is a fantasy that is not only permitted, but imposed by endless cycles of media culture. In these stories, characters are processed — "mediated" — through hyperreality, a commodified version of paradise (one of the stories is entitled "Falling into Paradise") where the traditional oppositions between dreaming and waking, past and future, even life and death appear to have been reconciled.

In hyperreality, as Baudrillard has argued, the distinction between reality and simulation is no longer relevant. Throughout *Fear & Philosophy*—a book which might have been subtitled "Tales of Hyperreality"—Martin is concerned with showing how consciousness is constructed in a society that, though remaining exploitative, has somehow evolved beyond alienation, whose subjects can no longer be dispossessed of their "true" natures by a dominating power because the subject itself has become a simulacrum, a copy without an original.

Martin allegorizes this loss of the Original Self in a story entitled "Seven," describing the demise and rebirth of a character named Donald Storm, who is struck by lightning. His body is scattered in seven pieces across the continent, each piece becoming "an all-new Donald Storm, much in the same way that each part of a severed flatworm grows into a full new flatworm."

There was something very ominous about the times, a feeling of dread in every aspect of life—personal, professional, urban, suburban—that made what happened to Donald Storm seem not only possible, but even necessary. And so each part of him was all of him, and each new Donald Storm knew just what the old one knew, but with a crucial difference—each had a memory gap, and each was driven to fill it, to find those events, perceptions, and feelings that might occupy not only the present becoming the future, but the past as well.

Each of the new Storms experiences a series of nonlinear adventures in his quest to be reunited with the other Storms. Our identities, in this allegory, are viewed as storm-centers whose present motions are non-Newtonian — i.e., unpredictable or chaotic — so that they cannot be "played backward" in order to reconstruct our past. This is, of course, one of the attributes of fractal phenomena.

"If we totally get rid of the concept of identity," Martin asks in

the novella-length story "Double Identity," "what would take its place?" The answer is Superman, the archetype of a hyperreal or media-generated figure. He is the only character in *Fear & Philosophy* who "gives the weather back the shape it gives him." In this story, Superman behaves less as a unitary character — i.e., the representation of a person, made recognizable by some positive set of attributes — than as a character-system, a zone in which multiple systems of discourse chaotically collide and reshape themselves. He is, in Martin's own words, "a basin of attraction, a pattern of motion made from a set of probability functions."

Martin's Superman is a fictional embodiment of what, in meteorological chaos theory, is called the Butterfly Effect: "the notion," as James Gleick describes it in his book *Chaos*, "that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York." Each sentence in the story operates as a kind of microclimate, a discursive "bubble" of comedy, eroticism, satire, tragedy, advertising lingo, journalism, or philosophy. Begin from any set of discursive coordinates, and, as Martin puts it, the "initial conditions determined by careful computation soon become chaotic, yet manifest a pattern of coherence." The name of this "coherence" is Superman, the populist (anti-Nietzschean) *Übermensch*, able to move with impunity between fragmented levels of language and experience.

In "Double Identity," Superman's powers derive from the fact that he, or the impossible coherence he represents, ultimately escapes representation. Martin celebrates here the ironic return of some form of transcendence, one which can be glimpsed even through the interference patterns of mass media, the veritable screen of oppressive social relations.

In "Double Identity," Martin allows us to see through the myth of self-identity (with X-ray eyes!) to an emancipatory mode of consciousness drawn from multiplicity, not unity. Similar ideas — of a "social mutant" whose identity would be constituted wholly within difference — have been posed before, notably by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *Anti-Oedipus* and by Donna Haraway in her essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs." Martin's Superman story contributes to this heretical tradition by presenting an anti-character with the power to reconcile identity and non-identity (the Romantic/Hegelian version of "double identity").

That such a reconciliation could occur beyond a totalistic or unifying schema is the Utopian promise offered by Martin's writing, which, by breaking through breakage, cancels the incommensurable by intensifying it, until its feedback squeal reveals a world of dissonant harmonies — the coherences of chaos.

Poet's Court

TINY COURTS BY DAVID BROMIGE (BRICK BOOKS, \$9.95)

Reviewed by Douglas A Powell

"The State Supplanted Gold," the first poem of David Bromige's *Tiny Courts* [in a world without scales], consists of two lines:

'Irony' i read
but it said 'Money'

Indeed, irony is a primary figure in these poems of Bromige's, eclipsing with its proper capital 'I' the subordinate 'i' of the speaker. The figure undermines the authority given to narrative; so that, while the reader is treated to Bromige's manner of voice, s/he is never imprisoned by Bromige's relationship to content.

