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The Feminine, The Poetic, And The Sacred In BPNichol's The Martyrology And Journal

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THE FEMININE, THE POETIC, AND THE SACRED IN BPNICHOL'S *THE
MARTYROLOGY AND JOURNAL*

by

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in the Joint Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture

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The Feminine, the Poetic, and the Sacred in bpNichol's *The Martyrology* and *Journal*. Natalya

Androsova, Doctor of Philosophy

in the Joint Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture, Ryerson and York

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Abstract

My goal is not to analyse the sacred – to analyse it is to kill it. The objective is only to explore different ways of approaching the sacred through looking deeply at the nature of poetic language. In our contemporary society, the sacred is the other. And so is the feminine. Our culture often rejects these modes of experience, but poetic practice gives them both a time and a space. My overall argument is that poetic practice creates an approach, a site and a possibility for the sacred to manifest itself phenomenologically by breaking through from the other realm into human experience. Poetic practice holds an intention, creates a direction, a dimension, a state that can approach the experience of the sacred and honour it, be open to it, invite it and allow the subject to suspend the habitual control and instead adopt a surrender mode. Thus, poetic practice itself becomes a sacred activity that teaches us about different kinds of knowledge, experience and insight and invites us to experience a different mode of being in the world, in language, with ourselves, and with each other. Instead of detachment and alienation that permeate our culture, instead of separation from and the resulting objectification of nature, poetic consciousness offers us a more primal mode of being that pre-modern man used to call sacred.

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Dedication

To Dad

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Introduction

Exigency

Our modern culture is plagued by anxiety, alienation, and the delusion of the God-complex. We are entering a dangerous zone of absolute power and absolute control, of absolute totalizing grids and absolute surveillance. Everything that is filled with primal vitality is suspect. The all-pervading utilitarian technocratic thinking suppresses all other modes of being in the world, so the feminine, poetic, and the sacred are mostly rejected by our culture as having no value. Such narrow utilitarian logic takes a form of dangerous reductionism that persistently permeates our culture. What rapidly gains urgency is the need to find alternatives to reducing human beings to utilitarian functions and disembodied sets of data, and to reducing language to a set of rigid definitions that are closed for questioning or renegotiation.

Mircea Eliade explains that nonreligious men have existed in all cultures since the beginning of time, but in our age, the entire existential situation has reached a new and critical level:

But it is only in the modern societies of the West that nonreligious man has developed fully. Modern nonreligious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself as the sole subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence. ... Man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god. (*The Sacred and the Profane* 202-203)

The crisis we are facing can be accounted for by various factors – economic, political, financial, ecological, cultural, etc. It can also be addressed on all those separate levels, but perhaps, a more appropriate solution may reveal itself through a change in our understanding of the problem. A shift of perspective, if you will. Can this crisis be a result of a certain way of thinking? By exposing the deeply embedded mental patterns underlying our cultural unconscious, we can recognize them and therefore change them. Looking deeply at poetic practice allows us to investigate questions about human consciousness from a unique angle and find new answers.

Objective and Approach

The nature of this dissertation is more exploratory than argumentative. The goal of this work is to open up for discussion the themes of feminine writing and the sacred, prominent in Nichol's work, rather than to shape a convincing argument about gender and writing based on precise definitions of the feminine and the sacred. I want to slip free of the phallogocentric stance of using language to argue readers into a certain position and instead encourage them to participate in exploring these texts. This approach is consistent with the subject of the dissertation.

This dissertation is drawing on the philosophy of the sacred, critical theory, *écriture féminine*, cultural studies, literary theory, semiotics, and psychoanalysis. As a balancing act between interpreting and experiencing the poetic process of composition, this study employs both hermeneutics and phenomenology. Most importantly, a close reading of Nichol's poetic and theoretic texts will provide a rich context for the discussion of the above questions.

Key terms

In an effort to break away from the phallogocentric use of language, it would be inappropriate to start with precise and rigid definitions of the feminine and the sacred and apply a rigorous philosophical analysis to persuade the reader into adopting a certain view of Nichol's work. Ideas I am working with are more fluid and open.

