

VISUAL POETRY IN CANADA: BIRNEY, BISSETT, AND bp

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Visual poetry is not the startling new and unorthodox linguistic phenomenon that many think it to be. By providing a brief historical account of the international concrete movement in poetry and then examining several Canadian examples of concrete poetry, I hope to draw attention to the values of this all-too-frequently misunderstood art form as it is practiced by some of our most talented Canadian poets.

As early as the *Greek Anthology* (300 B.C.),¹ poets have been deliberately arranging written words into visual shapes to picture the central object of a poem: an axe, for example, or a cross. Christian monks in the Middle Ages and many Renaissance writers, including George Herbert and Robert Herrick, continued this tradition of patterned or shaped poetry. At the beginning of the twentieth century, poets began to reconsider the visual possibilities of poetry. Stéphan Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* (1897) was a major breakthrough. Unlike pattern poets, however, Mallarmé allowed the words to move across the page in unstructured patterns, and he employed several different type-faces to emphasize different themes. e.e. cummings is probably the best-known North American poet to use typographical and spatial effects in his poetry of the 1920's and 1930's. He led the way in using such typewriter keys as the parenthesis, the ampersand, and the dash in other than strictly prescribed ways, and he often spread his poems across the page and sometimes eliminated the space between words to speed up their reading. Around the same time as cummings, European poets like Guillaume Apollinaire and F. T. Marinetti were exploring the visual presentation of poetry. Theo Van Doesburg, an artistic innovator in Europe, published a magazine called *Art Concret* in 1930.² To Van Doesburg, *concret* was virtually synonymous with our current term "abstract"; he felt that the natural subjects of painting were lines, planes, angles, and colours. Other artists associated themselves with the Concrete Art movement, including Josef Albers, Jean Arp, and Max Bill. All had been at the Bauhaus where the dominant theory was functionalism — allowing the material to obey its own innate laws. In 1952, Eugen Gomringer, who had been Max Bill's secretary, wrote visual poems which he called, at first, "constellations" and, later, "concrete poems"; in 1956, Gomringer wrote a revealing essay called "The Poem as a Functional Object"³ in which he payed

¹See Margaret Church, "The First English Pattern Poems," *PMLA*, 61 (1946), 636-50.

²George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution*, (New York, 1967), p. 40.

³In *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington, 1969), pp. 53-54.

tribute to Max Bill and Concrete Art as the central impetus to his poetry. Concrete Art also provided the Noigandres poets of Brazil with a name for their poetical experiments. In "the pilot plan for concrete poetry" (1958),⁴ they announced the sources, definitions, and potentials for concrete poetry. Decio Pignatari — a Noigandres poet — happened to meet Gomringer in 1955, and the international concrete poetry movement is dated from that point. Besides the Noigandres poets and Gomringer, Oyvind Fahlstrom in Sweden and Carlo Belloli in Italy were writing what came to be called concrete poetry in the early 1940's. Until 1955, however, none of these poets was in contact with the others; it seems that concrete poetry arose simultaneously all over the western world.

Earle Birney was the first Canadian poet to make prominent use of visual techniques in his poetry. Birney thinks that the renewed attention towards Oriental poetry stimulated the development of concrete poetry. Perhaps he is referring to Ernest Fenollosa's essay on "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,"⁵ in which Chinese poetry is called "concrete" because it sometimes retains the original picture in the ideograph. To Birney, concrete poetry is not destructive of language, even though words and letters are sometimes broken into their constituents; rather, concrete poetry makes the "language yield those enjoyments offered the viewer of non-objective painting."⁶

In "Ballad of Mr. Chubb," first published in 1950, Birney uses five different type-faces to recreate the appearance of business signs.

BALLAD OF MR. CHUBB

O Mr. Chubb sells *Chubbsidized*
Cars on Chubbsidized Terms
 His RUMBLE IN—ROCKET OUT! has quite outsized
 nextdoor's neon Perms
 not to speak
 beyond the town's gray creek
 of the farmer's wooden WORMS
 between two flowing hills in Minnesota

Across the sizzling highway abandoned Mr. Chubb
 likes to look
 at the tall legs behind each club
 squeezed by the lady golfing dubs
 who stand so finically
 in SLIM'S HOOK
 & SLICE CLINIC
 beside a flaxblue lake in Minnesota

⁴In Solt, pp. 62-63.

