MONSTROUS READING:
THE MARTYROLOGY AFTER DE MAN

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> A mark as mark, writing as writing, is not something to be
> heard or seen, it is something to be read. (Just as we can hear
> [b] and [p], but the difference between them that constitutes
> one as [b] and the other as [p] is not something we can hear—
> it is the marking that makes it possible for us to [think we]
> "hear" [b] and [p].) As that which can and has to be read, this
> inaudible and invisible stutter is nevertheless that which
> opens up a future—an other future, a future open to . . . the
> other.
> Andrzej Warminski, "Terrible Reading (preceded by 'Epi-
> graphs')"

> . . . absolutely incomprehensible if I were not forced to confess
> that I suffer from a morbid horror of the pen, and that this
> work is for me an experience of sheer torture, quite out of
> proportion to its relative unimportance.
> Ferdinand de Saussure, "On a torn, undated page"[1]

1. The Death of the Author

How to begin to read a poem that ended without being at an
end? Now that *The Martyrology* is finished, which is to say neither
complete nor incomplete, not so much a fragment of a whole as
other than whole, now that bpNichol's long poem has been con-
cluded but not miscarried, the task of the reader becomes more
than ever to begin to *read* the poem, the final shape of which hav-
ing only recently been unalterably imposed by the author's
unforseen and unforeseeable death. Indeed, that shape was
unlooked-for to the precise extent that the death was unexpected.
Unhappily, readers of Nichol are in a better position since his
death to see what must have always been the case: that a radically
open-ended poem like *The Martyrology* will need to test its com-

mitment to its chosen status by remaining open, finally, to the one thing that it could not and yet was compelled to be open-ended to—the death of the author. As readers we have no choice but to find ourselves answerable to that dreadful aporia; today when we read *The Martyrology* we commence by reading (of) Nichol's death, itself utterly senseless and unrepresentable and yet fully inscribed in a poem whose final form is what it is exactly because of it.

"Is this where the poem begins?"[2]

2. A Dream of Dismemberment

"[T]aking the notion of open-form writing to its logical extreme,"[3] as Nichol once said of his poem, meant, finally, exposing *The Martyrology* to the extremity of death. Yet the abrupt ending of Nichol's poem serves to remind us that the text will have been from the beginning a kind of death sentence ever more about to be pronounced. Certainly the sense of an ending, and of the hazard of life's triumph over art, is not confined to the entirely exorbitant "place" where Nichol's death interrupts *The Martyrology*. As Stephen Scobie has argued about the first five books, the narrative of the poem is itself fraught with the weight of destitution, moments, as he says, of "desolation caused equally by the death of the saints, the failure of language, and the abandonment by the father."[4] I want to begin my remarks with one of these moments, obvious enough to be easily missed.[5] I want to begin at the beginning of Book 5; but this is not as simple as it sounds, since Book 5 possesses several beginnings in the form of a detailed map of downtown Toronto, four epigraphs, and two title pages.

The first of these epigraphs is made up of a simple word game:

blue

bluer

bloor

Arranged on the page as a stepped sequence, the epigraph seems to tumble out of itself, auguring the textual strategy which will come to dominate Book 5, the "ear-y" way in which language invariably sounds itself beyond or before sense. On a separate page, Nichol next reprints an anecdote from Caxton about the risk of miscommunication that follows logically from the shifty relationship between the signifier and the signified. That language is characterized by an endless process of "dyversite & chaunge" is

put to us by the passage itself, which reproduces Caxton's archaic word usage and orthography. Immediately below this epigraph Nichol cites Cocteau's declaration that "The greatest literary masterpiece is no more than an alphabet in disorder," a remark that not only decanonizes canonical works by reducing them to the meaningless linguistic atoms making them up, but also, more interestingly, declines to inform us as to whether this reduction is the occasion of satisfaction or regret: which has suffered the most, one might well ask, the alphabet's order in being rearranged into meaningful words, or the "greatest literary masterpiece" for being dismantled into so many blank letters? And from that unanswered question the reader turns to the second title page and finds a letter from a friend, quoted in full, which moves quickly from reminiscences about a shared writerly past to a startling image of the writer alone before an annihilatory violence hidden within his own writing: "I had a sudden image of your poetry capturing you like the Minotaur in the labyrinth," Nichol's correspondent concludes, "—and started wondering what is the relationship of someone to the mythology they make up? Anyway. Best, Matt."

Is there not a narrative faintly constructed here between and along these epigraphs, or at least a circling about and a deepening of the sense of a certain hazard inherent in the task of writing? From the harmless pun on "bluer/bloor" we turn to Caxton's politely acknowledged problem of the shiftiness of words, and from there to the dismemberment of the "literary masterpiece" at the hands of its own materiality, and then finally to the phantasmagoria of Matt [Cohen's] letter, where the dream of the Minotaur is related and a kind of warning made. But of what? A curious "image" this, whose hallucinatory power seems tied to its very suddenness. Matt's decision to sign off at exactly the most provocative moment in his letter—"Best," he writes—would be funny if it were not so conspicuously lacking in reassurance, and it serves finally to reinforce the sense of immanent danger, as if in closing the letter so abruptly the friend were shaking off the chill of the lurid picture he was responsible for evoking, as if he needed to keep himself from seeing the terrible truth of what he had just suggested in the metaphor of the Cretan labyrinth: that "the relationship of someone to the mythology they make up" harbours a hidden violence, even fatality. "Best," indeed, Matt writes, as if he were really saying "good luck to you, my friend; I'm glad that I'm not in the business of fighting Minotaurs."

Ordinarily prefaces are the place where the writer indulges in the fantasy that one is the master of one's own text. Here, however, the text, not the author, is powerful. Matt's dream of dismemberment is at the very least an inauspiciously ambivalent way to begin Book 5 of *The Martyrology*, a volume which is more obviously given over to the felicitous life of words, not their threatening, much less monstrous, otherness. If writing is labyrinthine, surely it is an exuberantly a-mazing space, not unlike the place that Blake promises when in Jerusalem he offers us the "end of a golden string." Nichol would seem to celebrate the erring paths of the signifier once, as he writes, the "hazardous connections to their signifieds / are severed" (Chain 1); why then begin with a warning, as if one hazard only concealed another? A large part of the Minotaur's repulsiveness comes from its grossly indeterminate status, the fact that it is not at all certain whether it is human or not. What is so threateningly alien about one's own poem that it can be thought of as similarly monstrous? What cruelty lurks at the heart of the labyrinth of language?

3. A Terror Glimpsed: La folie de Saussure

These are difficult issues to raise, it seems, even for Nichol, who after all displaces them into Matt's voice, in a way faintly reminiscent of Coleridge's self-protective deferral to a similarly fictional "letter from a friend" at a crucial juncture in *Biographia Literaria*.[6] I want to suggest that the later work of Paul de Man, which might usefully be described as an unfinished[7] theory of language's threatening otherness, is extraordinarily germane to the probing questions and darkening mood that Nichol's prefatory remarks evoke. De Man's last public lecture is a case in point. In the course of discussing Walter Benjamin's unsettling observation that translators—and, by extension, all who wrestle with words—face a "monstrous and originary danger" in their work, de Man is led to the disconcerting conclusion that it "is not at all certain that language is in any sense human."[8] In a slightly earlier essay (to which I want to return in a moment), de Man argues that Ferdinand de Saussure's most radical linguistic research had brought him perilously close to this very "danger," or what he calls the risk of "cognitive dismemberment" at the hands of "the uncontrollable power of the letter as inscription" (*HI* 37). Part of the task facing readers of de Man will continue to be the unpacking

of the significance of remarks like these, whose typically lurid figures of destruction are matched only by their unsparing compression.[9] But this much is clear: de Man's later rhetorical readings all reflect what Barbara Johnson calls his "central insight: that language, since it is . . . constitutive of the human, cannot itself be entirely 'human.'" As Johnson argues, language