How you feel about that meadow
personally will only
embarrass us

before the planning commission
The chair drums his fingers
This is really irrelevant
(“Don't drool when you say lot-split”)

"Everything I write has happened to me, yes," says Bromige, "I happened to hear it or read it or mis-hear it or mis-translate it..."* It is precisely this penchant for the mis-understood that provides much of the ironic metal of *Tiny Courts*:

The book was called (she said)
Civilization and its discotheques
and life was too short to complete it
(“Personal(too)”)

but not by those who think
the immediate is
Shit, i just ran out of paper
(“So, a poetry of immediacy”)

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In the audible world of Bromige, puns and slips of speech substitute for statement—they are more interesting than statement because they only allude to what is actually being said; they do not evoke by denotation. If there is reference in this kind of poetry, it seems to happen by accident; the poet is correspondingly absolved of bearing “message,” he has only delivered an (albeit thinly) disguised phrase—the reader assumes responsibility for its decoding.

Much of the irony of Bromige’s poems arises from the formal manipulation necessary to produce such seeming accidents: intentional ambiguities, erasures, lines broken at audibly awkward moments; theatrical asides which undercut the verity of events. Furthermore, Bromige demonstrates a “reliance on a recognizable mode” (Ron Silliman, writing on *Tight Corners* in *The Difficulties* vol. 3, no. 1) which sets this irreferential voice against a strangely traditional backdrop. Bromige’s employment of regular stanzaic constructions, justified margins, and hypotaxis provides an ironic framework for a poetry which questions “language’s cognitive domain” (Silliman, *ibid.*). This is rather like publishing a Dadaist “non-poem” in a journal of poetry—the format does not suit the work, but in what other context is the work as interesting? “We have always made mistakes, but the greatest mistakes are the poems we have written” (Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*). Bromige is not unaware of the tension between his poetic “act” and its outward appearance. Indeed he admits this inconsistency as a condition of society:

We are nonetheless civilized
with a touching faith in reason
so a sense of contradiction
goes with me all my days
 (“Feeling for the blind”)

Bromige’s poems provide a mirror for the realm of public discourse. Rather than railing against the panoply of stupid talk, he mimics in order to provoke recognition. Bromige takes his precedent from the political arena, although there is little overt political content to be found in these poems:

...we who for decades had been attempting to bring to a more general awareness the dumbness (Dumheit) of the language of political power, its hollow cleverness and its low cunning, found in Watergate both a confirmation and a renewed injunction to continue and broaden the attack. From Watergate on, I have strengthened an already existing tendency...in my poetry, into this commitment.

This is not to say that these poems serve only to reflect our own ironies. They are, without consideration of their implications, aesthetically pleasing and diverse exercises of the poetic impulse. Bromige is not only fond of misused language; he also enjoys wordplay, and he uses devices such as anagrams and acrostics to vary the range of this collection. He is a sharp rhymesmith, as evidenced in a poem such as this one:

Pomade upon the hair
and then the promenade
where the sun like orangeade
flickers off the waves
like lemonade and knocks
your knickers off for foreignaid
and kicks you knockers off
 (“Song: Brilliantly inventive”)

The contrast between the pleasant half-rhyme of “pomade,” “promenade,” “orangeade,” “Lemonade,” “foreignaid,” and the “ick”-y sound of “flickers,” “knickers,” “kicks” creates a kind of musical contrapuncto, opposing notes played against each other within the same melody. Such unabashed lyricism stands in curious opposition to the controlled speech-based lines of other poems in the collection. Here is Bromige reminding us that, after all, he is a poet; and the impulse to create art might occasionally pre-empt commitments to irony or ideas. As Bromige says:

To read my poetry as ironized is to read only halfway into it. It is to stop short of the requisite further step, which is to overcome one’s timidity in the face of an apparent irony and take the risk that the phrase, line, sentence, piece has more than irony to offer; the reader is called on the feel this experience through...

Stephen Rodefer says, in his poem “Plane Debris”: “Like history, a man is a lesson. As soon as you learn it, no need for class,” By extension, a man’s poetry is equally a lesson. If that lesson is created in such a way that it is immediately consumable and absorbable, then the reader may as well move on to a more difficult lesson.