⁵In *Instigations of Ezra Pound* (Freeport, 1920), pp. 357-88.

⁶*The Creative Writer* (Toronto, 1966), p. 81.

Mauve loudspeakers over the PA
and MA
Comfort Station try to keep Mr. Chubb in whistle
with tunes expanding like thistle
from the goldgray
jukebox of the *HOME SWEET*
HOMEBURGER CAFE
by the blue flax-fields of Minnesota

But Mr. Chubb worries
of headlines *AUTO STRIKE SPREADS* as he hurries
with cash box and disaster kit
and Lena / that sweet chit /
hurries past *MAO CLAIMS Z-BOMB* weedy
graveyards of autos to his lonely week-
end "*Bide-a-Wee*"
beside a sand-dune shore in Minnesota

For Mr. Chubb's cursed
with a fear and a fever
O not only that Lena won't be kind to him either
but *REDS MAY MAKE MOON FIRST*
before he's stocked stocked against the worst
his airconditioned leadlined shelter
still helterskelter
beneath his personal hill in Minnesota

Yet all this hubbub
is wasted in Chubb
With a hook and a slice
O waiting handsome Slim and flaxeyed Lena *TONIGHT—*
STRIKE! to end all strikes
and stock him away in a worm-
lined home without terms
under the waving nettles of Minnesota

Under the golfers' curves
O the jukebox mute in his mind
Mr. Chubb headlined
will lie *Asleep in Jesus* while fresh-permed Lena
with the cash and her murderous
young hurryhurry lover
rockets far away and over
the flaxen hills of Minnesota

The first stanza includes the car-seller's motto: "Chubbsidized / Cars on Chubbsidized Terms," printed in italics to recall the way it might be presented in newspaper advertisements. There are the contrasting upper case letters of "RUMBLE IN — ROCKET OUT!" and the separated lower case letters of "P e r m s" to resemble differing sized neon signs. There is also the larger upper case letters of "WOЯMS" to exaggerate the humble subject and to satirize the farmer's lack of education by the reversal of the *R*. The sign for the "HOME SWEET / HOMEBURGER CAFE" is the only one in the poem that uses oversize upper case letters. Because of the five type-faces in "Ballad of Mr. Chubb," the reader is reminded that most signs are visually distinct from each other.

"Epidaurus" (1963) demonstrates one of Birney's earlier uses of positioned letters and words to stress their meaning. The poem itself refers to the well-preserved Greek theatre which is still remarkable for its superb acoustics. In fact, tourists are sent to the top rows, hushed, and told to listen while the guide drops a pin on the stage. On the same spot, but before the Greek theatre was constructed, there was a temple to Esklepius and a spa for the Corinthian ladies. "Epidaurus" is a poem about the inevitable changes resulting from the passage of time, from the Corinthians to the Greeks to the twentieth century tourists. In terms of Birney's visual poetry, "Epidaurus" is important because of the spatial arrangement of the final word,

d
r
o
p

to underscore its meaning. Birney has since used this method many times, "Window Seat" (1969) recreates shapes by jumbling the horizontal order of the letters. In this Mittyesque poem, Birney fantasizes from his window seat in a plane about the various kinds of dives he could make if he were to walk out onto the wing of the plane. The final stanza reflects his mind's return to the inside of the plane as he thinks ahead to "the meek shuffle into the pens . . . at ground level." The dreamt-of dives are visually reconstructed, partly to add texture to the fantasy.