Even though each of the three key concepts –the feminine, poetic, and the sacred – is extremely complex and deserves a careful consideration in a separate chapter, it is crucial to

briefly introduce some context for these concepts here. I will develop them and will return to them over the course of the dissertation, but at this point, I will start making some provisional comments about their nature, while being aware that these themes have fluid boundaries. It is important to emphasize right away that in this work, the poetic principle of language is not restricted to poetry, the feminine mode of being is not exclusive to women, and the sacred is not limited to the religious context.

Rather, the feminine, poetic, and the sacred are understood more as organizing principles invisibly present in our individual and collective psyche. They are made visible in the physical world through various manifestations, for example, speech and thoughts, actions, cultural norms, works of art, etc.

For the purposes of this project, I am mostly interested in their manifestation through radical poetic practice, which I approach phenomenologically, using Nichol's poems as pointers. In particular, I am interested in investigating the phenomenological intimations that Nichol's poems offer about the state of consciousness that emerges through his practice of radical poetic writing. Nichol's texts teach us that for him, poetic consciousness is a complex combination of heightened multi-sensory perception and openness to the sacred mystery of language and life, as well as an intuition of a transcendent yet intimate alterity at the heart of the human experience.

Every poet goes through his/her own unique process of writing and experiences a different form of poetic consciousness. What stands out in Nichol's work, however, is a sense that poetic consciousness is marked by surrendering to the presence of otherness in language. Language takes the writer to the sacred and becomes the sacred activity in its own right. According to the hints that Nichol's works offer, during the process of radical poetic writing, the

poet enters into a poetic consciousness that is characterized by aligning with a more primordial form of embodied perception that is closer to the unconscious and is prior to thought, prior to language, and prior to the separation from the all-embracing union with the totality of being.

Thus, Nichol's poetic practice is based on certain attitude, a mode of being, a particular state of consciousness – a poetic consciousness –and becomes a sacred activity in its own right. It is connected with the unconscious and strives for fusion with another reality, a radically other reality of the sacred. Nichol's poetry also reveals other forms of knowledge that mark the appearance of the sacred – for example, insight, revelation, a hierophany or an epiphany. In addition, we learn from his texts that poetic process can be seen as an ethical practice of sacrificing the subject's ego, as the poet gives up his perception of "I" as a separate object and merges with the totality of the sacred order.

Even though some operative definitions are necessary in order to approach the subjects of interest, I would like to emphasize that this project is not looking for closures, but for possible openings. Thus, in this work, poetic principle is not only limited to the genre of poetry. It refers to the literary texts that connect the writing subject and the reader to the semiotic forces of language, to the unconscious, and to the feminine sacred part of our psyche that Kristeva has termed *chora*. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva defines the concept of the *chora* as "a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (25).

Based on the theory of *écriture féminine*, the term feminine in this work is not restricted to the female gender. It is a general psychic principle available to both genders, which reveals itself through such qualities as openness, fluidity, instability, fusion, and relationality. This

dynamic principle resists closure, stasis or definitions and points toward totality and pure potentiality.

Nichol's texts reveal a connection between his spiritual quest and the quest for a new form of language that is akin to the new more feminine form of language explored by the theorists of *écriture féminine*. There is a clear parallel between a writing self, emerging from my understanding of Nichol's work, and Kristeva's subject "en-proces," a writing subject in process, on trial and in crisis; a writing subject whose symbolic unity is subjected to the violence of the semiotic forces that disrupt this unity and continuity.

It is intriguing to find a connection between the ideas of *écriture féminine* and a male writer and thus, to be forced to look deeper at the ideas of feminine and masculine. I believe that there are different types of experience, and one way we could characterize them is by calling them more feminine or more masculine, without resorting to a pernicious sort of essentialism. These principles are simply helpful in naming certain types of experience but not in exclusionary terms. After all, Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* relies on her analysis of Stéphane Mallarmé and Comte de Lautréamont. Her other work also turns to the analysis of James Joyce and other male writers. So, connecting Nichol's poetry with *écriture féminine* allows us to complicate and at the same time relax the relationship between gender and the feminine dimension of language. More importantly, it allows us to dispel the charges of essentialism often associated with *écriture féminine*. Even though the logic of the feminine signification is drawn from the phenomenological experience of being a woman, this logic is available to both genders and can be discovered and experienced in each one of us.

Thus, this project submits a certain cultural idea of the self to investigation. One of the striking features I have found in Nichol's work is the shifting identity of the writing self. Nichol's writing self seems protean, labile, and ever changing and stands in opposition to the idea of a fixed, stable, enduring, ongoing self. Thus, it appears to align with the more feminine self proposed by *écriture féminine*, the self, marked by mutability, rather than fixity, by multiplicity and heterogeneity, rather than unity and uniformity.

