

# Subjects of Experience: Post-cognitive Subjectivity in the Work of bpNichol and Daphne Marlatt

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## I

**D**APHNE MARLATT and bpNichol have both been critically celebrated for the writerly qualities of their work, and in the 1980s both were explicated in vocabularies that borrowed significantly from poststructuralist and French feminist theory respectively. Yet both have also been reproached for perpetuating discredited positions: Nichol for the retention of a humanist subjectivity and imperialist narrative of nation; Marlatt for feminist essentialism. I have chosen to consider them together because of the similarity in critical response to the so-called humanist elements in their work, and because I hear this response as typical of a literary-theoretical reaction to writing that reenacts perceptual experience. The two major critiques that have come out about their work to date are epistemological — the “essentialism rap” as Marlatt calls it (*Readings* 128) — and postcolonial or cross-cultural. I want to suggest that both critical streams misrecognize the kind of subjectivity proposed by the process poetics that Nichol and Marlatt practice. Using a distinction of Giorgio Agamben’s, I argue that Nichol and Marlatt assume the position of the subject who undergoes rather than the subject who knows, but that it is the latter to which critics have addressed themselves. This is not to say that the assumptions which produce the subject of experience are beyond contest, but rather that they have yet to be adequately explored. Because my focus is on the poetic performance of experience, I will be considering Marlatt and Nichol at a level of abstraction that may seem to overstep the considerable differences between them in method and content. What I hope to gain by this generalizing approach is a way

to reframe the critical response to the perceptual, performative dimension of process poetry, and to suggest how such writing might speak to us now.

The one point most readers acknowledge about both Nichol and Marlatt is that each combines easily recognizable themes and cultural narratives with strongly foregrounded textual play. In *The Martyrology*,<sup>1</sup> Nichol pursues themes of identity (who is “i”?), of nation building (where is here?), of historical narration (how do i tell a life?), and of social relations (how does “i” get from me to we?). These themes are very loosely assembled under a quest motif and enacted by a cast of characters that includes the saints (the “st” words of the language) and a lowercase, first person narrator who finds himself adrift in a vast word world. As the “i” traverses this world in a search for self, relationship, and home, it faces fear, death, and loneliness. Those readers who have sought to position *The Martyrology* with the help of postmodern or poststructuralist theory have set Nichol’s dazzling repertoire of textual devices against this narrative and its diminutive subject. In “*The Martyrology* as Paragram,” a key essay on Nichol in *North of Intention* (1986), Steve McCaffery begins with a recognition of two economies in the work: the syntactic, or “material order of language” (58), and the semantic, which gives us the “idealist effects of language” (59). In the same essay, McCaffery writes that Nichol’s “dialogism provides us with a contemporary access to *The Martyrology* not as a serial epic or poetic journal, but as a polyphonic staging of intersecting texts in which inter-subjectivity (undeniably present) is never allowed to dominate, and needs, in its relative status, no apologetic justification” (75-76). Stephen Scobie, in *bpNichol: What History Teaches* (1984), also identifies contrary tensions in the work and positions Nichol between modernist humanism and deconstruction (9). Smaro Kamboureli, writing on Nichol’s construction of the self in “Self/Identity/Pronoun: bpNichol” (1991), notes that while Nichol cannot get rid of the “I,” the “apostrophic mode” of *The Martyrology* establishes the con-stitutive role of the other in the engendering of the self and thus decentres it (162). Douglas Barbour, in his contribution to the ECW Press critical series on Canadian literature (1992), reads Nichol’s writing as “a form of *écriture*,” but agrees with Scobie that “while Nichol has moved boldly into the field of decentred writing, he is also, and still, a major instance of the presence of voice in poetry” (*Canadian* 282).

Other readers, however, most of them from a younger generation of critics, have not been similarly convinced that textual density adequately qualifies the narrative component of *The Martyrology*. Those who read the

poem as epistemologically naïve argue that the wordplay is recovered at the thematic level, or that Nichol fails to deconstruct the narrator as presence. Peter Jaeger's assessment of *The Martyrology* as recuperative of the humanist subject exemplifies this kind of response. In *ABC of Reading TRG* (1999), Jaeger writes that "*The Martyrology's* inscription of a speaking 'I', along with its use of journalistic form, recuperates a self-present subject at the thematic level... Nichol's longpoem offers readers the comforting assurances of a de-politicized, atheoretical humanism that is only partially de-stabilized by the ramifications of its own formal procedures" (35).

To Jaeger's reservations and those of others similarly disposed toward *The Martyrology* — Jeff Derksen, Darren Wershler-Henry, and Christian Bök, for example<sup>2</sup> — postcolonial readers have added their own. In an essay included in the collection, *Beyond the Orchard* (1997),<sup>3</sup> Glen Lowry finds in Nichol an idea of community that simply repeats the liberal pluralism of the official culture in which the juridicial and historical subjects are taken to be the same (68). Moreover, Lowry argues that *Book 5* of *The Martyrology*, which details the poet's rediscovery of his geohistorical environs in Toronto and other sites, is thematically tied to British Romanticism, Wordsworth's in particular. Drawing on the "great image bank of European culture" (71), Nichol, like British and European settlers in Canada, whites out indigenous culture. Other contributors to the *Orchard* also find that Nichol unself-consciously inscribes white privilege. Mark Nakada suggests that the alphabetic letter, on which the programmatic radicalism<sup>4</sup> of *The Martyrology* depends, is not, in fact, culturally neutral or ahistorical. Louis Cabri also argues that Nichol relies on the supposed neutrality of the alphabetic letter to open up a utopic and ahistorical space of writing. Kate Foster finds in Nichol's idea of community traces of Therapfields, the group therapy organization in which Nichol lived and worked, and which she reads as marked by cultural homogeneity (white and middle-class). For these readers, existential generalization in *The Martyrology* serves to veil an unacknowledged imperialist and patriarchal history that lives on in the poem.