WINDOW SEAT

40 ft of wing out there
suddenly i want to walk
into that sun
but capt loudspeaker says
headwinds 105 mph speed another 400
at once im walking back on air

BUT WHAT A FUN DEATH!

alt 35000
 nothing but
 7
 miles of
 high dive
 at last i can practice k
 g c n
 a a i
 i j f
 r s n l e
 e o a r s
 b d
 s p r i n g i n g
 down from clou d to clou d
 c l o u d c l o u d

(o yes acceleration 32 ft per sec per sec)
 but ive 7 m to play with

& all that wind d r i f t
 & b o d y f i a P

ive got time at last to break the world
 's record for b (i once dreamed about) s^om
 a e
 c r
 k s a u l t
 s

before straightening into a

AA
 SS
 WW
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 NN N N N
 Y

so widearmed & precise i am

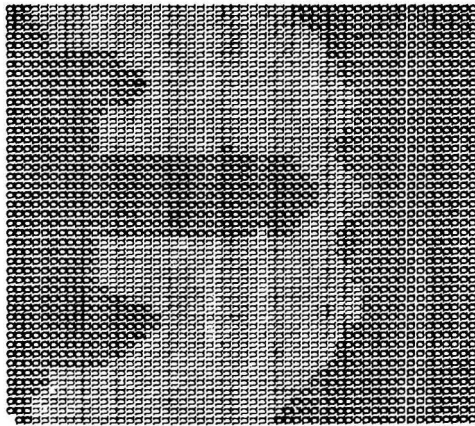
embracing s^ee !
 e e

the whole world & time
 in one last sweet tick of li—
 but no one lets me walk out
 too hard to break this doubleglass
 i'll have to be content again
 with the usual smooth landing
 dead on

& the meek shuffle into the pens
 to wait my turn somewhere
 at ground level
 under the overcast ahead. *Edmonton, Alberta 1969*

While it is true that these poems are primitive, they were the first that anyone attempted in Canada. It is because of these early poems that Birney has been called "the real forerunner of concrete in Canada."⁷

For Bill Bissett, 1962 was the year that he first "allowed the words to act visually on the page."⁸ Most noticeable, initially, about Bissett's poetry is his peculiar orthography, described by Frank Davey as "idiosyncratic quasi-phonetic spelling" which is part of his "attempt to write of an unqualified, elemental, and pure visionary world" as well as "a symbolic act of social rebellion."⁹ For example, Bissett spells "the" as "th," "and" as "nd," and "some" as "sum." Bissett defends his way of spelling by observing that "as recently as 17th century," there was "no consistency in spelling rules." He wonders why poetry has "to be / lockd in th structure of 17th c./ bourgeoisie stuffd / chair art forms."¹⁰ It is hard to know where to begin talking about Bissett's visual poetry; perhaps I should begin with a poem that uses only two typewritten letters, *u* and *o*. A first glance shows that this poem, "uo," has a black/white image created by the typing of the *o* over the *u*; a light-coloured bird is visible, wings outspread. Furthermore, the bird is encased within a square, like a cage. However, "uo" can be viewed from different angles with different results. By concentrating on the darker image, one can see the outline of a building, maybe the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. Still viewing the darker image, but from the opposite direction, one can make out a schematic version of a phallus. The whiter image can also be seen as a profile of a human face. Bissett says of the "visual form" of his poetry that it is the "apprehension of th spirit shape of th pome rather than stanzaic nd rectangular."¹¹



⁷bpNichol in *The Cosmic Chef: An Evening of Concrete*, ed. bpNichol (Ottawa, 1970), p. 79.

⁸In *Contemporary Poets of the English Language*, ed. Rosalie Murphy (Chicago & London, 1970), p. 99.

⁹*From There to Here* (Erin, 1974), p. 51.

¹⁰*pass th food release th spirit book* (Vancouver, 1973), n. p.

¹¹In Murphy, p. 99.

The letters themselves carry content; *ou* might be read as "oh, you!" or "oh! you?" or some variation thereof. The letters could also be read in the other direction; "you, oh." or "you owe!" The *u*'s, read upside down, look much like *n*'s, and the word "no" is a possibility, maybe advising "you," the reader, to avoid seeing too much in the poem.

bpNichol dates his involvement with concrete poetry as 1965. He recognizes that concrete poetry "is not as immediately accessible as some forms of poetry. On the other hand they're so immediately accessible people think they missed the point, because it's too simple."¹² Nichol has written many visual poems based on simple ideas. In his book, *Still Water*, some of the poems (for example "st*r" and "groww") use only one word, slightly altered to exaggerate meaning. Others, like

blob,

plop

explore the shape of two contrasting words which look and sound alike. A simple use of typography in Nichol's "Christian Cross #2" results in a complex poem.

theory
 theory
 theory
*the*orytheorytheory
 theory*theor*ytheory
 theorytheory*theor*y
 theory
 theory
 theory
 theory
 theory
 theory

¹²anne sherman and nick power, "Not what the siren sang But what the frag ment: 'doing concrete,' an interview with bp nichol," *The Varsity*, Friday, Feb. 28, 1975, pp. 10-11.