The sacred is used to describe another dimension of reality that is radically other and, in fact, is the opposite of the everyday reality of the profane. Since the sacred refers to the realm of invisible reality, it manifests itself in the profane world through a radical change of perception in certain states of consciousness. There is much debate as to the nature of such reality – ontological or psychological – and hence, many different traditions of approaching and describing it. These approaches will be delineated in great detail the next chapter in order to gain better understanding of how we relate to this realm.

There are few spaces in our culture for any of the above three principles to manifest themselves or to thrive. The practice of poetic writing offers a breathing space (both metaphorically and literally) for all three principles to reveal themselves and to meet. In their interconnectedness, they empower each other and reveal new forms of knowledge and new possibilities of meaning-making available to our culture. I am especially interested in the power of poetic language to reveal the repressed feminine and sacred elements and to (re-)integrate them back into our individual and collective cultural consciousness. Poetic practice is a powerful medium that reveals the strange and the uncanny, the taboo and the sacred, and shocks us into awe or terror before we are able to process, intellectualize, and rationalize our experience of it. Poetic language presents us with paradoxes, contradictions and mystery by asking powerful

questions: Who is speaking? What is it that makes ordinary language fail? And what is it that both escapes language, but is still powerfully present in it in an invisible way?

Questions

The questions I address in this work fall into several clusters:

1. Who are we? What is the nature of the self? How do we define ourselves through language? Does a modern human being have any relationship with the sacred? How can language help us enrich our understanding of who we are?
2. How do we communicate with each other? How do we approach the other? What is the place of otherness in our culture, and of such alternative modes of being as the feminine and the sacred?
3. What are the limits of human experience, of perception, of consciousness? What are the limits of language in expressing experience? What is found at the limits of language? What new forms of knowledge and modes of being can be revealed through poetic consciousness?

These questions are not only urgent, persisting and relevant to our culture – they are crucial for our survival. We have impoverished our understanding of human nature to a point of danger. Thus, one of the wider cultural implications of this project is to expand our vision of a human being and of human society by investigating principles embedded in poetic consciousness. Through the analysis of connections between poetic consciousness, the feminine and the sacred in language and culture, my project aims to contribute to the field of knowledge in

the form of a deeper and more expanded understanding of human nature, the nature of language, ultimately striving to help us recover the feminine, poetic, and sacred dimensions of our culture.

Thesis

Eliade's description of the sacred rituals, Kristeva's analysis of the poetic process and Nichol's poetry together point to an organic connection between the feminine, poetic, and the sacred. There are obvious parallels between certain psychic and symbolic transformations taking place in the self who is immersed in the mystical state of consciousness and the writing subject immersed in the poetic consciousness. A change of consciousness is evoked by a similar process, in which a firm grip on the solidity of everyday reality, of the objective phenomenal world is loosened, and with it, the solidity of the subject itself. A maelstrom of the existential transformation takes a hold of the subject and throws him into a symbolic cycle of death and renewal, destruction and rebirth. Each moment of symbolic deconstruction offers a moment of the renewal of agency and, thus, encompasses a potential for transformation and empowerment. This is an opportunity to renew the relationship with oneself and the other, and develop a relationship with *the wholly Other* without defining it, but through experiencing it. Every moment is a chance to die and start anew. This process has a feminine quality to it as it asks for openness to the transcendent mystery that is larger than us and even though it can be perceived, remains unknowable.

A radical poetic practice challenges common everyday patterns of meaning making by questioning the symbolic process and introducing elements of the semiotic disposition that shatter the symbolic order of language, thus uncovering the untapped potential for healing and

renewal of the subject's existing symbolic cultural contracts. In their attempts to reconnect us to the repressed elements of culture – the feminine, poetic, and the sacred – artists provide an alternative to the modern technocratic paradigm. To heal the modern ailment of alienation and isolation by reconnecting us to our selves, each other and the repressed elements of culture, they offer us the possibility of catharsis and rebirth through a poetic practice.