Readings of Marlatt follow an analogous pattern. Expositions that support the work find there a dense word play that decentres the subject and constitutes a revisionary form of narration through which Marlatt engages in a quest for a female/feminist identity, for social and ecological justice, for the lesbian body, and for an originary female/feminist homeplace. In a seminal essay for this critical line, Barbara Godard in "Body I: Daphne Marlatt's Feminist Poetics" (1985), finds in Marlatt a

writing of excess. The feminist subject that begins to emerge does not trace itself to Lacanian lack, Godard says, but to a subjectivity closer to that proposed by Nancy Chodorow and Julia Kristeva. This subject “has less rigid ego boundaries and sees the world not as divisions and hierarchies but as an interconnected web” (489). Lianne Moyes, in “Writing, the Uncanniest of Guests: Daphne Marlatt’s *How Hug a Stone*” (1991), contributes to this view of Marlatt in an Irigarayan explication of the status of the womb in *How Hug* as neither inside nor outside representation. Janice Williamson, in “It gives me a great deal of pleasure to say yes: Writing/Reading Lesbian in Daphne Marlatt’s *Touch to My Tongue*” (1991), draws on a wide range of key feminist sources (Irigaray, Wittig, de Lauretis, Fuss, Kristeva, Meese, and Gallop, for instance) to describe lesbian desire in Marlatt’s writing and the invention of “an embodied language” (182). Pamela Banting, in *Body, Inc.: A Theory of Translation Poetics* (1995), argues that Marlatt translates between the semiotics of the body and symbolic language, letting the former alter the latter: “Marlatt collapses dialectics and brings different dialects and different bodies into play,” she says. “Bodies and lovemaking alter language” (187).

Critiques of the work, although fewer than those directed to Nichol, similarly point to thematic recuperation of the textual play, to an essentialist feminism that seeks to ground itself outside language, and to the overstepping of other differences such as race in the validation of “woman” as the operative political signifier of the text. As with Nichol, the reservations take the form of either epistemological or cultural critique, and both focus on Marlatt’s alleged naturalization of gender binaries. The two major proponents of an essentialist reading of Marlatt are Lola Lemire Tostevin and Frank Davey. In “Writing in the Space that Is Her Mother’s Face,” (1989, 1995), Tostevin hears Marlatt’s texts as recuperative or “vulvalogocentric” (*Subject* 201). She suggests that “While the radical re-writing and rereading of dominant forms aspire to the displacement of master narratives, whether they be historical, mythological or literary, many women may find solutions to complex social problems limited if confined to the reproductive or sexual spheres or, for that matter, to a segregated society” (*Subject* 201). Frank Davey also makes a serious case for Marlatt’s essentialism in his “Words and Stones in *How Hug a Stone*” (1989, 1994). Davey argues that *How Hug* orbits a transcendental signified that limits the play of the text. For Tostevin and Davey, Marlatt’s writing is recuperative,<sup>5</sup> and for reasons parallel to those of critics who find that Marlatt does not adequately acknowledge differences of race or class. One of the most extended and carefully balanced studies of

Marlatt from a postcolonial and cross-cultural perspective comes in Wendy Plain's unpublished MA thesis on *Ana Historic*, defended at Simon Fraser University in June 1996.<sup>6</sup> While Plain suggests that Marlatt's construction of the feminist subject in this novel replicates "the invisibility of First Nations women in conventional feminist paradigms" (79), she also acknowledges the "interlocking system of vulnerabilities and hierarchies" (91) that mark differences of sex, class, and race in the text and complicate the gender binary that haunts it.

If I may rephrase the question raised by these commentaries, the issue in the critical construction of both Nichol and Marlatt is whether the net effect of the text is productive or recuperative. By productive I refer to a process of multiplying linkages akin to rhizomatic "becomings" as these have been explicated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: the narrative line is complicated through an excess of connectives, to the point where it begins to change form. By recuperative, I mean the possibility that this proliferation of connections may be subordinated to a linear narrative, or a foundational signified. The section titled "Imperfection: A Prophecy" in Nichol's *Book Six Books of The Martyrology* illustrates the duplicity in question. This section contains some of Nichol's most conventional themes and narratives. Two obscure apostles of the Bible, Adronicus and Junias, and the apocryphal giant Buamundus, who appears in *The Lost Literature of Medieval England*, wander through Britain, converting pagans to Christianity. In their later years, they set sail for a rumoured land that turns out to be Canada. On these journeys of discovery, our heroes meditate on their mortality and insignificance in relation to the capital "L" Lord they pray to ("i have understood so little Lord in my cringing smallness" (n.pag.), while the narrative voice remarks on the scenery, and tells jokes and stories, a typical Nichol way of passing the time on a long textual trip: Buamundus, because of his size is "BOO!! / set a scare / AMONG US." Or in one theory about the voyage, Buamundus wants out and becomes "BUAMOUTNDUS." Read against the grain, this journey constitutes a quest narrative that is clearly Eurocentric and imperialistic, despite the folksy wordplay, since our travellers wind up in the "new" world. Moreover, the passages of prayer are not ironized in any way, and for some readers they will be too fraught with a contaminated belief system to be audible as anything else. At the same time, it is easy to show how the narrative has been reworked to underscore the temporal, *imperfect* qualities of the historical narrative and its actors. Nichol does not attempt to *overcome* this narrative he has inherited (in the sense that one might "overcome" a metaphysics), but to crochet it into

minoritarian<sup>7</sup> status; it is too fussy, too indiscreet in its mixing of genres and telling of little jokes, too much the cosmic doily, too *feminine*. Frayed and fidgeted in this manner, the old masculinist quest narrative begins to unravel, and connections to mundane genres like the diary or the crossword puzzle begin to form. The text is becoming something else in a manner that perhaps more accurately reflects the ways in which cultural beliefs and practices actually change — through misdirection and friction — rather than through the immediate *cognitive* liberation that theory appears to make available.