> is neither inside nor outside the subject, but both at once. As the ground of possibility of expressive intentionality, language cannot itself be entirely reduced to interpretability. This does not mean that language never means, but rather that beyond the apparent meaning, and even beyond the . . . hidden meanings, there can always be a residue of functioning—which produces effects—that is not a sign of anything, but merely the outcome of linguistic rules, or even of "the absolute randomness of language." Not that language is always absolutely random, but that we can never be sure that it isn't.[10]

A disturbing and freakishly counterintuitive notion, this: that language is not human, or worse, that we are not in a position to determine decisively whether it is human or not. For de Man the "residual" or "material" linguistic functioning which makes the concept of subjectivity *as* a concept available to thought radically exceeds the subject, remaining other than and irreducible to it. Moreover, the perilous surety of human being is achieved only by turning away from the inconceivable blankness of this linguistic materiality, a turning—or "troping," he would say—which enables the mind to "shelter itself from self-erasure" (*SS* 770). The Heideggerian provenance of de Man's rhetoric here is not accidental, for it underlines the close links between his insistence on the non-subjective, prephenomenal conditions of signification and the German philosopher's disenchantment with the notion that "language is the expression, produced by men, of their feelings and the world view that guides them."[11] Heidegger asks: "Can the spell this idea has cast over language be broken?" Only by listening to what "Language speaks" [*Die Sprache spricht*], he replies, in an infamous pronouncement which has had an extraordinary influence on post-humanist thinking since the Second World War. De Man, like Derrida and Kristeva, resembles Heidegger in suggesting that "in its essence, language is neither [an] expression nor an activity of man."[12] Nevertheless, his thought is to be decisively distinguished from that of his philosophical contemporaries, spe-

cifically over what he calls, with uncharacteristic neatness, "the difficulty of the relationship between the self and its discourse" (*TT* 75). (Nichol would say: "the relationship of someone to the mythology they make up.") Briefly put, where Derrida and Kristeva exuberantly affirm the prephenomenal "notions" of *différance* and the *chora*[13] for their power to liberate thinking from the metaphysics of presence, de Man attends to the materiality of the sign, stressing the hidden threat that its radical sense-lessness inescapably poses for reading, for cognition, and for what is reassuringly familiar about the fundamentally humane (or "phenomenal") space that is constituted by language. For de Man, even to suggest that language "speaks" automatically humanizes and recuperates what it says, since such speaking could only be *for* us and *to* us as the sole creatures in a position to listen. What language says, if anything, is not something we can determine with any certainty. Whatever language is "in its essence" is therefore at best an anthropomorphizing postulate about it rather than a quality that could as such be perceived, described, or known.

After "Shelley Disfigured" (1979), de Man's essays constitute an uncanny return to Heidegger's inaugural philosophical question: "Why are there 'beings,' why is there anything at all, instead of nothing?"[14] Reconfiguring Heidegger's ontological rhetoric in linguistic terms, de Man asks instead why there is signification rather than ubiquitous blankness. And, like Heidegger, he argues that the answer to the question must be found in the asking of it. It is only in thinking (of) language as a question, as an indeterminate opening rather than as something given to perception, that de Man can turn his critical gaze to the unique site at which language takes place, the movement or act that unfolds the space in which articulation occurs; "the materiality of the letter" and the "letter as inscription" are two of the several names which he idiosyncratically gives this originary linguistic moment. The unstable object of de Man's focus escapes conceptual location, but it might just as easily be described using a phrase Nichol himself employs in *The Martyrology*: "adrift between the signifier & the signified" (Book 5, Chain 3). Because this minimal space of random movement is the very condition of the distinction between signifier and signified, it is itself radically *in*-articulate and illegible; certainly the relation of its non-signifying betweenness to language's phenomenal appearance in signs could not be understood by a reading

that, after all, reads only (about) language. For de Man, language is indistinguishable from the forgetting of the condition of its possibility in this inaugural breaching, and thus functions at two levels which are unaccommodated to each other and yet inextricably interinvolved: on the one hand, the in-human lacuna that is signification's possibility and, on the other, the blotting out of the intolerable blankness of this lacuna so that language may occur and the subject—among all other conceptualizations—may appear. Thus it "is not at all certain that language is in any sense human," if only because the concept of certainty itself belongs entirely to the near side of the taking-place of language. The prephenomenal character of the opening of language makes its nature into something like a bare act, irreducibly singular, opaque, and, as de Man insists, "uncontrollable." What bears emphasis, then, is that the materiality of the letter is utterly heterogeneous to that which is articulated in language. A "chasm"[15] divides language from the material condition of its possibility, rendering arbitrary and contingent all phenomenal forms that inevitably come to be imposed upon it. What would it be to read the unreadable origin of language, to traverse language's unfathomable distance from itself? Nichol's word, "*adrift*," seems just right, conveying as it does the originary in-difference[16] to meaningfulness out of which the sign suddenly forms and to which, according to de Man, it is ultimately answerable. As de Man concludes in "Shelley Disfigured," amidst this betweenness "nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence" (*SD* 122).

At the conclusion of my remarks I want to circle back to why de Man so readily compares the materiality of the letter to death—in this case the death of Shelley while writing *The Triumph of Life*—and how that comparison illuminates the final disposition of *The Martyrology*. After "Shelley Disfigured," de Man's unique notion of the sign's materiality never ceases to guide his work. What will vary is the way in which the hazard of its gross indeterminacy ripples through individual texts. Arguably the clearest explication of linguistic materialism comes in his discussion of Saussure's research on anagrams, the so-called "other" or "crazy" Saussure. Since Jean Starobinski's publication of his commentary on Saussure's notebooks in 1971—under the title *Les mots sous les*

mots[17]—it has become well known that in the years leading up to his seminal lectures on general linguistics Saussure was obsessed with the strange possibility that Latin verse concealed key words and proper names through various mechanisms of anagrammatic and hypogrammatic dispersal.[18]   Although Saussure wanted to believe that these names were thematically relevant to the texts in which they were deviously buried, and that their appearance was thus governed by a set of definable linguistic rules, he found finally that he could not dismiss the possibility that what he saw, or thought he saw, was of his own invention. The more he looked, the more language seemed to be a potentially limitless significative field, inscribed not only with names, but with any number of other patterns and articulations whose meaningfulness or meaningless-ness depended entirely on the will of the reader to make them so. Unable to distinguish conclusively between what were the ran-dom effects of a disordered alphabet—as Nichol's epigraph from Cocteau might suggest—and a bona fide system of codification, Saussure felt compelled to suspend judgement over the whole matter and to keep his research unpublished. As he wrote in a letter, "I make no secret of the fact that I myself am perplexed—about the most important point: that is, how should one judge the reality or phantasmagoria of the whole question."[19]

For de Man, Saussure's "perplexity" is the outward cogni-tive response to an inner necessity about language. In order for a linguistic pattern to have one meaning or another, indeed, for a linguistic pattern to operate significatively at all, fully presup-poses "the movement of the *sign-function*"[20] or "positional power,"[21] senseless in itself, which makes that meaning, any meaning, possible. Saussure's suspended question about the "re-ality" or "phantasmagoria" of what he saw in the repetitions and patterns of Latin verse brings him to the threshold of apprehend-ing this material precondition of language, the armature of mean-ing whose erasure paradoxically enables signification—and therefore language—to take place. Not that language's positional power could ever itself be read or understood, since the object of reading is always language and nothing less. "That language is, is not comprehensible," writes Hans-Jost Frey,[22] identifying linguisticality—what language is at its effaced origin—with the sheer sense-lessness of its power to mean. The materiality of the letter amounts to a virtual or non-significative "act" in which the question of language's having taken place is held in abeyance and

remains unthought. As Marc Redfield argues, linguistic materialism "consists in the necessary though impossible possibility that a sign may not be a sign."[23] The "sign that may not be one"[24] is the very blankness haunting Saussure's reading, as his hypogrammatic gaze widens to include more and more hidden words and meanings—until it becomes impossible to determine at what point signification stops or starts. Adrift between the signifier and the signified, Saussure's gaze glazes, turns into a stare, halted and perplexed by the linguistic proliferation it is itself responsible for triggering. Where does reading begin? Saussure's question is unanswerable until he can determine with any certainty whether or where language has taken place, but this proves to be the most difficult question of all.