Bromige’s poems are not difficult to approach, as would be, say, a lesson in medieval Chinese history—in such a lesson we would have to learn far more than the subject at hand; we would need lessons in geography, language, customs, etc., in order to prepare for the history lesson. Bromige’s poems are more like a lesson in contemporary his-

tory—we already speak the language, know the customs, are familiar with the topography. But there is still much we cannot know. This is not a poetry which gives everything of itself on the first or even the fifth reading. Some of the poems are downright enigmatic; others, so subtle that the return to them opens new levels of meaning which might previously have been missed.

A partial reason for this resistance within the poems is Bromige's wandering 'I':

i keep recurring
to that design.
And i can't mean me
("On going on")

In much narrative poetry the 'I' is fairly consistent. In Gary Soto's or Lucille Clifton's work, for example, we can assume fairly accurately that 'I' means the poet. Robert Peters dons a persona in his 'I,' and that persona carries us through an entire book. But Bromige keeps us guessing. In *Tiny Courts* he dons various personae, including inanimate ones, such as a clock or a layer of pond scum. He invites the reader to inhabit the 'I' as much as he does, so that the poem becomes an event outside of either poet or reader:

...my pre-biographical experience can never be used to explain away or fully account for any but the weakest of my writings; such an approach neglects the very thing that counts most, art, the transforming power of the imagination.

This provides for the final irony of Bromige's poems, that the poet does not presume to know any more about the poem than the reader knows. The poet here is only one more reader of his own work, while the reader, inhabiting the 'I,' becomes the true creator of the poem. This fusion of identity blocks the possibility of anyone becoming the "authority." And so we may never completely understand these poems. But as Bromige says, "There's nothing like reading except reading."

*All Bromige's remarks quoted here are found in an interview with Tom Beckett in *The Difficulties*, volume 3, number 1).

The Brawn and the Brain

ASPHALT CIGAR BY KEVIN CONNOLLY (COACH HOUSE, \$12)

Reviewed by Clint Burnham

"Junkmale," a poem in Kevin Connolly's new collection *Asphalt Cigar*, ends thus:

I've just spent the whole fucking night
playing pool with Bob on a threadbare,
half-size, buck-a-play table.

"Research," I call it.
Bob calls it "Thursday,"
and he's right.

Connolly has characterized his own work as epistemological, and it is evident that here the work is confronting the Lukáscean question of proletariat consciousness. For the male intellectual, participation in male rituals is suddenly problematic; this problematic, brought about by the rupture in the working class intellectual's masculinity, makes its effect as lack of knowledge.

What's interesting about Connolly's project is that he conducts it within the parameters of the conventional voice-driven, anecdotal lyric. Or so it appears: I think Connolly's lyrics are closer to George Bowering's anti-lyrics than to James Tate or James Merrill's refined takes. But yeah, and there's some documentation on the matter in the way of Steve McCaffery: "Connolly's poetry can be described primarily as a practice of the sentence, a stanzaic prose pitched at a rhetorical minimum," he writes in *Open Letter**. Yet at another point in the same essay, McCaffery notes that "the refusal here to attach an additional similitude provokes a loaded interstitiality ... where there is equally a feeling of a dissociation of the signifieds as a cumulative comparison of terms." So to rephrase McCaffery, Connolly's work constitutes a negative critique of meaning within a more conventional frame. Sort of like early Adorno: the thorniness of the philosophical question here in some ways demands the pretence of a transparent language.

But what interests me here is a kind of political reading of

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Connolly's work, that is, a way of seeing how it comes to face the brawn versus brain question. For what that question means, to my way of thinking, is the quality of mediation. First of all, this means that the poem confronts the bad faith felt by intellectuals, the existential angst that being a writer or intellectual entails. The writer makes the classic mistake of being removed—mediated— from a quintessential male activity: shooting pool. The writer calls this "research," thereby revealing his inability to enjoy an event for its own sake. When Bob says that no, it's "Thursday," his literally everyday common sense wins the day. Bob is right because he knows what day it is: the bed-rock of male proletarian thought. Yeah, you can go back to the 10 Hour Committee in Victorian England and Marx on the working day for historical arguments on why time figures so largely in proletarian consciousness. This is a different tradition than Heidegger, but only in some ways. While basic struggles were carried out to limit the amount of work in the new industrializing factories (since the machine represented frozen capital), the historical working class was born to a "knowledge" that time was up for grabs. But as Marx pointed out in *Capital*, the working day was itself variable, not a fixed constant. This is why, I think, there has been such concern paid to notions of time and the everyday in such writers as Gramsci and most of all Henri Lefebvre.