Thus, artists and poets have taken on a very important task of healing the culture by transforming the way we perceive ourselves and the other. In their work, they engage the realm of radical otherness and thus reveal the way we engage with alterity within and without. They expose the unconscious cultural mechanisms of repression, abjection, scapegoating and sacrifice. Through their work, artists and poets have the power to wake us up from our *narcissus narcosis* and show us how to deal with the invisible forces of culture. They bring to light and heal those aspects of the individual and collective psyche that have remained hidden in the shadow. They redefine the notions of subjectivity and introduce the possibility of alternative modes of being, experiencing, and communicating.

Scope

Although the relationship between our utilitarian culture and the sacred often seems to be non-existent, there are reasons to believe that the sacred survives. Generations of artists have shared a passion for and a commitment to engaging with the sacred mode of being. In critical literature, poetry and the sacred have been compared and likened to each other, but for reasons different than in this work. The basis for previous comparisons was anything from similar themes to comparing the role of the poet to that of the priest, etc. This study focuses on the parallel between the concepts of the sacred, as explained by Mircea Eliade, and poetic practice,

as defined by Julia Kristeva. Eliade's classical accounts of the sacred rituals parallel the transformations of the subject reported by some radical modern writers, ultimately suggesting that the practice of poetic writing can be a powerful practice of engaging the sacred. I am relying on the writings of a revolutionary experimental Canadian poet, bpNichol, to illuminate this relationship between the feminine, poetic, and the sacred.

The first distinct quality of Nichol's oeuvre is its sprawling diversity of forms. Nichol enjoyed experimenting with a variety of genres, such as concrete and visual poems, sound poems, flip poems, and "ideopomes," prose novels, performance work, cartoons and comics, etc. He produced books, recordings, envelopes of visual poems and objects, and a multitude of journals, notebooks, letters and theoretical essays. But even though Nichol enjoyed the exercise of experimenting with a wide variety of writing forms, one cannot miss the special place of *The Martyrology* among his other works. What stands out is his exceptional devotion and dedication to this project that begins in 1967 with the composition of "The Martyrology of Saint And" and ends with his untimely death in 1988. It contains a major thrust of his work and in many ways exemplifies his writing. The length of the book and the duration of the project allowed Nichol to develop and continually crystallize, decrystallize and re-crystallize his ideas on writing over the span of two decades. It seems to be both a sustained experiment and an ongoing practice of consolidating of his many ideas on writing: "In those early years the first problem was to get my chops together, which I think I've done. Now the problem is to keep pushing at my own limitations and attempting to uncover and undermine my own developing clichés. It's a long process" (Nichol, qtd. in Miki 339).

The language of *The Martyrology* and *Journal* reveals a striking similarity to the language of *écriture féminine*. Their form is akin to that of a poetic journal where the author

writes to explicitly show how writing is written. Both *The Martyrology* and *Journal* can be seen as an exercise in life writing, a genre that has a special importance in women's literature. The act of writing involves paying attention to a succession of evolving forms in the short span of a piece. A form evolves and is quickly left behind to be surpassed by a new form that evolves in the next moment. Thus, the text itself has a feminine character, and, like a feminine subject, is in process, on trial, in crisis.

Gaps

There are very few writers who are committed to bringing the feminine and the sacred back into the cultural arena. While religious states themselves have been brought out into the open by Rudolph Otto and William James, and the imagery of these states has been somewhat addressed by Jungian theory, the modalities of language associated with the above states have been mostly ignored by mainstream research. Yet, these states have been extensively drawn upon by mystics and poets who have tapped into their noetic nature. This dissertation will fill in the existing gap and will advance research in the area of literary and poetic theory – more specifically, poetic practice will be considered as a locus of articulating new concepts of subjectivity, language, knowledge, culture, the feminine and the sacred. I am particularly interested in arriving at a deep understanding of the similarities in the psychological and existential transformations of the subject undergoing the experience of the sacred and of the subject involved in poetic practice.

This project's intended contribution is to recover the poetic, the feminine and the sacred aspects of experience and expression for our culture. Nichol's revolutionary work is exemplary

in its dedication to reclaiming these three aspects of being for our culture, but this dimension of his writing has been grossly overlooked by critics. Unfortunately, one of Canada's most prolific and innovative poets remains a brilliant yet under-researched figure in Canadian literature. This project strives to fill the existing gap in critical literature.