4. A Maze of Messages: Nichol after de Man

My remarks about the materiality of the letter may seem to have moved my argument away from Book 5 of *The Martyrology*, but I have in fact arrived at the heart of the poem's textual strategies. What Saussure appears to have glimpsed—and subsequently repressed, coming as this glimpse did on the eve of the more "rational" linguistic science which would come to bear his name[25]—was a profound revision of how signifying systems operate, one which strikingly anticipates the exorbitant treatment of language characterizing (but by no means confined to) Book 5. One could argue that what is a "chimerical obsession"[26] in Saussure becomes a radical poetics—not without its own obsessional qualities—in Nichol. Like the linguist, Nichol treats the text as if it were hypogrammatic or paragrammatic, that is, indeterminately bound with several competing signifying strands. As Leon S. Roudiez writes, language is paragrammatic "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 not accessible through conventional reading habits."[27] For Nichol the text is pervasively and unpredictably underwritten by other texts, *les mots sous les mots*; in his hands words are everywhere making themselves heard beneath or within other words, writing re-sounding itself like a vast echo chamber. The extent to which Nichol's poem is open to these reverberating "possibilities" is perhaps no more evident than in the case of what Steve McCaffery calls his "charades,"[28]

where phrases, words, and letters are compelled to yield new
significations simply through the redistribution of the blank spaces
in which the signifying material is inscribed. McCaffery provides
two extraordinary examples:

> Flamingo: pale, scenting a latent shark.
> Flaming, opalescent in gala tents—hark.

> Hath outrage, dying rated well on super-bold staging looms?
> Ha, thou tragedy ingrate, dwell on superb old stag in glooms.[29]

As Nichol writes in Book 5:

> this multiplication
> attention to a visual duration
> comic stripping of the bare phrase
> the pain inside the language speaks
> ekes out meaning phase by phase
> make my way thru the maze of streets & messages
> reading as i go
> creating narratives by attention to a flow of signs)
>
> each street branches in the mind
> puns break
>   words fall apart
> a shell   .
> sure as hell's   .
> ash ell
> when i let the letters shift sur face
> is just a place on which im ages drift
>   (Book 5, Chain 3)

"Puns break / words fall apart": ironically echoing Eliot's *Burnt
Norton*,[30] Nichol notes that words are subject to a built-in impre-
cision, their semantic depth constantly threatened by the slipperi-
ness of their lettered "sur face." Here, for example, "a shell" yields
the colloquial "sure as hell's," only to break up into the non-sense
of "ash ell." What is interesting about this passage is the way in
which Nichol not only attends to the "flow of signs," but self-
consciously draws attention to their disseminative breakage by
describing what he is doing. Book 5 abounds with specular
instances of this kind:

> looking out across the surface of words today
>   (Book 5, Chain 1)

> i mine the language for the heard world
> seen scenes unfurled by such activity
> > (Book 5, Chain 1)

> > writers   struggle as i do
> make a mend
> join the torn letters of the language
> > (Book 5, Chain 1)

The choice of verbs in these and other passages is itself revealing. Looking across surfaces that are mined, torn and mended, Nichol uses terms which reify writing, as if he were *doing* things with words as much as writing them. Stripping language of its prior semantic determinations, and focusing instead on the play of its sub-semantic constituents, Nichol compels reading matter to become, at the moment of its manipulation, merely linguistic matter. Occasionally a metapoetic description is followed by a quoted example, in a curious (and, one might say, reflexive) anticipation of the "activity" of critical discourse about *The Martyrology*, including my own:

> lionel was tracking the word shift: 'laughter in slaughter'
> > (Book 5, Chain 2)

Perhaps most reminiscent of Saussure's hypogrammatic gaze, however, is the poet's "tracking" of concealed proper names, especially the names of saints. Beginning in the opening books of *The Martyrology*, Nichol often divests the conventional meanings of words which happen to start with the consonant cluster "*st*," only literally to (re)canonize them as the names of saints: "storm" and "stranglehold," for example, are christened "St. Orm" and "St. Ranglehold."

Both the game of the saint's name and its witty verbal equivalents in *The Martyrology* are generally considered to be a primary expression of Nichol's willingness to "admit into the poem a radical sense of linguistic free play and dissemination which is central to a poststructuralist theory of language."[31] Without question, Nichol luxuriates in the pleasure of the text by liberating it from the notion of a fixed and stable meaning. *The Martyrology* becomes a site where sentences, phrases, and words are recast as an expansive, non-totalizable writing field in which the material elements of the language endlessly combine, dissolve, and coalesce again to form new significations quite apart from those which are available to more familiar reading strategies. And yet to describe *The Martyrology* in this way blunts the full force of its

disarticulating tactics, and for reasons whose underlying defen-
siveness would need to be calculated, disinterred, not only for
Nichol, but for post-modernist criticism as a whole. It is of course
true that hypogrammatic reading reminds us that at any point the
referentiality of a text is jeopardized by another dimension of
language functioning next and counter to that referentiality; there
could be no end to the words one could "playfully" assemble out
of any given chain of signifiers. Nevertheless, the process of "look-
ing across the surface of words" ineluctably remains a form of
reading, and reading is always a case of *deja lu*—how else could we
know that we were reading anything, unless the signifiers in front
of us were recognizable as language? But as Saussure's curious
experience with the anagrams powerfully suggests, it is exactly
the surety of that recognition—essential to the intelligibility of
language—that is unsettled once the text has been dismantled into
a disordered alphabet, and thus exposed to the sheer random
occurrence and aggregation of individual letters, syllables, and
words. What language actually is *before* it becomes readable, which
is to say before one word or another is read *into* its accidentality,
is not comprehensible. Yet the pressure of this unintelligibility
makes itself felt precisely because once the text is
hypogrammatically unsealed it becomes impossible to halt the
"multiplication" of words generated along its "sur face." As Wlad
Godzich notes, Saussure "considered his anagrammatic research
a failure" not only because it had succeeded in demonstrating that
"a string of signifiers [was] . . . capable of yielding a great many
different signifiers" but also because "it refuse[d] to give them a
hierarchy."[32] The second part of Saussure's difficulty is for him the
most disconcerting, for without this "hierarchy" there is no way
to discern the phenomenal shape of individual significative pat-
terns (whether words or phrases) in the otherwise heterogeneous
blur of the linguistic material. Saussure's research "failure" is of
course the linguistic windfall behind Nichol's poetic success. Yet
by affirming the poet's "radical sense of linguistic free play" in the
name of "post-structuralism" or "post-modernism," critical dis-
cussions of Nichol risk missing the underlying recuperative aspect
of *The Martyrology*'s exorbitant textual strategies: the poem's very
readability, the fact that it is composed of legible signs, attests to
Nichol's own careful hierarchization of the non-hierarchical pos-
sibilities that his poetic tactics are responsible for opening up. The
poet "make[s]" his "way thru the maze of . . . messages," as he says

in Chain 3, but this labyrinth of information cannot be traversed everywhere, all at once; there will always be an interminable number of ways not taken. In other words, Nichol cannot read all the messages and be one reader because reading is expressly a question of taking or choosing a path. For the sake of intelligibility *a way* must be made and will always be made through the maze, some "messages" ignored while others are deciphered. What would it mean, then, to be lost in the labyrinth, without a way through its endless signifying turns? By not forging a route of any kind. That is, by suspending the process of discrimination between signifying and non-signifying patterns upon which reading as such depends, Nichol would approximate Saussure's "perplexity" about Latin texts, the aimless moment in which meaningful language has been overwhelmed by the blank infinity of the sum of its possible significations. Captured by the unthinkable and unrestrained excess of the linguistic material before sense can be made of it, Nichol would in effect surrender to the monstrous thoughtlessness hidden within the maze's heart.