This take on time, masculinity, and class is a contested struggle in Connolly's text, one full of contradictions in the way that poetry is supposed to be. The attempts at transparency in the diction of the poetry are apparently linked to this bad faith over the status of the intellectual: a desire to reach "back" to the masses equates some success in that endeavour with an aesthetic choice. Here's a comment on lines from a Talking Heads song in another poem: "The song at least makes sense/and pays for its own lunches." "Making sense" is linked, if not causally, with economic self-sufficiency. This success in the market is then seen as the ultimate success, instead of merely one form of economic success. The texts in *Asphalt Cigar* pose these questions, framing discussions in densely layered "persona" and "voice". This poem, "Twelve arrests, no convictions," may be uttered by a convict-poet or may eschew any stable narrator (even while retaining a sentence structure of punctuation and capitalization).

This is Connolly's largest collection so far— he has half a dozen chapbooks from the most important small presses in Toronto, and he edited for a number of years the literary mag *What!* But it's also part of an aesthetically militant tendency in Canadian letters, in a con-

tinuation of 1960s early postmodern formalism via such questions as visual poetry, self publishing, mimeo and now xerox - the whole gambit. This generation in Toronto included such heavyweights as bpNichol, Victor Coleman, Steve McCaffery. In the 1980s and on, small press exploded in such a way that publication form outstripped poetics as a field of experimentation, so that it seemed natural that in Vancouver, the reverse should be true.

One of the constitutive elements in a lot of the Toronto writing of this community, I think, is a tendency toward minimalism of various sorts: minimal presentation sometimes (tiny chapbooks, two pages, rubber-stamped); what McCaffery called the "rhetorical minimum" of linguistic register (although sometimes also a borrowing of NY school-like ironic yelling - more O'Hara and Padgett and Berrigan than Ginsburg or Ashbery); and a tendency to visual poetry that acts to strip the text (although there's also plenty of over-the-top work like and beyond McCaffery's *Carnival* series); and most importantly, a critical minimalism that enforces itself in opposition to theoretical arguments carried beyond a certain level.

As a part of this larger discourse or scene, then, Connolly's work is in a dialogue with it. Two of the book's sections were originally chapbooks and one was a graffiti project; the topics appropriately mix the high-low thang: Canadian supermodel Monika Schnarre quotes Sartre and Paul Virilio, Nietzsche ends up on stickers, Christopher Columbus does velvet paintings and sings karaoke. These "surface structures" provide a grid as determinant as those posited by my reading earlier in this article; it is the number of readings possible, through any of various cultural entry points and in many registers, that maintain my interest in Connolly's work.

*Steve McCaffery. 1994. "From Breton to Bloor Street: Surrealism in the Poetry of Kevin Connolly." *Open Letter* 8.9: 71-85.

Book Briefs

By Susan Smith Nash

Stromata by David Miller (Burning Deck, Providence, RI, \$8). Five longish prose poems that engage the reader's sense of narrative inevitability. The first, "Stromata," is divided into Book One and Book Two—the first involves looking outward ("The eye sees stone and sees nothing. The wall is quite literally a wall, to which the young woman presses her face, her body shaking as she weeps") while the second involves looking inward ("Misery's singular, however many the lives it possesses; and though assigned to marginalia, its images impoverished, powerless"). Miller heightens the ambiguity in each thought, line, and image so that they glide together in non-hierarchical, energetic ways.

The Rosy Medallions by Camille Roy (Kelsey Street Press, Berkeley, CA, \$10). Narratives of desire that confront the reader with the realization that some of the urgency of innovative writing lies in the encryptedness of knowledge, and that what is understood viscerally is not necessarily worked through in the conscious braid—ever. This is the language of the socially-constructed (or deconstructed) self bared naked so that you're forced to see your own violences: "I liked the closed-in feeling—relation defined through position and abandonment, the meaning of fix. So the streets were deserted after dark and any stranger carried death!" If Henry Miller were a smart, funny lesbian and he were rewriting *The Rosy Crucifixion*, this is what might result. Brilliant insights into the savage dynamics of love.