Marlatt's quest narratives are similarly wrought upon, although by means of different strategies. In *Zócalo*, for instance, a story about a couple vacationing in Mexico, the female tourist finds herself shut out from a culture that is not hers and is forced to see herself as a foreigner in the eyes of locals. A passage that tells of her photographing passersby and vendors on a seawall turns into a meditation on the gaze: the telephoto lens becomes an "impertinent accessory to the act of her seeing" (10). Focussing on a vendor, she finds

his dark glance ... is both *for* her & *at* her, a not knowing he can't quite tear himself away from but continues to sit staring suspiciously from around & behind several intervening backs, the closest of which, so close despite their mutual silence, turns finally & says, you're snooping, that's what you like about that lens isn't it, that's what it allows you to do. (10)

What happens here as the scene unfolds is the complexification of a set of clichéd relationships: white middle-class tourist photographs local exotica; first world objectifies, patronizes, and exploits the third. But this familiar script is complicated by a gender binary that cuts across race and class. The orange vendor about to be photographed poses "*for* her" but also looks "*at* her." This exchange is further complicated by the presence of the male companion of the female tourist, who accuses her of "snooping," an activity that implies curiosity and intrusion but might also suggest a certain suspension of judgment. Only if we hold tourist and vendor to cultural scripts outside the text at hand can we be sure about the quality of the gaze that passes between them. For a brief moment the gender, race, and class categories that make up this socially assigned script are set vibrating against each other and against the particularities of the three people involved, with the result that tourist and orange-vendor shift between subject and object positions.

This scene opens and closes like a camera shutter in a text where one

micro-event flows into the next, pushed by paragraph length, run-on sentences that move incrementally through a global experience of sight, sound, and intellect. The small variations Marlatt introduces to the scripts she inhabits accumulate within and between texts. In *How Hug a Stone*, for instance, the poem that Frank Davey has used to demonstrate Marlatt's essentialism, there are the macho imaginings of the narrator's son, which Davey hears as confirming gender roles. These sections attributed to the son, however, are positioned inside the mother's narrative, and are distinguished generationally from hers in tone. The boy's extravagant make-believe, as opposed to the narrator's "real life" story, implies a reversal of the clichéd gender scripting where the woman fantasizes, dreams, makes things up, while the man takes care of the real world — a script that Marlatt confronts explicitly when she comes to write *Ana Historic*. In *Narrative in the Feminine* (2000), Susan Knutson makes this point about Marlatt's subversive use of traditional narrative forms in far greater detail than I can engage here: Knutson, in a narratological reading of *How Hug a Stone*, shows that Marlatt thematizes the quest narrative in order to transform it through complication.<sup>8</sup> As in the passage from Nichol, the given cultural script in Marlatt's texts frays into a more complex set of connections.

## II

Another way to frame this question of the contrary tensions in the work of Nichol and Marlatt — the productive and recuperative components — is to say that both of these poets write from experience, if I can stretch that term to mean response to various mediating regimes as well as perceptual and proprioceptive impressions. While each came out of different poetic communities, Nichol from concrete and sound poetry, and Marlatt from the process poetics of Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and TISH,<sup>9</sup> both of these communities of the 50s and 60s sought to revise the *status* of knowledge. The concrete poem materializes page and grapheme, or sound and rhythm, breaking up the semantic component of language and positioning its elements in time-space: it is a site where new linkages and agrammatical alignments may come into play, rather than a discourse primarily intended to develop key concepts or renew cultural paradigms. At this level of abstraction, concrete is akin to process poetics. Both of these poetries have been read as a push for unmediated knowing, concrete because the fusion of form and content in some versions of it suggests a transparent language, and process poetry

for similar reasons: because the emphasis on sense impressions and embodied speech has seemed to propose direct apprehension. What I want to emphasize, however, is that both concrete and process poetry reimagine knowledge as an affective act: they express knowing as experience, and experience as a mode of knowing. This is humanism, as critics have complained, but it is humanism repeated with a difference.

I read Charles Olson's *The Special View of History* (1970) as a vital document for poetics of the era, even those such as concrete that are quite removed from Olson's project, because his work thematizes the postwar effort to de-reify the metaphysical tradition and create a poetics of the embodied and historically situated. In *The Special View*, Olson argues that myth, when it becomes "what is said," dissolves into an historical act, and history, Olson says, is "finding out for oneself" (20). It is a record of sayings and doings as opposed to a description of reality as such. This new humanism (Olson's "human universe") was meant to place "knowledge" in quotations, or better, reposition it as a practice, rather than an authoritative tradition, or what deconstructive philosophy would later call an ontotheology. Olson's touchstones in *The Special View* are Keats's negative capability and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, both of which he quotes approvingly as having returned knowledge to the material world from its misplacement in a transcendental realm of certainty.

At mid-century, however, this bid to rethink knowledge as experience and experience as the root act of knowing came at a time when the nature and validity of experience had already long been at issue in philosophies ranging from phenomenology to the eclectic thinking of Walter Benjamin.<sup>10</sup> In his recent history of the theme, Giorgio Agamben locates the end of experience in the Renaissance, with the founding of modern science. The displacement of the senses through prosthetics and the connection of God and man through the emanationist mysticism of the Neoplatonists helped lay the groundwork for the Cartesian cogito (20): the subject who knows, rather than the subject who undergoes. This distinction Agamben finds in Greek drama, in which he sees a clear division between human and divine knowledge: human knowledge means "what is learned only through and after suffering, and excludes any possibility of foresight" (19); certainty, in contrast, is a divine prerogative. Agamben's account of the emergence of the subject of knowledge thus complements Olson's complaint that post-Platonic philosophy and science (scientism) constitute a misguided claim to certainty. The philosophical history offered in *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience* (1993) suggests a context for Olson's delight in mid-century developments in

quantum physics (Heisenberg), linguistics (Benjamin Lee Whorf), and philosophy (Alfred North Whitehead) that announced the collapse of objectivity.

Of course, neither Olson nor his peers have fared particularly well with critics on this project. Since the 1970s and the continental critique of phenomenology, the major theoretical objection to a writing of experience has been epistemological.<sup>11</sup> What Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Kristeva and the American deconstructionists have argued in different ways is that consciousness is a derivative sociolinguistic product that is out of phase with itself. It thus has the status of a symptom or effect rather than a cause, and is constituted by various regimes that it cannot master (language, history, or social position for instance). The effect of these continental arguments has been to shift attention away from the contents and operations of consciousness to the process of its production from mediating systems. The critic's job is therefore to make plainer the determinants of experience rather than to trace its trajectories: to search out blind spots where ideology is received as common sense, or shatter the mirror that offers an imaginary self. The writing that has developed alongside this theory often has moved away from narrative, since story belongs to an expressive tradition that is open to skepticism the moment experience can no longer be taken as spontaneous. Yet the poetic effort to reimagine knowledge as undergoing rather than knowing was directed against the same epistemological realism targeted by continental philosophy.