Saussure will not have it. But as I have suggested, in his own way neither will Nichol, for all his emphasis on the disseminative potential of language. Faced with what Godzich accurately describes as "a heterogeneous, non-reductive field which [did] . . . not lend itself to the conceptualization of a model,"[33] Saussure appears to have fled to the comforting rationality of linguistics. As de Man suggests, the swerve in his research career "supports the assumption of a terror glimpsed" (*HI* 37). To the exact extent that Saussure's own "maze of messages" escapes conceptualization, it is unrecognizable as writing, which is one of the connotations of de Man's strange remark that it "is not at all certain that language is in any sense human." What begins as play for Nichol, the "comic stripping of the bare phrase," likewise leads to a cryptically grim disclosure: "the pain inside the language speaks."[34] What this pain could be is difficult to articulate because it is, in its bareness, where the poem as readable language begins, the maze before a "way" through it been chosen. But Nichol's hypogrammatism gives it a muted voice, insofar as the poet's frolic amongst possible readings at every point bears the trace of a deeper undecidability: the labyrinthine prospect of a truly infinitized free-play that is irreducible to and unregulated by any system of signification. In this intolerable realm the semiotic condition of the sign is eclipsed and language rendered into a kind

of textual blur or smudge that extinguishes understanding. To experience language in its radical bareness is itself incomprehensible, for, as de Man writes, "We would then have witnessed . . . the undoing of cognition and its replacement by the uncontrollable power of the letter as inscription" (*RT* 37).

De Man's point is that cognition, readability, and conceptualization generally are always already the refusal of this monstrously unsettling possibility. Insofar as "linguistic free play" can be said to describe *The Martyrology*'s hypogrammatism, it too is unavoidably an expression of the disavowal of the "letter as inscription" because it restricts itself to destabilizing the *manner* but not the *fact* of language's signifying function. From the perspective of the "work" of conventional reading habits, Nichol's word games are unarguably playful; yet the difference between "work" and play dissolves once it is remembered that both forms of apprehension are identically *readings*.[35] Whether playful or laborious, reading presumes the legibility of the text and thus shelters *The Martyrology* from the "pain" of the "bared phrase" precisely because its agony could never be apprehended by a reading that reads only language. In other words, whatever label we give *The Martyrology*, legibility remains the humane bound of intelligibility within which the promised "freedom" of its "play" is unavoidably circumscribed. That Nichol's practice of a "poststructuralist theory of language" is so readily described as *play* (or "charades") pinpoints the limits to its "radical" nature, for the metaphor of gaming names language as the medium and object of the one who *plays*; after Schiller,[36] what could be more essentially human than *das Spielen*, playing? *Homo significans* and *Homo ludens*: under these companionable and intimately interlinked signs we preserve the humane space of language by finding in it the reflection of our deepest selves not only as maker of signs, but as the sole, privileged creature in the position to luxuriate in their polysemy.

And yet the threat of the text's undoing by "the power of the letter as inscription" often seems close to the surface, and never more so than in those moments in Book 5 when Nichol seems taken aback by the momentum of his own linguistic free-play:

t he
hee hee
   ha ha
     ho ho

> tho i know its no laughing matter some days
> a sum of ways
> weights the measured writing of the poem
>
> (Book 5, Chain 3)

Here "laughter" is literally found in "slaughter," onomatopoeic mirth in the graphic dismemberment of the article "the." As McCaffery economically describes it, "spacing . . . inaugurates a radical split in the phonic direction, introducing in the second line an investment in a different sound whose end profit is a different meaning that generates its own chain of playful implications."[37] Yet Nichol is quick to note that there is a certain unhappy price for this playfulness, as he feels the sudden gravity or "weight[iness]" of the incalculable and labyrinthine "sum of ways" language might go once its hypogrammatism is unleashed. Held up against the measurelessly random possibilities that the letter insists upon language, even Nichol's manifest playfulness must come off more soberly as a "measured writing." Writing as writing is exactly the measure of intelligibility that is imposed upon the chaotic linguistic matter out of which it is made. As he writes in Chain 1:

> looking out across the surface of the words today
> the letters are not my n m e

Language is neither his ("my n"/mine) nor him ("m e"/me); but even as Nichol's letters acknowledge that they are not his foe or "n m e" either, he introduces the possibility that in their openly admitted otherness they might well become so; in the next several lines, the poet tentatively compares himself (and us) to "narcissus," making "the surface of words" into a fatally attractive simulacrum of the self:

> narcissus as it was so long a go
>   e go
>   and maybe even i go
>   o go s poe goed
>   edgarrishly
>   all'a narcissistically
>
> so u go

Much could be said about how Nichol proceeds in these few lines, which are in many ways an exemplary instance of how Book 5 "unfolds"—if that is the right verb to describe the poet's halting movement through language's maze of messages. Nichol is in fact obliged to invent a verb to characterize how it is that he and his

letters "go": "o go s poe goed," after the mythical Okanagan creature Ogopogo. One might say then, by way of paraphrase, that the poem proceeds *monstrously*. Or, as he also suggests, it unfolds "edgarrishly," deviantly, like the excessive characters in stories by "[P]oe,"[39] or like the language of Gloucester's half-crazed son in *King Lear*, whose nonsensical echolalia on the heath appears playful while also sounding the destruction of a more general coherence.[40] Surely that way lies *la folie de Saussure*; but as de Man notes in what is undoubtedly his own most garish essay, "no degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words" (*SD* 122).

5. Scrapped Script and a New Saint Axe

By dismembering words into letters, Nichol brings out the relationship between meaningfulness and the literal, material properties of language; new words and meanings are generated by the "playful" manipulation of letters and syllables which are themselves quite without the sense they receive once they are manipulated. What is the nature of the textual material, then, and what are words such that they can be made out of it? Considered strictly as a game, Nichol's text only affirms the fairly obvious fact that signifiers are capable of yielding multiple meanings; what always goes without saying, however, is that the difference between what a text says and what it is construed to mean leaves open in principle the strange notion of the signifier freed from all significance—freed even and especially from being merely insignificant, a mark whose meaninglessness is relative rather than absolute, wholly a function of its difference from those which have been construed as meaningful. To read this (absolutely) blank signifier would be precisely not to read; it would be to leave open the question of language, which is to say not to discriminate between what makes sense and what does not, but, impossibly, to "see" the text in its sheer materiality. Such sight would approach what de Man calls, after Kant, *Augenschein*, the "stony gaze" under which meaningful language "fragments" into the radically meaningless material condition of its possibility (*PMK* 144).[41] For de Man, language is always and everywhere the phenomenal monument to this materiality, marking its ineluctable operation precisely by annulling it. Like Derrida's non-concept of *différance*, the disappearance of materiality is indistinguishable from the

phenomenal appearance of all that is thought and known.

Nichol's hypogrammatism, which amounts, finally, to an extraordinarily sustained attention to the purely random distribution of letters and syllables in the linguistic field, reproduces Kant's *Augenschein*, in so far as that is possible. Certainly no attempt is made, as is the case in Saussure's notebooks, to rescue language from itself by anchoring its hypogrammatism in a particular poem's extra-linguistic thematic concerns; the words which Nichol deciphers from other words are randomly generated by the text's senseless capacity to produce meaningless clusterings of letters, linguistic scraps whose significance as readable words can come only after the accidental fact of that clustering. As I have suggested, Saussure is repulsed by the measurelessness of this linguistic phenomena; but Nichol presses on, exploring the outermost limits of language by "taking the notion of open form writing," as he says prosaically, "to its logical extreme."[42] Once the incommensurability of the signifier and the signified is demonstrated, as it undoubtedly is when words are read into chance accumulations of linguistic matter, the non-signifying object of Kant's "stony gaze" would seem theoretically possible; yet it is not until the penultimate Chain of Book 5 that that "extreme" comes closest to being realized. In these pages, I would argue, the fragmentation of language into a disordered alphabet is chastening and precipitous as much as it is "playful," for, in their scattering of single, isolated letters (chipped off from the ends of unconnected words), the reader is brought to the very threshold across which language in its materiality passes into cognition and readability. Where "laughter" was once playfully "tracked" in "slaughter," now all that remains are dismembered signs, the detritus of scrapped script (or "scrapture," as Nichol calls it).