The cross-shaped poem is probably the most popular kind of pattern-poem ever written, including such versions as the Greek *technopaegnia*, the Christian *carmina figurata*, and the shaped poetry of the Renaissance. Nichol's poem acknowledges this tradition by its title, but uses the contrast between roman type and italics to express other than devotional concerns. Although Nichol uses only one word, "theory," the italicized letters spell out three additional words — "the," "or," and "y." If read sequentially, these words ask a stimulating question: "the" (a definite article used as a nominal) is the church laws; "or" is or; and "y" is "why?" In other words, the question is: should church laws be accepted on faith? Further, the word "theory" is the brick from which the cross is built, and represents semantically the foundation of the church. One additional reading employs the Spanish meaning of "y" (and); the phrase now reads "the or and," the definite against the compound, unity contrasted with diversity.

Earle Birney, in his poem "Newfoundland," makes similar use of italics to indicate words within words.

NEWFOUNDLAND

(for E. J. Pratt)

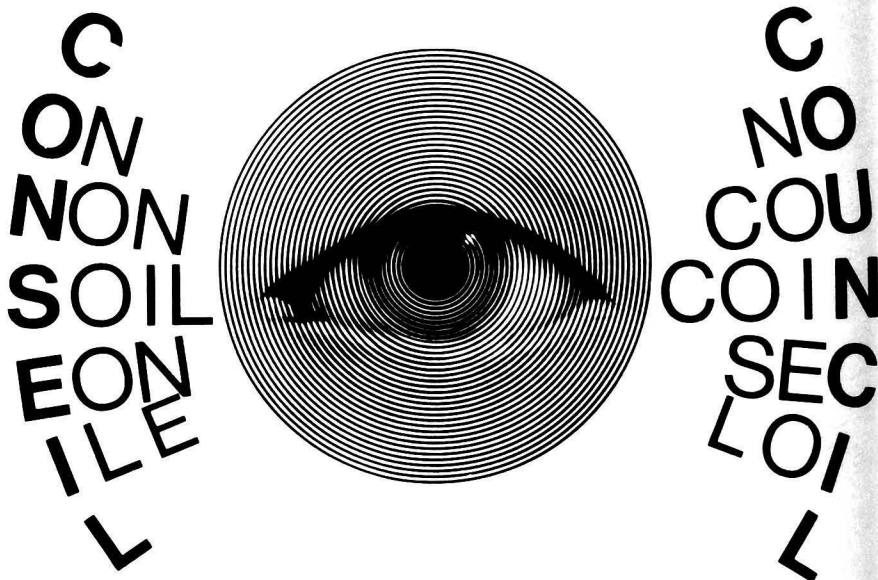
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 n e w f o u n d l a n d

St. John's, Newfoundland

The poem is dedicated to E.J. Pratt who was born and raised in Newfoundland; thus the first italicized word is "ned," Pratt's nickname. Reading only the italicized words, the poem goes "ned found new land on old fold and wan wold found elan and noun fun and won an eon end." Paraphrased, it reads "Pratt discovered new land on an old enclosure and on a gloomy plain; and he found zest and joy in words which earned him a place in history."

So far I have examined visual poems which make use of simple techniques: Birney uses type and shape to reflect meanings; Bissett uses overlaid letters to create visual designs; Nichol and Birney use two contrasting type-faces to identify words within words. Now I shall turn my attention to more complex visual poems.

Earle Birney has been intimately connected with the Canada Council since its inception, both as a recipient and as an adjudicator of awards. His contribution was recognized formally in 1968 when he was given the Canada Council Medal for "outstanding cultural achievement." For Birney, however, respect for an institution does not render it impervious to his satirical barbs; in his letters, Birney mockingly refers to the Canada Council as the "Canned Cow."¹³ In his poem, "Canada Council," he comments once more on some of that institution's less positive qualities.