What then, is particular about the writerly subject of experience? Is it distinguishable from the substantive self and the old humanism, and if it is, how does it differ from the deconstructed presence?

Undergoing implies that the subject is always immersed in something — labour, life, and language, Foucault says — on which she has no exteriority. In process poetics, this condition is figured through the *retrospective* nature of form; form unfolds *behind* the poet as s/he moves through a poem or a life, rather than before her as a thesis to be explicated. Only as the poem approaches its end — the end of the poet's life in the case of the life-long poem — does the form begin to emerge and then only for others, rather than the one who has lived it and will never see the whole of it. To say this another way, the origin, when origin has the poststructuralist meaning of full presence, is ahead: it is always deferred to the future where it is virtual, rather than actual as it is taken to be in the metaphysical tradition. Hence, the readerly quality of process poetry (the writer reads her own writing) and the absence of reflexive devices that

distance and ironize. The poet is finding out as he goes along, as it were, and in this mode, the writer cannot grasp the groundlessness of her own work. The death of the subject in the symbolic, the immanence of past and future, or the virtual whole of work, mark the advent of the Other in relation to the poet's I-voice because they cannot be *undergone*. In contrast, the deconstructive point — that the trace of the Other inhabits all that a work can bring to presence — has validity at the conceptual level where the Idea, according to its metaphysical history, endures through every instantiation. Here deconstruction does its work by exposing the materiality of the Idea. When the poet approaches the materiality of the Idea intuitively, however, it appears as a polarized Other. The subject of experience can *think* its own death, but cannot consciously live it, nor can it bring to awareness the whole of the symbolic in every nomination. Process poetry thus offers a point of view, rather than ironic reflexivity; it records the perspective of a diminished, fallible subject who cannot give an authoritative account of itself, let alone the whole of the virtual past that inheres in it as a languaged being. From this perspective, ideological biases can neither be dispelled nor forgiven; rather, the *ethos* of the work lies in the poet's effort to expand and clarify the point of view as much as possible, and to mark the narrating voice as a locus of affects and apprehensions rather than as a knower.

For Olson, this perspectivism meant Alfred North Whitehead, and there are some key Whiteheadian points in his poetics that help to clarify the reimagining of experience in the poetry circles Olson influenced. In the atomic universe of *Process and Reality*, the minims of which are matter-energy units that Whitehead calls "actual entities," organisms take shape by responding to their surrounds through positive or negative prehension; they do or do not take in other actual entities. In this manner, the entities form more complex assemblages, ranging from simple organisms and compounds to those with consciousness. Every actual entity, Whitehead says, is connected to every other one in the universe either positively or negatively, and the aim of the whole process is the maximization of creativity and complexity through novel combinations. Any assemblage, in that it is composed of a series of positive and negative prehensions, can be understood as a point of view or perspective on the universe as a whole since it constitutes a particularized expression of the data it has prehended. In this schema, Whitehead's God takes the place of the ultimate point of view or metaposition that cannot be occupied by any entity *in* the universe. As "outside," however, He is paradoxically nowhere else but in the world. In what Whitehead calls His consequent as-

pect, God is the totality of existents at any one time; in his primordial nature, he is virtual, rather than actual, and represents the maximum potential for complexity of each entity. In this virtual aspect, God is a “lure for feeling,” or urge in each thing to maximize its linkages and hence its expressive potential. As Deleuze says, in his reading of this Leibniz-Whitehead construct in *The Fold*, every unit (monad or actual entity) expresses the whole universe, but not all of it with equal clarity (25). Each entity, then, “wants” to enlarge its “clear zone.”<sup>12</sup>

In my view, Whitehead’s cosmology cannot be read for truth or falsehood; it functions better as an abstract model of potential relations than as an empirical account of the universe, for which it manifestly will not serve. In the abstract, however, it suggests much. First, the Whiteheadian entity forms itself affectively, through ongoing response. Such a process would not leave us with a unified subject or an uncritical acceptance of experience as somehow more authentic than other ways of knowing. Instead, it suggests that experiential agency is to be located in the creative repetition and inflection of various regimes in which the subject has been interpellated: linguistic, social, semiotic, chemical, biological, geographical, cultural, or historical. Moreover, the noun does not precede the verb in this narrative; there is no entity prior to the interactive event. Actual entities, despite the name, are not objects but events. In process poetics too, the subject emerges: it does not come to the process already formed. Form is retrospective. Secondly, the terms subject and object represent relative perspectives rather than ontological distinctions; that which is a subject for itself is an object for others. In the subject position, the entity is *sublime* in its virtual linkages; it expresses the whole universe, either positively or negatively by taking it in, or not, and it is thus complex and indeterminate beyond capture. In its sublime aspect, the subject cannot be intuitively experienced, and it is this aspect that suggests a deconstruction of the “is” or whatness of being. Considered in its objective position, however, the subject is simply one perspective among many and a datum for others; to extrapolate from Deleuze’s reading of Leibniz and Whitehead, we might say that the actual is the clear zone of the subject — the small, finite zone of acts and attributes rather than the endless virtual universe the subject inflects, and which gives it creative potential.