For Nichol, writing is a sacred activity and reveals itself to be a combination of belief, faith and action. His passion for and commitment to his relationship with the sacred is impossible to miss, and the connection he makes between a spiritual quest and searching for a new, more feminine form of language deserves more attention than it has received in the existing scholarship. Therefore, this project enters the discussion to bring new understanding to the complex relationship between a poetic form of language, the feminine and the sacred.

There have been only a few major studies of the sacred in the work of Nichol – Susan Billingham's book, *Language and the Sacred in bpNichol's The Martyrology*, Carl Peters' dissertation, *No/Tation: The Practice of the Sacred in bpNichol's Poetics*, and Brian Henderson's dissertation, *Radical Poetics: Dada, bpNichol and the Horsemen*. The remaining criticism seems to fail to address this dimension of his work, focusing instead on more literary or "secular" readings of Nichol's texts (Peters 4, 11). In one of the major studies of the relationship between language and the sacred in Nichol's long poem *The Martyrology*, Billingham does a remarkable job eliciting a number of language "routes to the sacred" from Nichol's work. However, I believe that her analysis can be expanded. In this study I will address the sacred in relation to the poetic process of composition described by Nichol himself. There are aspects of this relationship that were not considered in Billingham's work or, perhaps, intentionally excluded from it as lying beyond the scope of her objectives and interest, but which will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between poetic language and the sacred.

Peters' dissertation also focuses on Nichol's idea of the sacred and is courageous in proposing a number of bold claims regarding this dimension of Nichol's writing that has been denied by others. But in supporting his arguments, Peters' claims often remain insufficiently supported by textual evidence, so the reader is forced to establish the connections between the poetic text and Peters' proposed arguments on her own. This tendency to leave his claims unsupported by sufficient explanation hurts Peters' otherwise interesting and provocative work. Also, the scope of Peters' work is mainly the system of notation created by Nichol, which is radically different from the scope of the present project. A more careful analysis of the relationship between Nichol's poetic practice and the sacred is necessary.

Henderson's dissertation gives special attention to the philosophy and psychology of Nichol's language and places his work within the Hermetic tradition, focusing specifically on the notions of presence and absence, as well as a simultaneous emptiness and fullness of language. It proposes a view of poetry as faith and discerns "a Kabbalistic relation between world and word" (vii). It also analyses the alchemical and geomantic dimensions of Nichol's texts and proposes that a poet is a medium for the voice of the Other.

Thus, I must acknowledge right away that by treating Nichol's writing in connection with the themes of feminine writing and the sacred, I am only dealing with one possible approach among many. Other approaches to his work are undoubtedly relevant and interesting. However, my approach is unique in bringing to light Nichol's ongoing "research" into the form of language and its relationship to the search for the sacred within language. These are especially evident in his long poem *The Martyrology* and his prose novel *Journal*, which will provide a foundation for the present discussion.

Chapter outline

This dissertation starts by describing the problem and the exigency of the current existential situation, defines the scope of the project and explains its significance. It then proposes a thesis and clarifies the theoretical framework and the key terms that will be crucial for this study. Chapter 1 approaches the concept of the sacred other(ness) in both an individual psyche and culture in general. The following chapter engages with Kristeva's project of reviving the sacrificed feminine other by introducing the ideas of *chora* and the abject. Kristeva questioned, complicated and challenged the conventional story of the sacred that has dominated the Western intellectual tradition for centuries. She has revised our cultural understanding of the sacred by connecting it to the feminine. Moreover, she exposed the mechanisms of sacrifice of the feminine and the maternal on two levels – in culture and in the individual psyche. Chapter 3 investigates the parallels between the ideas of *écriture féminine* and the way Nichol's writing makes feminine a vividly present and privileged aspect of his poetic form. Chapter 4 turns to exploring the unique characteristics of poetic language as the other of ordinary language. The next chapter describes the similarities between the poetic process of composition and sacred rituals by looking closely at the transformative mechanisms inherent in both. Chapter 6 demonstrates how Nichol's writing reveals radical transformations of the writing subject and connects them to the idea of sacred rituals. The following chapter shows how poetic process can itself be considered a sacred activity. Chapter 8 explains how poetic practice can have powerful implications in redefining the established contemporary literary practices of writing and reading. In Chapter 9, Nichol's texts are read in the context of the general and restrictive economies to articulate how poetic practice becomes an agent of change for the economy of thought. Finally, in Chapter 10, the principles of alignment and attunement to the sacred, inherent in the poetic

process, are investigated. The project ends with a Conclusions chapter, which summarizes the main arguments proposed by this study and engages with their wider cultural implications.