Ants Dissolve in Moonlight by W.B. Keckler (Fugue State Press, NY). Stunning cover art of a neon electric pink ant fuzzed in radioactive or hazardous waste larger-than-lifeness opens this collection of fluid, thoughtful, gorgeous poems. Some connect the reader with the challenge of re-perceiving everydayness, such as "The Donut Shop"—"Blue reflection, a fat lady's/behind in Plexiglas before me./Now she sneezes. She has/bright Fellini hair./Is hers September's first cold/ Words must rely on their marrow." Others recall the perverse ironies of Emily Dickinson, such as "Mikado" and "He vomited stars all

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night./Tiny girls pulled at silk tethers,/Jumbling him to shake demons out." Subtle wordplay and quick intelligences recall Stevens, but updated and more fleshy and playful.

Bread and Water by Alison Knowles (Left Hand Books, Barrytown, NY, \$18). One of the most fascinating experimental, visual works in recent years by Fluxus artist Alison Knowles. The technique used consists of photographing the cracks on homebaked bread, correlating them to rivers found in world atlases, and then constructing poetry from the random happenstance of coincidences and language. This is an exciting work from an influential writer whose contributions to experimental writing were featured in a show at the Guggenheim last year. A map of the mind's hemispheres in the form of a global trek, Knowles includes "The Amazon at Belem," "The Hudson at Jersey City," "Lake Como at Bellagio," "Overview of Shikoku," "River Stour from Pegwell to Canterbury," "Santa Clara River at Oxnard (Los Angeles)" and others. It is simultaneously a geography, a mindscape and a bestiary: "Honey sucker cockatoo and brush-tongued lorie / bandicoot and kangaroo / bat tribes and flying foxes sixty sorts of parrots"; this one from Deaf Adder Creek, but the others contain similar populations of energy and life.

Strictly Confidential by Bruce Andrews (Zasterle Press, Grand Canaries). More of Andrews' non-hierarchical, all-inclusive, catalogue prose poems, which, upon first glance, seem to be part of a larger project which includes *Mobius*, *Tizzy Boost*, *Divestiture—A*, and others. However, *Strictly Confidential* differs from other works in several significant ways. Here, Andrews' narratives construct a pseudo-confessional form which pushes the boundaries of realism by mapping perception—"Red is a color. Until 1687, clocks had no minute hands. They're not qualified to treat females? Finger licking good, OK?" Andrews' random-text generator has the musicality of a Kronos Quartet experimental piece.

Ex Why Zee by Bruce Andrews (Roof Books, Segue Foundation, NY, NY, \$10.95). In *Ex Why Zee*, Andrews gives the reader access to the techniques of innovative writing, the praxis of experimentalism. Drawn from live multi-media performances and collaborations, this book is energetic and down-to-earth. Collaborations with Sally Silvers are a stand-out—"Eagles Ate My Estrogen" is truly hilarious send-up of stage directions and choreography. The movements depicted

are random, jerky, and spasmodic; a perfect counterpart to the script: "Eagles are my estrogen / Serum party / Scalpel the herk's hump / Dead woman kept alive to save fetus / Farmer gives birth to his pail / The is a tooth fairy / You either want to fuck it (?) or drain it (?)". *Ex Why Zee* explores the limits of the sign and sign (meaning) construction through gesture and word.

Numen by Cole Swensen (Burning Deck, Providence, RI, \$8). Cole Swensen's ethereal, subtly nuanced words suggest that existence is a constructed perception. She emphasizes the representation of light, shadow, and shading in the series "Numbers": "a simple decision / and all colors / as if they/ And we climb / in rainstorm formation / separating / lines / and for a moment / lines." Swenson positions herself within the world of phenomena with a mindfulness and clarity. In "Garden" the identity of the person comes through means of connecting to the world around one: "Water all oer this world, dripping the sound / Something you could love / Where the sky descends in sheets how they / sway where there is no / wind like you and I."