The figuring of these contrasting faces of the subject is key to the difference between the subject of experience on the one hand, and on the other, the disseminated presence, or even the Deleuzian desire toward which my vocabulary has been moving. The emphasis in dissemination

is on the temporality of language beings, such that every presence is produced and accompanied by a virtual chain of signifiers that prevents full disclosure (we might say every signifier is connected to every other one in the language and that all virtually coinhere in each). In the Deleuzian empirical formulation, the focus is again on a virtual, dispersed subject that multiplies its linkages rather than the (partially) reterritorialized subject that acts in finite, stratified space. These critical strategies, I have argued, target the subject who knows; they undermine the unity of the subject at the cognitive level. However, neither deconstruction nor Deleuzian desire actually take us beyond the double tension between the apparitional presence and its virtual past — between stratified and smooth space,<sup>13</sup> or the semiotic and symbolic. The subject who undergoes figures this tension differently; it others its own sublime indeterminacy. On this point, Žižek's argument with deconstruction is instructive. Žižek claims that skepticism, because it refuses positionality, functions like a metalanguage. In contrast, he offers Lacan's real as the impossible-to-occupy metaposition that appears along with the subject.<sup>14</sup> But can we not see variant constructions of the subject here? If deconstruction targets the subject who knows, competing theories, such as the Lacanian, offer a subject who thinks it knows, but actually undergoes, who misrecognizes itself, and is therefore unwittingly determined by an Other (the symbolic order, its own death) that it can neither avoid nor intuitively master. The feminist revision of Lacan, as exemplified by Irigaray's rethinking of lack in tropes of fluidity, is closer to the poetic in that it allows the subject a way of thinking other than the skepticism of deconstruction or the naïve belief attributed to it by psychoanalysis. Thinking becomes affective response rather than cognitive grasp: like Shakespeare's Gloucester, we learn to see feelingly and to similar effect.

What makes the new humanism differ from the old, then, as well as from the disseminated presence, is the double. Foucault announced it as the "unthought" in *The Order of Things* (326), but it is my contention that this elusive double has taken various forms — Other, God, lack, real, impossible, virtual — in the critical streams that have circulated since mid-century. By this I do not mean to imply that all these names reduce to the same signified; they alter the significance of the signifying chain rather than anchor it,<sup>15</sup> and as the feminist response to Lacan shows, the social and political stakes in figuring the Other are high. As an abstract relation, however, the Other distinguishes the subject who undergoes from the one who knows.

## III

If we take the subject in Nichol and Marlatt to be a subject of experience, and form to be retrospective, then another reading of these poets begins to emerge which does not depend so much on which component of the work, the productive or recuperative, is thought to dominate. First, the apparently metaphysical components of their work take on a different significance. Prayer in *The Martyrology* serves as a positioner; it underscores the smallness of the narrative voice inside a language world it has not mastered, but it also rises up with that voice as the evocation of the Other and the place of the impossible. The functional transcendence of Nichol's "Lord" is part of the structure of experience. In a passage from *Book 5, Chain 3*, that Frank Davey hears as confirming the presence of a transcendental signified ("Eggs" 49), Nichol writes:

you tolerate them Lord  
 the many guises of your signifiers  
 know you are the signified. (n.pag.)

As the position that cannot be occupied, the signified presented here has an epistemological meaning (the impossibility of certainty for the signifiers), but it also has a practical one. In an earlier section of *Book 5*, Nichol writes:

selfish is where the self is H  
 attains that link between the ones  
 forms llord  
                   the mahayanna view  
 having reached a point of unity with heaven or with God  
 we must place ourselves  
 again  
                   into the world  
  
 forward is a for world stance  
 the human thing to do (*Chain 3* n.pag.)

When, in a skeptical culture, we assume that what we know must be the whole of what there is to know because there is no transcendent realm, we absorb the impossible and assume a "point of unity with heaven or with god." The self takes on "the link between the ones"; it makes itself responsible for the syntax of the world in a move that naturalizes a historical, human universe. The crosspiece of the letter "H" (the "cross"), is what connects and separates the "ones," visually the two vertical marks of the

letter. With the elimination of the horizontal mark, the “ones” collapse into the lowercase “l,” the first letter of “lord” or the number one. “Number one” thus takes the place of the uppercase “Lord” and the ones move into the place of the impossible. The play of letters here suggests that to collapse the ones into “lord” in this manner, is to deify consciousness. Nichol urges that the *human* thing to do — the adjective conjures its absent other, the sacred — is to “place ourselves / again / into the world,” to accept mortality. Another way to read the crosspiece of the “H” is as death, and in fact, death is implicit in the Christian word play. The visual message of the letter “H” is that the crosspiece which separates the ones, and which therefore gives them form or “life” lays (itself) down. The phonic message is held in the fact that the letter “H” is articulated by the expulsion of breath.

The ongoing thematizing of death throughout *The Martyrology* urges the imminent suspension of the adventuring “i” and serves, along with prayer, to index the heterogeneous Other of experience. But Nichol also writes about pain, and here he offers an experience that cannot be brought to cognition, rather than a concept that cannot be intuitively imagined. In an untitled poem collected in *gIFTS*, beginning with the line “wandered the streets of downtown Berkeley” (n.pag.), Nichol wrestles with the disjunction between undergoing and knowing. The poem is about the pain in the speaker’s leg and seems to invite a reading of it as autobiographical representation: the pain Nichol lived with was a symptom of the tumour that killed him. Representation, however, is immediately swallowed in aporia. A pain can only be undergone; it cannot become a communicable object of knowledge. Hence, the poem circles around and around its unsayability. First, the poet finds expression deflected in cliché: “the pain / is sent to try us.” Then, he attempts to establish an analogy between the “body [that] disintegrates” and language with its “sure connectives gone.” But each time the poet speaks of pain, he dramatizes the impossibility of turning his experience of it into knowledge. Hence in the lines, “hauling my leg up the hill / even as this line drags every other line with it / the whole of the Martyrology trailing behind” (n.pag), poetic feet attempt to carry an empirical leg, but instead demonstrate the disjunction between knowing and undergoing. The poem ends as lines (of poems) and waves (in a California harbour) “beat at the shore of some knowing.” In the last line, the poet concludes that body, pain, works, and days “simply are.” He gives them ontological status, but, in the same breath, distinguishes being from knowing. In the realm of experience, there is no way to *avoid* the ontological, any more than there is to bring it to knowledge as full presence.