The emptiness of this lettered space discloses more clearly than ever the fundamental discrepancy between meaning and the constituents of meaning; reading is here reduced to near-zero degree apprehension, a mere spelling out of single, meaningless letters.[43] Nevertheless, as an identifiable part of the alphabet, the letter as letter is already well on its way to language; that is why linguistic materiality "appears" not in the actual mark on the page, which is, after all, readable as a letter, but in the utter incommensurability of even this minimal significance and what that mark must be—senseless in itself—in order to bear meaning at all. "Such marks cannot be known to *signify* and cannot be said to be

perceived," Cynthia Chase notes, "since their form, their shape, their phenomenal status, is a function of an intentionality or semiotic status that can only be postulated for them rather than perceived, described, or known."[44] In other words, language's "semiotic status"—what I have been calling its readability—amounts to a "postulation" about these marks, a human or "intentional" imposition of meaningfulness on that which lies beyond or before perception, description, and knowledge. The altogether absent continuity between these marks and conceptualization, beginning with the notion of "language," but extending to all manner of thinking, including the notion of the human subject, undoes phenomenal apprehension, disfiguring it by exposing the contingent nature of its impositional character. Utterly in-different to that which is postulated about it, the materiality of the letter thus operates as the indeterminate back-ground against which language and knowledge appear, not positively, as the object of apprehension, but negatively, as a kind of sustained hallucination about and defensive gesture against the disarticulating force of the power of inscription.

If language is, as Nichol admits, "not a spell" but "an act of desperation,"[45] then "what *is* the relationship of someone to the mythology they make up?" The answer to the question which introduces Book 5 naturally finds a focus in the poet's myth of the saints, and particularly in the game of the saints' names. The fact that playing with names forms such an important part of Nichol's hypogrammatism is significant, since of all the parts of language it is the name that most lends itself to the comforting notion that language is essentially a nomenclature, a system of signs pointing to things that are already given to comprehension in advance of signification. Nothing could be further from the truth in Nichol's name game, where the real question could be described as what is given to language in advance of comprehension. Here Nichol thematizes as play the fact that words can always be recovered from the purely accidental combination of letters and syllables. Of course the names of the saints are not already *there* to be recognized and read—although it is interesting to note how difficult it is to speak of hypogrammatism as anything but a process of "decipherment," as if one were disclosing something fully-formed but "concealed" in the textual material. As in the case of Saussure's anagrams, the game of the name demonstrates instead that language as such is not given to perception at all, but must be made—

is constantly being made—to appear through the arbitrary decision to impose meaningfulness upon some articulations—meaningless in themselves—and not on others.[46] Nichol's word play thus raises the question of what must be there for the name, for any meaningful word or pattern, to be brought into legibility *in the first place*. Where does reading—"conventional," "post-modernist"—as reading begin? That multiple, or rather, infinite significances can be conferred upon linguistic patterns, even in the absence of any communicable meaning, necessarily implies a moment of inertial opposition or resistance about language in which the question of what is determined to be significant, and thus what is *in*significant, is left open. To pass from "stranglehold" to "St. Ranglehold," for example, the reader must move through a sort of linguistic apogee, which, like the turning point at the height of a parabolic arc, is essentially dimensionless, imperceptible as such. Neither one word nor the other, neither noun nor proper name, this pivotal linguistic moment "between the signifier & the signified" is itself unreadable, yet logically necessary for the new signification to have been conferred upon the same aggregate of letters. Evident only in its effacement, this moment is not a sign and thus certainly not language, but what might be called "pure phonic datum," the condition of the possibility of signification.

"Pure phonic datum" is Sylvère Lotringer's term for the materiality of the letter. In his discussion of Saussure's unresolved perplexity about the significative status of the proper names that he had tracked in this datum, Lotringer asks two questions with a punning flourish worthy of any word play in *The Martyrology*:

> What is to be done with the disturbing repetitions of the pure phonic datum, with the "regular distribution of vowels and consonants" glimpsed in the Saturnian and certain formula lines of Homeric poetry? To which saint should they be dedicated—if not to a new *Saint-Axe*?[47]

The French would say: *Ne savoir à quel saint se vouer*, meaning, roughly, "to be at one's wits' end."[48] Lotringer's question deliberately echoes Saussure's undecidability about the "phantasmagoria" or "reality" of what suddenly looms before him in his hypogrammatic research: unable to decide whether what he gazes at remains significative—that is, language—or not, and thus unwilling to determine what to "do" with it, the linguist finds himself exposed in that irresolvable moment to the unintelligible

possibility of "pure phonic datum." The moment is itself intolerable because it marks the end of wit, and unsustainable because even the minimal imposition of names like "datum," "materiality," or "the sign that may not be one" settle out the radical indeterminacy which these terms name. What is to be done? There is nothing to do except *read*, which is to say *inflict* sense of some kind upon the utter senselessness of the materiality of the letter by choosing a path through its unbounded possibilities. Language is precisely the consecration of the materiality by which it is subtended, or, to use Lotringer's metaphor, the endless spiriting away of "pure phonic datum" through its dedication to one saint or another.

Perhaps even a dedication to a "new *Saint-Axe*," whose grim name recalls the threat of dismemberment that it is language's originary task to sublate. To which saint, indeed, if not this one, should we commit Nichol's fragmentation of language into the random sequences of its letters, and the reassembly of these fragments into words and names—especially the names of saints? We read these names; what remains unread is that which language must be in order for it to be read, for such names to be read "in" it. In other words, if reading is always reading language, then what the lettered space of the hypogrammatized text is in principle "before" functioning as legible writing remains inaccessible— blotted out so that language can take place and reading begin. The paradox is that the game nevertheless points well beyond itself while effacing the conditions which allow it to be played. Rather than simply functioning as a ludic element in the text, Nichol's hypogrammatism discloses the more general phenomena by which the work of reading, whether conventional or playfully unconventional, is possible, makes itself possible. For the transparently arbitrary "discovery" of the saints' names reminds us that reading pre-thinks the resolution of the undecidability about whether what lies before us is significant or not, and thus whether language has occurred.

The game of the saint's name represents an uncanny literalization of language's founding consecration of its materiality. As a naming, the game repeats the inaugural scene of nomination in which the passage from the materiality of the letter to phenomenal, readable language is everywhere effected: to read is always already to give a name—"Readability"—and a face—"language"— to that which is absolutely nameless and faceless, the blank materiality of language that Rodolphe Gasché characterizes as

"the *texte brut* [literally, "the bare phrase"], . . . the text before it starts to signify and prior to the established meanings that the community of interpreters has inflicted upon it."[49] Reading renders familiarly human that which is in-human within language, or more exactly that which lies on the far side of determining what is human about it or not; namely "the uncontrollable power of inscription." What needs to be emphasized, therefore, is that although the face of language makes this power phenomenally legible, the shape in which it appears is thoroughly alien to it; indeed, next to the sheer random occurring of the letters s-t-u-t-t-e-r, for example, the readable word in the shape of a saint's name—St. Utter—looks like a completely arbitrary and contingent fiction. Nor is the accidentality from which the legible word is drawn in any sense the cause or origin of that which is formed, no more than the saint's legends in *The Martyrology* are caused by the phonic datum out of which their names are abruptly and arbitrarily articulated. Their genealogies are grounded in nothing substantial, but in the accidental aggregation of letters which amounts to a start, a starting, but not an origin, that is, in a textual event that conditions meaning but does not itself possess meaning.[50] In conferring the name of Readability and the face of language on the texte brut we assign the capacity for reference to something which is in essence pure, material occurrence, like a random sequence of letters, and that therefore only acquires meaning or reference after the fact.[51] The game of the saint's name paradoxically serves the "decanonizing"[52] function of remembering the imposed or conferred character of that face, exposing it to be a massive and sustained figure for that for which there could be no literal expression.