Formatting

A special note must be made about the reference style of Nichol's poetic quotations. Because of Nichol's careful attention to the visual aspects of poetry, it is crucial to preserve all the original visual elements of his poetry even if it means modifying some MLA rules for formatting quotations, so exceptions to the MLA rules were made in order to honour the original form of the poem. Some examples of such modifications include the absence of punctuation at the end of a quotation because there is no punctuation mark in the original poem, an unusual use of capitalization (for example, using a lower case "i" to denote the first person singular or using all or some capitals in a word), modified spelling, the ampersand sign instead of the word "and," underlining, and a use of parentheses, to name a few. Also, I tried my best to keep all the visual arrangement of variable spaces between words and between lines as close as possible to the original. Because of the importance of the visual form in Nichol's poetry, another exception was made. According to the MLA guidelines, a short quotation from poetry that is shorter than three lines is supposed to be incorporated into a paragraph with line breaks marked by a forward slash. However, because of the crucial importance of visual space in Nichol's poetry, if such short quotations had some special spacing, to preserve it, the quotation was treated as a block quotation and given a separate space on the page.

Due to the absence of pagination in *The Martyrology (TM)*, no page numbers could be provided, but the reference note includes all the other reference elements that could be cited. For

example, the book number in Arabic numerals (e.g., Bk. 1) is followed by the section number (if there is one in the original) in Roman numerals (e.g., III), and is then followed by an abbreviated subsection title in quotation marks (e.g., “Saint Reat” instead of “Saint Reat and the Four Winds of the World” and “Scenes” instead of “Scenes from the Lives of the Saints”). So, a sample reference might look like this: (*TM*, Bk. 1, II, “Saint Reat”).

Chapter 1. Exploring the Sacred Other

From Eliade's seminal work *The Sacred and the Profane*, we learn that "the first possible definition of the sacred is that it is the opposite of the profane" (10). He explains that the sacred is a realm of being that can manifest itself in the profane world through a revelation or a hierophany, which Eliade defines as "a mysterious act – the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that doesn't belong to our world" (11).

This chapter investigates various theoretical approaches to such moments of hierophany, during which an opening emerges into another reality – the reality of the sacred. The purpose of this chapter is to inquire into the questions of the ontological and psychological nature of the sacred reality, to situate the concept of the sacred in various existing scholarly traditions in order to lay down a theoretic foundation and rich context for further investigation. Some of the

juxtaposed perspectives include those that are phenomenological and cognitive, immanent and transcendent, psychological and ontological.

When human consciousness is suddenly faced with something that is outside of its capacity to comprehend and, yet, something that can be apprehended as present, such encounter is powerful enough to cause a radical change in perception. A person is shocked into a new level of perception. What often follows is a mystical moment of suspended cognition but heightened perception that happens as a response of consciousness to the shock of being confronted with the reality of absolute unknowable alterity. Being faced with the manifestation of this other order often results in a radical transformation of consciousness, its restructuring, and possible insight.

I am claiming that the experience of radical alterity constitutes a similarity between poetic and mystical consciousness and is central to both. Both kinds of consciousness are based on the idea of surrender and suspension of the rational faculties of the mind sending us to the realm of the unconscious and the senses.

Eliade says in the modern world our relationship with the sacred has been cut off but remains hidden in our unconscious (“The Sacred and the Modern Artist” 82), but is the sacred reality itself relegated to our unconscious? This chapter inquires into the locus of that which is beyond our understanding. Is it located in our psyche or in the real world outside of the psyche? In other words, is the sacred only a psychological projection or a reflection of the relationship with the reality transcendent to the self? There are different, even contrasting views among the scholars of this alterity. All of them acknowledge the presence of radical alterity, but locate it in different places.

Psychological perspective

Freud proposed that it is the alterity within identity, not beyond it, that produces an uncanny effect in the psyche. In his frequently cited essay, “The Uncanny,” Freud explored the presence of an alterity within identity that is beyond our understanding and causes an internal doubt as to the unity and stability of the subject. It is a terrifying experience of an inescapable relation to the radical otherness within. The uncanny, according to Freud, refers to “the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread” (123). He further defines it as “something that should have remained hidden but has now come into the open” (148). In his analysis, the uncanny is connected to primeval horror and infantile anxiety that is hardly ever overcome. What was meant to be hidden eventually emerges. It can emerge with a vengeance. This alterity within threatens to manifest as otherness we do not comprehend, nor acknowledge. It sometimes breaks through as a violence that we try to suppress, but that emerges anyway through the drives or sensory experiences that bypass consciousness.