Dominating the poem is an eye with concentric circles spreading out from the pupil. The black-on-white circles create an optical effect of shimmering; perhaps this sensory falsification is part of the "con." "Canada Council" is a poem written out of very rigid specifications. First, only the eight letters in the words "conceal" and "council" are used. Second, the number of letters in the words must correspond on both sides of the eye, in the order 1, 2, 3, 4, 3,

¹³In the Birney Collection, University of Toronto Library.

3, 1. Third, the words must begin or end with the letters of "conseil" and "council." Finally, some of the words must be bilingual, such as "on," "non," "ile," and "coin." These four restrictions represent the severe method of screening Canada Council applicants. For example, an application for a Canada Council Junior Arts Fellowship must include a thorough description of the writer's proposed project, three letters of reference, and a sample of the writer's previous work; and it must obey an unbending deadline. Birney's poem reflects the Council's stringent rules; just as the difficult entry requirements cut out many aspiring writers, so the structure of the poem limits its range. The ten words, apart from council/conseil, point out the effects of the Canada Council's rules: "sec" (dry), "ile," and "coin" (corner and money) describe the insularity and the aim of the proposals; "loi" is the list of rules; "cou" suggests that you must put your neck on the line; and "non" and "no" tell the applicant the bad news. At the same time, all these words are constantly under the gaze of the scrutinizing eye.

Bill Bissett's "quebec bombers" is very complex because of its unusual shape and its overlapping typographies and because of the tremendous concentration of meaning into small bits of language. Each of the three typographies has a separate function, both decorative and functional.



The graphically designed borders provide vertical stability and the *fleur-de-lis* recall Quebec. The big letters are cracking, like the insecurity of the province of Quebec itself (P.Q.), and the letters *P* and *Q* are not immediately followed by *R* and *S*, leaving the impression that Bissett has chosen the letters for reasons other than simply alphabetic. The next letters, *T* and *U*, have two translations: first, *tu* means "you" in French; and *tu* also is part of the verb *tuer*, to kill. The *tu tu* means "you kill," and refers to either the killing of the ruling class of Quebec by the FLQ or the killing of the working class by the ruling class. The rest of the big letters could indicate the end of the alphabet as we know it, and symbolically the end of the English language as the language of business in Quebec. Their very largeness denotes them as the dominant power on the page (and in the province), but as a power which is splitting apart under pressure. The third layer of typography is typewritten words — solid, direct, and simple. They represent the new radical citizen of Quebec who moves against the old power-base from a humble, yet secure foundation. These typewritten letters contain the heart of the poem's message. The fragment at the top of the page, "wer only human too wer," describes the effect of the non-Quebec ruling class who change Quebecers from human to sub-human. What was once human (wer is a contraction of we're, we are) has now lost its humanity (were or we were). Just beneath this opening phrase is a large section of typewritten words, partly obscured by the larger letters. "what can we say" is repeated for the first two lines and signifies not only a rhetorical question suggesting both resignation and action, but also a locale where words no longer have any ability to change things. A large block of typewritten and partially superimposed *y*'s follows, asking repeatedly "why?" In the centre of the page, a clear unequivocal "keep yr cell clen" (keep your cell clean) refers to the small revolutionary FLQ cadres and urges them to remain true to their idealistic purposes.

The final block of typewriting is the largest in the poem. It begins with the phrase "dirty concrete poet" repeated twice, then changes to "the concrete is dirty dirty," "sum like it dean what dew they ooo." The distinction between "clean" and "dirty" concrete poetry is that "in dean concrete . . . the visual shape of the work is primary, linguistic signs secondary." Dirty concrete poems have "amorphous physical shape and complex and involute arrangements of the linguistic elements."¹⁴ As related to "quebec bombers," the comparison presents the clean ordered life of a capitalist system and the dirty chaotic life of the lower classes. "dirt" fills the next five lines from margin to margin in an even pattern, an empty line follows, and then "dirt" returns in some of its anagrammatical forms: "ddt" (a permanent insecticide) and "dt's" (delirium tremens). These latter variations of the word "dirt" describe the results (dt's) of poor living conditions, where ddt is necessary. Lastly, the word "spray" is printed, and its anagrams underscore the thrust of the whole poem: the "spray" of ddt; the religious "prey" of the Catholic church in Quebec; the "spas" of the capitalists; the occasional "rays" of hope; the lack of "pay"; and the ultimate

¹⁴Murphy, p. 99.

sterilization of the people — "spavs." This line is followed by a row of "augh" and "agh," the sounds of deep distress and pain.