Where Nichol writes the double as God, pain, or death, Marlatt writes it as bliss. In an interview with George Bowering in 1979, she says, “I’m really given to the sensual. I really delight in that. That’s why I can’t get absorbed in the zero, in the blank. . . . language, you know, generates itself & it dies, but it’s all there in the body, & that’s why I love the music. Because the music is the physical quality of language” (*Net Work* 7). As this comment suggests, Marlatt turns to the semiotic as a way of writing beyond the conceptual.<sup>16</sup> In *Ana Historic*, for instance, a birth is “mouth speaking flesh” (126), and the “who’s there?” question that initiates the narrator’s search for a self in this novel ends in a lesbian love scene where the narrator speaks of “her on my tongue” (152). In a passage that I cite for the image, Agamben remarks of Benveniste’s distinction between the semiotic and semantic that the “semiotic is nothing other than the pure pre-babble language of nature, in which man shares in order to speak” (55). The semantic “like dolphins,” he says, “lifts its head from the semiotic sea of nature” (56). In Marlatt’s texts, the semiotic laps like water in and over the semantic, and cultural scripts that seemed to be fixed begin to move.

At the heart of the “essentialism rap,” however, is the question of whether Marlatt recoups the semiotic flow in foundational tropes of an originary female Other. Here She is in *How Hug a Stone*:

although there are stories about her, versions of history that are versions of her, & though she comes in many guises she is not a person, she is what we come through to & what we come out of, ground & source. the space after the colon, the pause (between the words) of all possible relation. (182)

This passage parallels the one from Nichol’s *Book 5* quoted above, which says that the Lord is a signified with many signifiers, and I would argue similarly that the *u-topos* of Marlatt’s texts is also a manifestation of the impossible. However, the difference between Marlatt’s and Nichol’s handling of the Other is the difference between a masculinist point of view and the feminist transformation of it. The above passage in *How Hug* lends itself to the kind of Irigarayan interpretation offered by Lianne Moyes’s “Writing, the Uncanniest of Guests,” in which the womb becomes a third space, neither inside nor outside, that undoes the dichotomy of the sexual binary. In a recent elaboration of Deleuze’s reading of Bergson, Dorothea Olkowski shows how this Irigarayan notion of the third — the in-between, the interval — might be extended. In Bergson, the interval lies between two kinds of becoming, perception and memory.

In the pause is the possibility for creative reception, including the determination of sexual difference.<sup>17</sup> As I have argued, Marlatt's strategy consists of constantly adjusting between memory and perception, of replaying cultural scripts in order to fray and worry them into something else. But the sublime in her work, the ocean of the semiotic immanent in every relation and every articulation of presence, often slips into the place of the impossible because it simply cannot be intuitively mastered: in relation to the experiencing subject, it appears to be transcendent.

#### IV

I began by acknowledging a postcolonial critique as well as the epistemological one, and on the postcolonial, I can be briefer. It is not so easy to make a dominant culture relative, historical, or malleable by declaration as Olson wanted to do, nor is it easy to turn an uppercase "I" into lowercase subjectivity,<sup>18</sup> simply by pronouncement. This is why the double tension in Nichol and Marlatt, between cultural givens and productive becoming, seems important — not for radicalism of thought because radical it is not — but because it offers a model of change that is not simply cognitive. It shows how traditional cultural paradigms might be made to shift through constant small adjustments. Yet I find no satisfactory response to the complaint that the dominant culture's concern with itself has simply dominated, and continues to do so in all the various post-modern strategies. Hence it is not just Nichol's exploration of the colonial settlement of Toronto's Annex neighbourhood in *Book 5, Chain 1*, for instance, that can be read as yet another whitening out of indigenous and non-European cultures, but the whole effort to transform the quest narrative as well. The same might be said for Marlatt's exploration of her mother's history as a Mem, or of "woman" or "lesbian" as a political signifier. Because process poetics, and concrete as well, are rooted in a certain anti-academicism of the era in which they emerged (a rebellion against the new critics and the modernist well-wrought urn), because they were marginal in relation to university sanctioned literatures of the day, and because the subjectivities constructed in these poetics were and are mediated, it has been relatively easy for practitioners to hear themselves as alternative or even minor in the Deleuzian sense. However, with the heightened visibility of other cultural perspectives and postcolonial critiques of the dominant, "alternative" has new connotations and we can better see process poetry as belonging to the traditions from which it dissents.

Yet membership in a dominant culture does not, I think, alter the need to “*affect the place from which we speak*” in Zizek’s words (155; emphasis added), or to respond to the challenge implicit in process poetics, which is that no amount of ironizing will secure a position in language that is safe from reproach or free from responsibility. As subjects of experience, Nichol and Marlatt cannot do otherwise than write from where they find themselves, and I have tried to show that this perspectivism may offer advantages worthy of continuing consideration. In relation to the practices of social othering that have given rise to the postcolonial, skepticism usefully critiques the intellectual traditions that have enabled them, but is not the critique also a refusal to identify with one’s own traditions? Even if complicity is acknowledged (there is always the caveat of the introductory paragraph), must it not also be enacted? Strategies that distance or ironize serve to protect the writer, who by such means attempts to leap from the contested ground on which she stands. In the 1970s, when feminist writers were struggling to articulate new subjectivities, the subject as such came under erasure; in the 1980s and 1990s, when minority readers and writers emerged more prominently in academic and cultural space, the mainstream population there quickly thinned in a rush for the margins. Let’s call these displays of critical acumen *knowing better*. But knowing better is not a satisfactory response to minorities who have been injured by dominant practices, because it does not account for the affective dimension of such practices. And if the cultural capital that has accrued to theory has anything to do with its potential to liberate, then a segue into the practical does not seem too much to ask.

We cannot, of course, go back to unelaborated experience. Narratives that put forward minority points of view without troubling over how that point of view gets produced, or how cultural and aesthetic forms can put pressure on content, may end up merely flattering the cultural order they are meant to challenge. A point of view, however, as it comes through process poetics, is not quite the same as strategic essentialism. The taking of provisional positions may still mean a one-way gaze or a narrowly partisan position. The subject has to bracket itself, but within the brackets, it functions as a specular identity: the gaze that travels out toward the world along a predetermined trajectory is likely to return the same way. The point of view in process poetics, however, suggests some asymmetry. If, for itself, the subject is sublime in its virtuality — if it takes up all the world from a particular angle — it is for others a datum; it does not just take in the world but is also taken up, in the worlds of others. This asymmetry is easy to see in Marlatt’s writing because she often turns

to moments when the gaze of others unsettles the familiar, but without giving up its own secrets. In *Month of Hungry Ghosts*, for instance, “Pam wondered how people on the street regard white women (she herself thinks English women look ‘dumpy’) & whether they found us sexual or not, commented on the looks various people gave us. We both felt separate & visible in our hired trisha pedalled by someone else” (93). Marlatt multiplies such moments many times, but in addition to these, there are the limit-experiences in both her texts and those of Nichol. These are the points at which the I-voice has to face the impossible, the hole in its world, as it were. Such moments hold open the writerly point of view so it can never quite close into specular circularity, and the “hole” then becomes a point of entry for the gaze of others: it makes the world of the poem porous, the mirror permeable. And what then comes through begins to alter the script.