"[S]ome unheard of, monstrous species of things are involved," Saussure writes,[53] figuring the dread of his own hypogrammatism in a language which seems uncannily similar to Nichol's in the epigraph to Book 5. What is brutishly aberrant about these "things" is not a silence understood against some projected horizon of audibility; the "unheard" here augurs an incomprehensible muteness at the core of language, its monstrosity a figure for the pure otherness of that which cannot be assimilated to any system of intentions or motives or signifying codification. Similarly, when Nichol writes that in focusing on the moment "when the word forms" he is "bringing into light what has been in darkness,"[54] the "darkness" to which he refers is a metaphor for

the senseless materiality of language which escapes even the minimal recuperation as the absence of the light of sense; lying beyond the phenomenal opposition of visibility and invisibility, and, for that matter, audibility and inaudibility, it is a blankness within the labyrinth of language which, strictly speaking, escapes understanding as such. At what point *does* a disordered alphabet become a masterpiece? One cannot say, since it (always) goes without saying: as Kevin Newmark observes in the course of a discussion about the random surfacing of concealed words in Blanchot, "we have no language in which to speak of the conditions of language, to speak meaningfully of the moment in which meaningless letters become meaningful words."

No language, perhaps, except language itself, which for de Man is always and everywhere an "allegory" (in his highly idiosyncratic sense of the term) of its own taking-place, a sustained cancelling out of the non-signifying materiality of the letter so that the phenomenal word may appear. The game of the saint's name, and the attendant legends which that game makes possible, amount to an extension of this allegory of reading; the stories of the saints are tied to names whose status in the poem is openly acknowledged to be the result of an arbitrary decision to "form" the word out of the text's "darkness." And from this inaugural delusion Nichol derives the relatively more developed narrative of the saint's legends, which are themselves easily assimilable to multiple levels of interpretation, whether, for example, as a figure for the poet's struggle with his vocation, or as an expression of Nichol's "post-modernism," in short, to all the conceptions—at once necessary and hallucinatory—which facilitate and enhance the fundamentally reassuring notion that what we are reading is not an inhuman accident, but language, and a poem at that. The fact that the text is entitled *The Martyrology* is one sign that the saints' stories and name game form a *mise en abyme* in which the entire poem's constitution *as* readable language is rehearsed, repeated from within. But because language's taking-place conditions meaning but is itself without meaning, it is only available retrospectively, in the poem we actually read. *The opening of language occurs and language means, but we will never be in a position to read language occurring or to see it at the point of its emergence from the darkness, since by becoming legible language performs the erasure of its having taken place.*[56] The terms "post-modern," or, for that matter, "poem," though necessary, remain inadequate to describe the

texte brut, since the readability which they fully imply can hardly account for the opening of language as that which is other than and irreducible to what is readable. Because the materiality of the letter is radically in-different to thought, marking only the text's capacity for "reference prior to designating the referent" (*RT* 7-8), it levels without compromise all distinctions on the basis of genre (*The Martyrology* as long poem), literary history or national affiliation (the Canadian post-modern), or subject matter ("the failure of language"[57]). De Man's radical position would therefore seem monstrously unpalatable to literary critic and author alike.[58] But readers miss exactly half of de Man's central insight if they conclude that in his hands deconstruction becomes merely destruction. It cannot be emphasized enough that for de Man reading is unavoidable to the precise degree that it is impossible. What saves his position from simply doing "literature a disservice by placing it in a realm remote from its physical, emotional, and moral contexts," as D.M.R. Bentley has recently said of critical theory,[59] is that for de Man we have *no choice but* to locate literature in these and other contexts, since literary criticism, like all forms of reading, crucially relies upon them in order to ensure the legibility of the text.

6. An Act of Desperation

> so this poem continues
> a kind of despair takes over
> the poem is written in spite of
> . . . .
> this is not a spell
> it is an act of desperation
> > "Friends as Footnotes," Book 2, *The Martyrology*

In his *Aesthetische Theorie* Theodor Adorno writes that "a fragment is a work that has been tampered with by death."[60] Because it was conceived and composed as a *life's* work, and thus exposed at every point to the possibility of interruption by Nichol's death, *The Martyrology* in its open-endedness will always have been fragmentary in Adorno's sense. Death has tampered with *The Martyrology*, to be sure; but death was always tampering with *The Martyrology*, its sheer unknowable otherness and brutal contingency lurking around the next turn of the labyrinth—or the

next—like that Minotaur which "sudden[ly]" captures the poet in
Matt's strange premonitory dream. For the writer of such a poem,
in which writing is always written against the implacable horizon
of its fatal interruption, the question will centrally be one of "the
relationship of someone to the mythology they make up." Writing
without a view to finishing, Nichol will paradoxically have availed
himself of only one ending, whose mortal hazard for *The Mar-
tyrology*, as for its author, will have been in its randomness and in
its inexplicability: the death of the author is precisely that which
cannot be *viewed*, that which is utterly unavailable to phenomenality
and cognition. Without Kant's *Augenschein*, without that impos-
sibly "stony gaze" of non-comprehension, Nichol's death as such
remains inaccessible. But the phenomenal shape of the poem,
which is to say whatever it is that we make of the text now that
it has been "completed," is paradoxically and irrevocably an-
swerable to that death, the disarticulating force of which decisively
articulates *The Martyrology*, determining where the poem as such
ends, and thus begins. The poem does not—cannot—negotiate
Nichol's death, since that would be to suggest that the one is
intelligible to the other. And yet it cannot help but negotiate it, in
so far as the poem is *intersected* by the death of the author, crossed
suddenly, incomprehensibly by its annihilatory force: this exor-
bitant point of intersection remains unthought and unknown,
except as a kind of interference effect in the phenomenal form of
The Martyrology itself. We read *The Martyrology*, now, and because
we read we impose an unavoidable intelligibility upon the death's
senseless intervention by annulling it. "[T]o read is to understand,
to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface, to repeat," de
Man writes in "Shelley Disfigured" (122). We cannot stop making
a certain strange sense of death while we read, although as de Man
also notes with regard to Shelley's unfinished poem, *The Triumph
of Life*, this process of "monumentalization" (*SD* 120) is inevitably
carried out after the fact, and as an arbitrary and contingent
fiction. As critical readers or as friends of Nichol, we can neither
gaze stonily at his death, nor share in its non-comprehension;
instead, we are compelled to read "into" it.

    Let me try to say this another way: Nichol's death shares no
relationship with the poem whose shape it nevertheless articulates;
it did not "mean" that shape. How, then, to read the altogether
absent continuity between the "act" of the author's death and the
poem as it stands today? Death tampers with *The Martyrology*, but

the tampering as such proves almost impossible to think. De Man's point, however, is that we are always reading of this tampering in the exorbitant convergence of the materiality of the letter and its phenomenal effacement in language. Death, like the uncontrollable power of inscription, is the absolutely other that conditions the poem and threatens it with fragmentation—and yet forms no part of its phenomenal shape.[61] As de Man luridly overstates it in "Autobiography As De-Facement," "death is a displaced figure for a linguistic predicament" (*AD* 81). Not that death is "only" a matter of words, but that the "predicament" of language—the erasure of the opening in which signification occurs—is indistinguishable from the phenomenality of the word "death"; both terms are figures for the senselessness for which there is no literal term. In other words, de Man might just as easily have written that the "predicament of language" is a "displaced figure for death," since each metaphor functions as a phenomenal displacement of what cannot be experienced meaningfully. Death *happens* inexplicably and precipitously, like the inaugurating predicament of language, and like the purely random clusterings of letters and syllables which in their randomness serve as a figure for that predicament. What intelligibility we make of these non-signifying events amounts to a human (all-too-human) "act of desperation," an imposition of meaning upon the radical darkness and in-humanity of their thoughtlessness. To the precise extent that The Martyrology is readable, and therefore a monument to the unintelligibility it erases, it is an example of this imposition, a displaced figure for Nichol's death. "[T]he poem is written in spite of /   ," Nichol writes, the line trailing off into the blankness of what the poem is literally unable to name but which it is nevertheless composed against. Nichol's death, like the materiality of the letter, constitutes the most fundamental point of resistance to the poem's reading. Its blank unthinkability disfigures *The Martyrology* in de Man's queer sense of the term, defacing or marking the text precisely by unmasking its readability as a humane figure imposed upon a monstrously indifferent otherness.