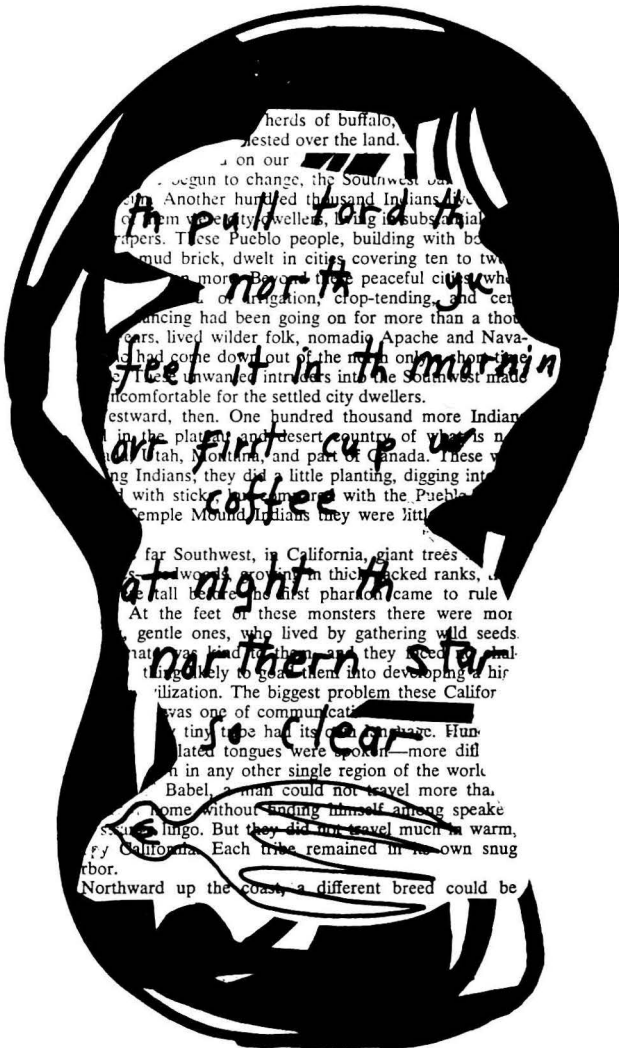
Bill Bissett often writes anti-establishment poetry. In "quebec bombers," by manipulating three different typographies, Bissett sets up a complex group of graphic and semantical correspondences which result in overwhelming "praise" for those "quebec bombers" who dare to shatter the forms of political and social repression. The poem represents a kind of culmination of visual poetry that depends predominantly on typography.

A step removed from typographical poems are the handwritten poems of Birney, Bissett, and Nichol. Space on the page remains an important consideration but rigidly mechanical letters, such as the typewriter provides, are consciously avoided.



Birney's "like an eddy" reads "like an eddy my words turn about your bright rock." By handwriting the poem, Birney is able to join all the words in order to recreate the continuous "eddy"-like effect of the swirling water. As well, the centrality and rigidity of the word "rock" are accentuated by the dominant position of the letter O. For those who are familiar with Birney's handwriting, as well as for those who are not, "like an eddy" is a very personal poem.

Bill Bissett is both an artist and a poet; it is not uncommon for him to combine his graphics with his linguistic creations.