## V

The process poetics I have traced here are only one way into the work of Marlatt and Nichol, but then my purpose has been to retrieve an aspect of their writing that I think has been neglected for polemical reasons. Not only did process poetry collide with the coming of poststructuralism to North American universities, but in Canada it arrived with the help of American writers at a time when academics were pushing to foreground Canadians and legitimize Canadian studies. What I think might be gained from a rethinking of this poetics now are writerly strategies that address the affective component of the contemporary cultural project, which is devoted to change. However, I do not want to suggest that this poetry is to be valued only for therapeutic reasons, or that it can be translated directly into a positive ethical or political agenda. The point of connection between the practical and the aesthetic is in that zone of affect where chance, choice, memory, and desire come into play and collision with those same affective dimensions in the worlds of others. In Nichol, the lowercase “i” constantly finds itself in new collocations with the other letters where it loses its ability to possess order, and must instead try to negotiate unexpected linkages and alignments in which it suddenly finds itself interpellated. To yield to Nichol’s dreadful and contagious punning, the imperial “I” has become an imp-in-peril, still capable of white mischief, but smaller, weaker, more introspective, and already on its way to becoming something else: becoming-woman, perhaps. In Marlatt, the clear zone is a point of intersection with other worlds and therefore criss-

crossed with trajectories that challenge response. This space is abstract — not strictly formal and not yet practical either. It is not only aesthetic play that goes on here, nor is it the laying down of a positive content, but the “between” of relationship, where nothing or something might happen.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I have confined my remarks to *The Martyrology* in this paper because it is this long poem that has been most at issue for readers. Even those who prefer Nichol’s other works feel some need to assert their value against that of *The Martyrology*. Darren Wershler-Henry, for instance, looks toward a “reassessment of Nichol’s other, ‘minor’ texts, which may, if we invoke Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s use of the word, prove to be more important than the ‘major’ one” (38).

<sup>2</sup>See Jeff Derksen’s essay, “Mapping Mind, Mapping Frames: *The Martyrology* and Its Social Text”; Wershler-Henry in “Argument for a Secular *Martyrology*” (cited above), and Christian Bök in “Nickel Linoleum.”

<sup>3</sup>*Beyond the Orchard*, edited by Roy Miki and Fred Wah, collects the work of two graduate classes on Nichol’s *Martyrology*, held at Simon Fraser University (January to April 1995) and at the University of Calgary (September 1994 to April 1995). Conducted by Miki and Wah, the seminars involved inter-university collaboration between the students. The editors note in their Preface that “the students worked together on a writing and publication project that would foster an open-ended critique of *Tracing the Paths*, a representative collection of essays on *The Martyrology* appearing only months before bp died” (5). *Orchard*, then, is a response to the mostly favourable essays on Nichol in *Paths*, and to an older generation of Nichol readers. *Beyond the Orchard* was published as a special project (“An H Project”) by *West Coast Line*, a journal for contemporary writing housed at Simon Fraser and edited by Miki until 1999.

<sup>4</sup>Steve McCaffery defines a paragram through this citation in his “*The Martyrology* as Paragram”:

A text is paragrammatic, writes Leon S. Roudiez, “in the sense that its organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining to form networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits . . .” (63).

For an exposition of reading strategies suited to Nichol’s paragrammatic texts, see Pauline Butling’s essay, “bpNichol’s Gestures in *Book 6 Books*” in *Tracing the Paths*.

<sup>5</sup>See also Julia Beddoes’s response to Frank Davey in her essay “Mastering the Mother Tongue: Reading Frank Davey Reading Daphne Marlatt’s *How Hug A Stone*.”

<sup>6</sup>I was the external examiner for Wendy Plain’s thesis and I have benefitted from her work.

<sup>7</sup>I use the word “minor” in the Deleuzian sense. A minor literature is a deterritorialized writing within a major language. It is political in the sense that the individual is not understood as an isolated consciousness, but as a junction within various social configurations (“machines”). Reda Bensmaïa, in “On the Concept of Minor Literature,” writes of the minor that “it is as if the system of ‘interpellations’ that works fully in the regime of ‘great literature’ no longer works” (217). Marlatt and Nichol are not minor in this sense, but in different ways

they push a major language toward the minor, Nichol by becoming-woman; Marlatt by beginning to situate white as a colour.

<sup>8</sup> Knutson shows that Marlatt both thematizes and complicates the quest narrative. She argues that Marlatt adds secondary fabulas to the primary one; that she makes the principal questor a collective, “gender-inclusive” subject; and that she juxtaposes mythic time to the linear time of the quest. Knutson concludes “that although the fabula of *How Hug a Stone* can be described as a quest, the narrative grammar of the quest cannot fully describe the events of the poem. The inaccuracy of the quest model with respect to parent-child relationships points to the patriarchal limitations of the model and perhaps of Western narrative itself” (59).

<sup>9</sup> Marlatt’s association with TISH — with the American poets who influenced the magazine and the group of young poets who initiated it (Frank Davey, Jamie Reid, George Bowering, David Dawson, Fred Wah) — has come up on numerous occasions. See for instance the interview with Brenda Carr in *Beyond Tish*, and Douglas Barbour’s introduction to Marlatt in the ECW *Canadian Writers and their Works* series, especially pages 191-96.

<sup>10</sup> Experience has been thematized extensively in twentieth-century philosophy, where it appears as either *Erlebnis* or *Erfahrung*. Martin Jay summarizes: *Erlebnis* he says, is associated with “the immediacy of lived, prereflexive encounters between self and world privileged by the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* from Dilthey on”; *Erfahrung* is a “marker for the cumulative wisdom over time produced by the interaction of self and world” (64).