How to begin to read a poem that ended without being at an end?

NOTES

I wish to thank Professor Kevin Newmark, Department of French, Yale University, for his help in the preparation of this essay.

1 Cited by Jean Starobinski, *Words upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, trans. Olivia Emmet (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979): 3.

2 bpNichol, *Hour 18: 12:35 a.m to 1:35 a.m.* I am grateful to Professor Lola Lemire Tostevin, York University, for pointing this line out to me in her paper, "'Is This Where the Poem Begins?': Points of Departure in bpNichol's *Book of Hours*," English-Canadian Poetry, NEMLA Convention, Toronto, 6 April 1990.

3 "After Reading the Chronology," in *Tracing the Paths: Reading ≠ Writing The Martyrology*, ed. Roy Miki (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1988): 339.

4 bpNichol: *What History Teaches* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984): 117.

5 References to Book 5 will be to *The Martyrology: Book 5* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1982). Since Nichol's poem is without pagination, references will be identified in the body of the essay by Chain number.

6 I am referring to the letter preceding Coleridge's severely curtailed definition of primary and secondary imagination in Book XIV of *Biographia Literaria*. Several contemporary readers have suggested that Coleridge's letter from himself to himself is a form of threat display that is triggered by his alarm over the forbidding task of his own philosophical project. See, for example, Jerome Christenson, *Coleridge's Blessed Machine of Language* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981).

7 De Man's most comprehensive project was cut short by his death in 1983, but was to have extended his critique of aesthetic ideology to Marx and Kierkegaard. See "An Interview with Paul de Man," with Stefano Rosso, in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986): 121.

8 "'Conclusions:' Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" *The Resistance to Theory* 87. In Hölderlin's word-for-word—and thus unintelligible—translations of Sophocles, Benjamin sees an example of how attention to the materiality of the target text precipitates an "abysmal" loss of sense. All meaningful translation, that is, translation predicated on the belief in the communication of meaning, opens itself up to the annihilatory violence of this "monstrosity," or to what he also calls "pure language," that which is purely language. See "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969). I have also found Carol Jacobs's "The Monstrosity of Translation," *Modern Language Notes* 90 (1975): 755-766, very helpful. In the discussion following the presentation of his paper on Benjamin, de Man supplemented his remarks about the monstrous inhumanity of language thus:

> If one speaks of the inhuman, the fundamental non-human character of language, one speaks of the fundamental non-definition of the human as such. . . . What in language does not pertain to the human, what in language is unlike nature and is not assimilable, or doesn't resemble, what in language does not resemble the human in any way, is totally indifferent in relation to the human, is not therefore mysterious.

See *The Resistance to Theory* 96.

References for quotations from the works of Paul de Man will be given in the body of the text, with the following abbreviations: *TT*: "'Conclusions:' Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'"; *HI*: "Hypogram and Inscription," and *RT*: "The Resistance to Theory," all in *The Resistance to Theory*; *SS*: "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics,*" *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982): 761-775; *AD*: "Autobiography as De-Facement," and *SD*: "Shelley Disfigured," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984); *PMK*: "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," in *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1984).

⁹ This is in no way to minimize the crucial importance of determining the significance of de Man's wartime journalism. Indeed, the fact that the sobering and thoroughly over-determined controversy over his journalism persists in Europe and the United States tacitly confirms that we continue to witness what Kevin Newmark calls the "turn" from "the question of declaring whether Paul de Man's work is of importance" to "the necessity of determining just where that importance lies." See "Paul de Man's History," *Reading de Man Reading*, eds. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989): 121.

¹⁰ *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987): 6.

¹¹ *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971): 196-197. For different reasons, and from importantly different angles of approach, Derrida, Nietzsche and Kristeva, to name only three, have been similarly disenchanted, each "listening" for what language "speaks" beyond its being taken up into the realm of the human subject. In the shadow of Schopenhauer's distinction between the world as "will" and "representation," Nietzsche, for example, posits the unnamed form he will call only "X," the inaccessible substance whose translation and effacement constitutes the opening of the "first metaphor," after which all knowledge and concepts follow as a chain of tropological displacements, human being chief amongst them. See, for example, "On Truth and Lies in a Normal Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities, 1979): 79-91. Rethinking Nietzsche in the context of Lacan and contemporary linguistic theory, and with an eye to "revolution in poetic language," Kristeva also returns signifying practice to its material origins, or what she calls the "semiotic *chora.*" For her, the body as such is the site of "a nonexpressive totality" formed by drives and rhythms that necessarily exceed subjectivity. Kristeva borrows the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* to name this pre-linguistic ground of language and knowledge. As she suggests:

> We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate articulation from a disposition that already depends on representation, lends itself to phenomenological, spatial intuition, and gives rise to a geometry. Although our theoretical description of the chora is itself part of the discourse of representation that offers it as evidence, the chora, as rupture . . . precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. Our discourse—all discourse—moves with and against the chora in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it.

See *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia UP, 1984): 26. Derrida's non-concept of *différance* similarly exceeds the textual universe it makes possible; as the "structural unconsciousness" of language understood in the broadest sense of the term, it is precisely that which is unknowable and unsayable, neither human nor in-human but the unarticulated ground against

which all such oppositions appear and become available to knowledge. See "Signature Event Context," *Glyph* 1 (1977): 192.

12 *Poetry, Language, Thought* 197.

13 See note 11.

14 *"Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr Nichts?"* Heidegger asks this question four times in the opening page of *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale UP, 1959): 1. "Beings" is a notorious point of difficulty for translators of Heidegger; Manheim's translation of *Seiendes* is "essents."

15 I evoke Heidegger's term *Graben* [abyss], which he uses to describe the unthinkable pre-ontological "distance" between being and that which enables being to be. See "The Anaximander Fragment," in *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David F. Krell and Frank F. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975): 19.

16 I use the term in its (German) philosophical sense: *Indifferenz*, meaning the inert ground of difference and identity. See also Gasché, "In-difference to Philosophy: de Man on Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche," *Reading de Man Reading*, eds. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989).

17 Published in English as *Words upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure.*

18 De Man notes that

Saussure hesitated a great deal in his choice of a terminology by which to designate the distribution of the verbal unit which, he firmly believed, underlay the texts on which he was working. He considered "anagram," then stated a preference for "paragram," which implies no restriction in the space over which the key word is dispersed. Elsewhere, he stated his preference for "hypogram" (sub-text or, better, infra text) . . . (*RT* 37).

19 Cited in Starobinski, *Words Upon Words* 105-106.

20 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974): 60.

21 De Man's notion of "the senseless power of positional language" receives one of its fullest treatments in "Shelley Disfigured." Typically, de Man leaves the discussion of the philosophical context for his theory of language up to others to fill in. See, for example, Rodolphe Gasché, "'Setzung' and 'Übersetzung:' Notes on Paul de Man," *Diacritics* 11 (1981): 36-57.

22 "Undecidability," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 132.

23 "Humanizing de Man" *Diacritics* 19.2 (1989): 44.

24 Redfield, "Humanizing de Man" 44.

25 Sylvère Lotringer argues that "the *Anagrams* weren't published: linguistics was born of that exclusion." See "The Game of the Name," *Diacritics* 3 (Summer 1973): 8. Although de Man cites Lotringer approvingly, he disagrees on how Saussurian linguistics is related to the anagrammatic research. "Rather than a 'mere' repression," de Man argues, "Saussure's retheorization of the question in the *Cours* can more charitably be seen as the insistence of theoretical discourse in the face of the dangers it reveals" (*HI* 37).

26 Saussure's research behaviour is described thus by Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1988): 224.

[27] Roudiez is cited by Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* 256n.

[28] See "*The Martyrology* as Paragram," *Open Letter*, Sixth Series, Nos. 5-6 (Summer-Fall): 196-197.

[29] "*The Martyrology* as Paragram" 196.

[30]
            Words strain,
    Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
    Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
    Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
    Will not stay still.

           Collected Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1974): 194.