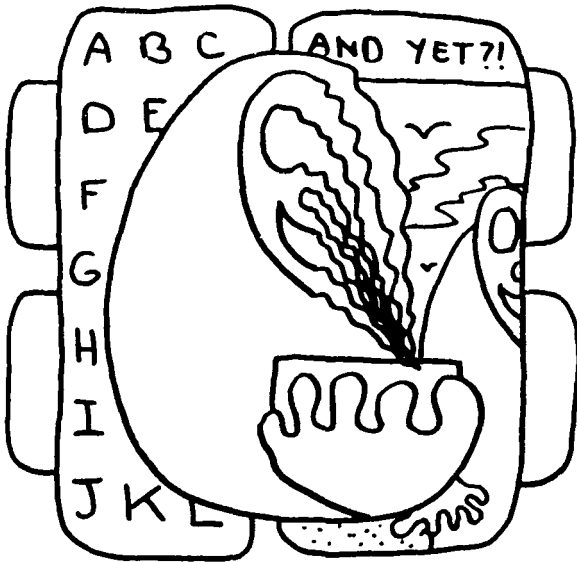


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In "th pull," he superimposes his own printing over a page from a book about Indians of the west coast, beginning with the Pueblos of the American Southwest and ending on the line "Northward up the coast, a different breed could be." Bissett's printing describes "the pull tord th / north" and leaves the implication that, unlike the south where "each tribe remained in itsown snug," in the north the "different breed" was now flourishing. This is a vision of unity, not of "Babel," which is emphasized by the final lines: "at night th / northern star / so clear." Handwriting leaves no question about the persona of the poem: in a collage poem, like Bissett's, it is important to know which point of view is the poet's.

bpNichol's "Allegory #7" presents a complex mixture of handwriting and drawing. Nichol uses the word "allegory" to mean something standing for something else, that is, an extended metaphor.



Allegory #7

"Allegory #7" is one of thirty-two allegories, all of which deal with the evocative power of language, such as the ability of the word "cross" to suggest a large range of meanings. In "Allegory #7," as in the other Nichol "Allegories," large printed letters — here, the capital *I* or possibly an *H* — are the framework. The two vertical *I*'s represent the two tablets of Moses: on one is written the letters A-L; on the other, "and yet?!". Allegorically, the

letters of the alphabet stand for the Ten Commandments. But the drawing gives another point of view. Here, I might explain that the cartoon character is Captain Poetry, Nichol's major persona, and one who signifies traditional poetry. In the drawing, the central image of Captain Poetry is melting into a pot, just as the Israelites melted their gold to produce the Golden Calf. Captain Poetry stands for the traditional usages of language, and his destruction is the destruction of language. On the perimeter, another Captain Poetry is observing the melting, and his smile means possibly that he agrees with Nichol's view that language must be broken up in order to revivify it.

Earle Birney, Bill Bissett, and bpNichol can be said to be the nurturers and the propagators of visual poetry. The disturbing complexity of "quebec bombers," the concentrated satire of "Canada Council," and the mock symbology of "Allegory #7" all indicate the subtle yet powerful nature of Canada's foremost visual poets. They are not, however, the sole practitioners.¹⁵ Judith Copithorne's hand-drawn swirling configurations distinguish her poetry. Hart Broudy's personified block letters recall Nichol's work but stand apart. David Aylward's graphic-linguistic creations explore the symmetry of the letter. Steve McCaffery extends the typewriter's possibilities into unimagined realms. Taking 1950 as an arbitrary beginning, it is clear that visual poetry in Canada has grown vigorously and that its innovations demand serious attention.

York University

Figures

1. "Ballad of Mr. Chubb," *The Collected Poems of Earle Birney*, Volume 1, pp. 47-48.
2. "Window Seat," *The Collected Poems*, Volume 2, pp. 162-63.
3. "uo," *pass th food release th spirit book*, n. p.
4. "Christian Cross #2," *Alphabet*, 10 (1965), 43.
5. "Newfoundland," *The Collected Poems*, Volume 2, p. 148.
6. "Canada Council," *pnomes jukollages & other stanzas*, n. p.
7. "quebec bombers," *pass th food release th spirit book*, n. p.
8. "Like an eddy," *pnomes jukollages & other stanzas*, n. p.
9. "th pull," *pass th food release th spirit book*, n. p.
10. "Allegory #7," *Love: a book of remembrances*, n. p.

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- *medicine my mouth's on fire*. Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1974.
- *pass th food release th spirit book*. Vancouver: talonbooks, 1973.
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- *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer*. Toronto: Weed/Flower Press, 1973. (revised edition)
- *Love: a book of remembrances*. Vancouver: talonbooks, 1974.
- *Still Water*. Vancouver: talonbooks, 1970.

¹⁵The best collection of Canadian concrete poetry is contained in *The Cosmic Chef*.