All Acts Are Simply Acts by Edward Foster (Rodent Press, Boulder, CO). This collection of essays, poetry, experimental fiction makes a significant contribution to the understanding and appreciation of how poetry and poetics are changing in the fin-de-millennium times we live in. Foster, whose journal, *Talisman*, is one of the most innovative, exciting, and non-partisan literary journals in print today, is simultaneously, an insightful critic and a challenging poet. In the first essay in this collection, "Poetry Has Nothing To Do With Politics," Foster debunks the notions of Stanley Fish and others who suggest that texts are simply social acts. In an imminently quotable line, Foster says, "Poetry is a way of knowing; criticism is a manner of speculation." The section, "The Space Between Her Bed and Clock" compels the reader to look at all writing in the context of an aesthetic position. "The Understanding" explores how one know oneself by means of mythological personae. "All Acts Are Simply Acts" explores the way poetry represents or allows one to know the warmth of human connection.

Khawatir by Jim Leftwich (The Runaway Spoon Press, Charlotte, FL, \$4). A small chapbook of mystical intensity which counters the impulse to categorize and reduce all experimental poetry to footnotes and exempla found in a dull book of literary criticism. Leftwich's work is passionate and alive with the collaged experiences of language,

sight, and perception. "Night's spiral satellite, riddle fish. Curved fish, webbed language flowers, muscles' eloquent thought." Leftwich achieves a gorgeous impenetrability here, and the words are dense, layered, evocative of a mood, a state of mind, an accident of perdiction: "Lapsed frivolous Shinto traffic, lacquer votive words, airt opaque time's item, as time emits its site, authority forgotten, surreal minority accented, selling Chevrolets. Coffin and sympathetic corpse, bet on scent, rescue cond, morse biopsy mode, tongue fingers soil's permission. Skin ankh atavistic." A true joy to read.

A Clove of Gender by Sheila E. Murphy (Stride Publications, Devon, U.K., \$15). A stunning collection of poems by widely published Murphy, whose poetry consistently contains a whimsy which is rare in experimental writing. *A Clove of Gender* is an unusual collection for Murphy in that it contains her ideas about writing poetry: "A I am supposed to be intelligent but content bores me. Only form is worth. The rest unhinges any certitude. For instance look at this free space and measure its dimensions. Is freedom really four feet deep or are we lying with discovery unclothed." My favorite section is "Desert Wildflowers," a bouquet of 20 varieties of plants assembled by Murphy, a resident of Arizona. "Desert Mariposa" is a good example of how, in Murphy's hands, the botanical becomes an analysis of the processes of earth and how one comes to understand oneself in relation to the world: "Wind lily of desire infrequently appears. Bulb pushes the earth open, pressures daylight to receive vermillion. Centered gland anchors the smooth pressed flower...Do I touch unscented cloth with lips that learn infinity."

Skyblue's Essays by Dallas Wiebe (Burning Deck, Providence, RI, \$8.95). These fictions have the self-consciousness of Robbe-Grillet and the urgency of new French cinema which tracks the lives of people lost in the surge of new political configurations, transparent prejudices, and a questioning of social hierarchies. Wiebe works these out in the arena of aesthetics, so that the protagonist of the stories, Skyblue, enacts and performs the figurative language. The resulting essays are fascinatingly lucid—like watching a performance piece and reading a critical essay on it at the same time. The collection is somewhat uneven, which, surprisingly does not detract from the book. Although the other essays are mildly ironic cultural critiques, which do not have the impact of his more experimental pieces, they are amusing and insightful, and an enjoyable read.

Publications Noted

Books and Chaps

- Todd Baron, *Outside* (Avenue B, \$9.95)
Dennis Barone, *Abusing the Telephone* (Drogue Press, \$10)
Marcel Cohen, *The Peacock Emperor Moth* (Burning Deck, \$8)
Damon Drukowski, *5000 Musical Terms* (Burning Deck, \$5)
Brian Schorn, *Strabismus* (Burning Deck, \$8)
Larry Eigner, *A Count of Some Things* (Score Publications, no price listed)
Crag Hill, *Yes James, Yes Joyce and other Poems* (Loose Gravel Press, no price listed)
Stephen Ratcliffe, *Present Tense* (The Figures, \$12)
Claude Royet-Journoud, *i.e.* (trans. Keith Waldrop), (Serie d'Ecriture, supplement one, Burning Deck, \$8)
Tod Thilleman, *Waverun* (Spuyten Duyvi, No Price Listed)

Magazines and Journals

- Jim McCrary, ed., *Smelt Money* #11
Susan Smith Nash, ed., *Texture* Issue 6 (Texture Press, \$8)