[31] Stephen Scobie, *bpNichol: What History Teaches* 127. In what is arguably the most theoretically sophisticated discussion of the textual strategies characterizing *The Martyrology*, Steve McCaffery similarly affirms the poem's "wordplay," but traces it to the Jena Romantics, whose notion of "Witz" acted as a sub-version of rational theories of knowledge. At one point McCaffery concedes that this play "commit[s] writing unavoidably . . . to the *transphenomenal* paradox of an unpresentability that serves as a necessary condition of writing's capacity to present." (See "*The Martyrology* as Paragram" 195-196. Emphasis mine.) My argument is that the unpresentable transphenomenal—exactly de Man's "materiality of the letter"—is more radically subversive than even McCaffery is willing to allow, since it starkly refuses conceptualization of all kinds.

[32] "Semiotics/Semiotext: The Texture of a Weaving Song," *Semiotexte* 1 (1975): 82. Godzich's essay appears in a double number of *Semiotexte* devoted to the linguistic implications of Saussure's research on anagrams.

[33] "Semiotics/Semiotext: The Texture of a Weaving Song" 82.

[34] The "pain" spoken by language recalls Kevin Newmark's remarks that language "always and everywhere signifies a 'wailing' over its disaster." See "Resisting, Responding," in *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, eds. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, Thomas Keenan (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989): 347.

[35] Moreover, hypogrammatic play can be put to political work. See, for example, Mary Daly's deciphering of "the rapist" in "therapist," in *Gyn/Ecology* (London: Women's Press, 1979).

[36] See especially Letter Twenty-six and Twenty-seven of *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans Reginald Snell (New York: Ungar, 1965): 124-140.

[37] "*The Martyrology* as Paragram" 193.

[38] Stephen Scobie makes this identification in *bpNichol: What History Teaches* 132.

[39] *bpNichol: What History Teaches* 132.

[40] Lear: . . . .
           Judicious punishment! 't was this flesh begot
           Those pelican daughters.
   Edgar: Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill.
           Halloo, halloo, loo, loo!
              (*King Lear* 3.4.74-76)
Edgar's words simply echo the sounds of Lear's. As the Fool rightly observes about this non-conversation, "This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen."

[41] My remarks here paraphrase Redfield's summary of de Man's argument in "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant:"

> The (impossible) Kantian eye, the *Augenschein* that de Man evokes at the end of this essay, sees the sign non-teleologically or "formally," and under this "stony gaze" the sign fragments into the mere possibility of signification: "meaning-producing tropes are replaced by the fragmentation of words into syllables or finally letters" [*PMK* 144]. And to "see" a "letter" non-teleologically would be to see it in its materiality: not as part of an alphabet, or as the instrument of a sign, but as the blank, contradictory, necessary impossibility of meaningless form.

See "Humanizing de Man" 45.

[42] "After Reading the Chronology" 339.

[43] De Man writes:

> When you spell a word you say a certain number of meaningless letters, which then come together in the word, but in each of the letters the word is not present. The two are absolutely independent of each other. What is being named here as the disjunction between grammar and meaning, *Wort* and *Satz*, is the materiality of the letter: the independence, or the way in which the letter can disrupt the ostensible stable meaning of a sentence and introduce in it a slippage by means of which that meaning disappears, evanesces, and by means of which all control over that meaning is lost (TT 89).

[44] *Decomposing Figures: Rhetorical Readings in the Romantic Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986): 105.

[45] Book 2, *The Martyrology*: Books 1 & 2 (Toronto: Coach House, 1977).

[46] See Jonathan Culler, "Reading Lyric," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 104.

[47] "The Game of the Name," 4. "*Saint-Axe*" is a bilingual pun on "syntax."

[48] I am grateful to Dr. Gabriel Moyal, Department of French, McMaster University, for hearing these words beneath Lotringer's words, and for pointing them out to me.

[49] "In-difference to Philosophy: de Man on Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche" 265. As Gasché argues, a reading for the *texte brut*, "one that focuses on the nonphenomenal and autonomous potential of language, rather than producing noumena, exhibits a fragmentary chaos of meaningless linguistic matter, repetitive mechanical rules, and absolutely opaque linguistic events" (282).

[50] Hans-Jost Frey is particularly cogent on the "starting" of language:

> Where discourse begins, it can—before diverting attention from itself to what it says—be known as an act of linguistic positing. This act cannot be derived. It is unconnected and abrupt. This means: it does not signify. Discourse as act is the presupposition for everything that can be said, but this act itself remains outside the range of language. It has no communicable meaning. That language is, is not comprehensible. That discourse takes place is, from the beginning, what it cannot be done with; it is, so to speak, the extralinguisticality of discourse that, as its meaningless facticity, disturbs the meaning as whose vehicle it occurs. ("Undecidability," 132.)

[51] The "uncontrollable power of the letter as inscription" challenges and subverts the intelligibility of language at every turn, a fact put to me when the title for an earlier version of this paper was misprinted in a conference brochure as "Phenomenality and Marteriality in *The Martyrology*." The question is: what is the signifying status of that accidental "r" in "Marteriality?" Reading the misprint for the first time, I was struck by the force of the hermeneutical desire which its entirely unforeseen appearance triggered: the extra "r" made a pun, of course, out of "Martyr," and this phonic repetition augured in my mind the semantic connections underwriting my own paper between the phenomenal transfiguration of language's materiality and the game of the saint's name. But to think this way—and there is probably no other way to think—is again to have demonstrated the profoundly familiarizing thrust of our reading habits, post-modernist or otherwise. The text echoes itself: I hear, or think I hear a pattern or repetition even though it manifestly occurs in the absence of any intentionality or referent. That the random introduction of the "r" leads to meaning effects of any kind is obviously the result of a retrospective imposition on what is an utterly senseless occurrence, whose occurrence as such defies description, since to do so—even as I have done here now simply by calling it "senseless"—is already to have initiated the inevitable process by which the letter as pure inscription is phenomenalized, made readable and thus available to the understanding.

[52] I use this word to play on Nichol's fascination with the lives of his saints. But the word also recalls de Man, who employs it to describe the object of reading strategies which draw attention to how the materiality of the letter functions as a sub-version of language:

> They read the [text] . . . from the perspective of a pure language . . .
> that would be entirely freed of the illusion of meaning—pure form
> if you want; and in doing so they bring to light a dismembrance, a
> de-canonization which was already there in the original from the
> beginning (*TT* 84).

[53] De Man's translation of Saussure appears in "Hypogram and Inscription" 37.

[54] See "The Pata of Letter Feet, or, The English Written Character as Medium for Poetry," *Open Letter*, Sixth Series, No.1 (Spring 1985): 82, 83.

[55] "Resisting, Responding" 347.

[56] I paraphrase de Man's crucial formulation: "language posits and language means (since it articulates) but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reiterate (or reflect) it in its reconfirmed falsehood" (*SD* 117-118).

[57] Steven Scobie, *bpNichol: What History Teaches* 117.

[58] In a country whose national criticism necessarily articulates what is distinctly Canadian about its literature, it is little wonder that de Man therefore remains mostly unread. Why de Man's severe form of deconstruction has been overshadowed by other contemporary theoretical models in Canadian post-modernist criticism would need to be the subject of another essay. But by way of a beginning, see my "Disfiguring the Post-Modern," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 26 (1990): 75-86.

[59] "Preface: 'Along the line of Smoky Hills': further Steps towards an Ecological Poetics," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 26 (1990): vi.

[60] *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984): 493.

61 As de Man argues, Shelley's accidental drowning, which halted the composition of *The Triumph of Life* literally in mid-verse, disfigures the text in a way that allows us to think (about) the relation of the "senseless power of positional language" to that which emerges from this power as readable, phenomenal language. "At this point," de Man argues, "figuration and cognition are actually interrupted by an event which shapes the text but which is not present in its represented or articulated meaning. It may seem a freak of chance to have a text thus moulded by an actual occurrence, yet the reading of *The Triumph of Life* establishes that this mutilated textual model exposes the wound of a fracture that lies hidden in all texts" (*SD* 120).