<sup>11</sup> On the poststructuralist response to experience, Jay notes that both *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* were deemed inadequate: “The very quest for an authentic experience lost in the modern world they [poststructuralists] damn as yet another version of the nostalgic yearning for a presence and immediacy that never has existed and never will” (64). For a particularly unsympathetic poststructuralist reading of Olson, see the Olson section in Andrew Ross’s *The Failure of Modernism*.

<sup>12</sup> Whether entities “want” to (or should) maximize their complexity is a complicated issue and one that lives on in Deleuzian studies. Whitehead constructs God in his virtual aspect as a “lure for feeling,” or urge in each entity toward the maximizing of its potential. Donald Sherburne explains:

God’s own aim in the creative advance is to have a world emerge of such a sort that his own experience of that world will result in the greatest possible intensity in his own experience. He therefore ... offers as a lure to each actual entity as it arises that subjective aim the completion of which, in that entity’s own concrescence, would create the kind of ordered, complex world that, when prehended by God, would result in maximum intensity of satisfaction for him. (227)

For Whitehead, “God” is the creative potential of things that tends toward complexity, and the implication is that the process is “good”; for Deleuze, creativity is desire as active deterritorializing force, different in kind from the reactive forces that give us the social regulation of behaviour and therefore ill-suited to moral categories such as good and evil. An expanded point of view does not necessarily translate to better social relations.

On the significance of desire, Dorothea Olkowski’s argument with Judith Butler is instructive. Where Butler takes the view that Deleuzian desire constitutes unfounded metaphysical speculation — Deleuze gives ontological status to a certain kind of desire and therefore engages in speculation that is implicated in metaphysics (as much so as Whitehead’s) — Olkowski argues that active force “is there to a lesser or greater degree depending on the history of the forces that have taken hold of that body (and so constitute it)” (46). Because active and reactive forces differ in kind, the latter is not simply the oppression of the former, nor is the former somehow more primordial (see Olkowski’s argument in *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation* (43-47)).

Even if one accepts Olkowski's argument, there is a problem in applying ontological investigation to the social or political spheres and this problem is also present in process poetics. The push to maximize linkages and extend complexity functions best at the level of cosmology, where it is in terms of an imagined whole, not the local, that maximum intensity is to be achieved. In Whitehead's terms, it is God's satisfaction that matters — but this will hardly do as public policy. Robin Blaser, reading Olson reading Whitehead, notes that Olson underlines a passage in *Process and Reality* which says, "The nature of evil is that the characters of things are mutually obstructive" (82). The comment implies that some may maximize their potential at the expense of others. In Olson's case, as Tom Clark's biography suggests (*Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life*, 1991) the maximizing of complexity as exemplified by the poet's wide ranging interests (the curricula he assigned to himself and to poet-companions), often took place at the expense of friends and particularly women who were expected to provide practical support.

Nichol and Marlatt, however, handle the push for complexity differently. Nichol always returns the first person to its diminutive status, behaving more like a tourist in his own expanding world than sublime subject. A tourist, of course, may be in a position of economic and social privilege in relation to the indigene, but not in terms of knowing the other. Marlatt takes up the tourist position literally; on the trips she records, the challenge is to open the narrator's perspective to others but not to absorb them. Different worlds intersect with hers in potentially obstructive ways, and this means that the contact zone — the clear zone — becomes fraught, a place for negotiation, and for the reimagination of positions. It is possible to read in both writers an effort to maximize complexity, and also leave room for others, but this is a kind of utopianism that seems congenial to the liberal status quo, especially if we try to extend the gesture into the practical.

<sup>13</sup>The distinction between smooth and stratified space comes from Deleuze's "Treatise on Nomadology" (*A Thousand Plateaus*). Deleuze is discussing the science of fluids: "The model is a vortical one; it operates in an open space throughout which things-flows are distributed, rather than plotting out a closed space for linear and solid things. It is the difference between a *smooth* (vectorial, projective, or topological) space and a *striated* (metric) space" (361-62). In the former, things spread; in the latter, they move from point to point: the difference is that between an ontology of fluids and one of substance.

<sup>14</sup>Speaking of deconstruction, Žižek argues that "the position from which the deconstructivist can always make sure of the fact that 'there is no metalanguage'; that no utterance can say precisely what it intended to say; that the process of enunciation always subverts the utterance; is *the position of metalanguage* in its purest most radical form" (154-55). What this means in the political sphere is that one must proceed without the protection of irony. For instance, "the point is that if we (the Party) say directly to the fighting workers: 'It does not matter if you fail, the main point of your struggle is its educational effect on you', the educational effect will be lost" (84).

<sup>15</sup>I have in mind Žižek again. What he calls "quilting" refers to the binding of signifiers through "nodal points" that then give identity to an ideological field. So feminism or Marxism, for instance, offer coherent discourses, but the same social field could be differently bound because there is no ultimate tie to a signified (See "Che Vuoi" in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (87-129)). Žižek's most interesting suggestion is that the nodal point *matters*; one must proceed as if it could be grounded.

<sup>16</sup>Pamela Banting argues the importance of the semiotic in Marlatt's writing. See *Body, Inc.: A Theory of Translation Poetics* (1995).

<sup>17</sup>See Olkowski, in a segment called "Interval" from the chapter "Against Phenomenology" in her *Ruin of Representation* (83-88), where she explicates her contention that "the 'in-

terval' between perception and memory, intelligence and social life, is decisive for humans, according to both Irigaray and Bergson" (83).

- <sup>18</sup>In *Month of Hungry Ghosts*, Marlatt draws attention to her lowercase "i":  
 & I see (just as I stands for the dominant ego in the world when you is not capitalized), that i want too much, just as, a child, i wanted affection.  
 Growing sense of myself as a Westerner wanting, wanting — experience mostly. (100)

This move is necessary to the *ethos* of Marlatt's work, yet insufficient by itself to bring about the desired result; the large western "I" cannot be made to disappear by fiat, nor does Marlatt seem to hold such expectations.

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