Freud tells us that “an uncanny effect often arises where the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary” (150). This radical difference cannot be reduced to an explanation, but only experienced. So, when a human being is faced with a manifestation of this wholly other reality – in herself or in another human being – she experiences an uncanny terror. For example, in *The Uncanny*, Freud asserts that a surprising manifestation of unusual forces in a normal person can distort an otherwise familiar image of a fellow human being, and a living person can be perceived as uncanny (150). And if this other reality emerges from the depths of our own psyche, the psyche undergoes a traumatic destructuralization and then, a restructuralization. More specifically, something that has been hidden in the self emerges and becomes apparent,

while everything that seemed stable and whole in the self becomes fluid, fragmented, pulverized, or lost altogether.

Thus, psychoanalysis proposed the existence of a radically different psychic reality that had not been recognized and remains hidden to normal everyday consciousness. Freud's commitment to the exploration of the totality of the mind placed the unconscious at the heart of the psychic world and drew attention to the radical irrationality of certain experiences. Still, he did not go beyond psychological explanations and refused to consider the possibility of a transcendent reality.

Complicating the story

Generations of thinkers have continued to theorize this uncanny strangeness within that constitutes an invisible, yet crucial, part of our psyche, giving it different names, developing a unique vocabulary for speaking about this phenomenon, but they have taken more risks than Freud and posited more expanded explanations of this feeling of the uncanny. Carl Jung, for example, developed his theory of archetypal psychology in order to challenge the mainstream psychoanalytic approach. He maintained that altered psychic experiences can be interpreted within a mystical or transcendent framework, thus complicating the purely psychological approach to altered states of mind, moving them closer to the boundary where internal reality meets external one.

In addition, James and Otto contributed greatly to depathologizing and further developing the concept of religious experience. James attributed great value to the reality the personal psychological transformations that take place during these revelatory states and emphasized their

potential to overturn the power of institutional faith and instead give more agency to the individual experience. In *The Idea of the Holy*, which has now become a classical study of the experience of the numinous, Rudolf Otto exposed the “bias of rationalization” (3) and proposed a new approach to the study of the sacred – an inquiry into the non-rational affective factors of the religious experience. Later, in the 1960s, other theorists, such as R.D. Laing, proposed to treat these altered states of consciousness not as a break-down, as tradition had taught us, but rather as a break-through. In what follows, I specifically focus on the two key approaches to this seemingly inaccessible place in the human psyche – the Jungian concept of the *shadow* and Kristeva’s notion of *strangers to ourselves*.

Jung not only builds on Freudian theory, but he proposes his own theory of total personality, or the *self*. Just like the Freudian psyche, the Jungian *self* includes parts that are not known to our consciousness, but our unawareness does not make these hidden aspects any less present or powerful. The one part of our total personality that is key to this project is the *shadow*. Jung introduces the *shadow* as the dark immoral aspect of our total personality that is dangerous since it is extremely hard to recognize or control. Moreover, the *shadow* is present in us from the very beginning as part of the collective unconscious. It is, in Jungian words, “the most accessible” of the archetypes, but at the same time, it has “the most frequent and the most disturbing influence on the ego” (“Aion” 145). He describes it as having the power to take over an individual because of the *shadow*’s “obsessive or, better, possessive quality.” The danger of the *shadow* lies in its suppression of an active agent, so an individual becomes more of a “passive victim of his affects... singularly incapable of moral judgment” (145). It is hard to become aware of this part of ourselves because it requires the recognition of darkness in ourselves “as present and real,” so, the work toward self-knowledge meets with strong internal

mechanisms of resistance. Therefore, the *shadow* usually lies hidden beyond the perception of the ego and consciousness. Because of the hidden character of the *shadow*, people project the dark traits of their own personality onto others. Jung says that rarely does a person acknowledge his own *shadow*, no matter how obvious it may be to an outside observer, because the projecting is done unconsciously. This Jungian concept of *shadow* is very similar to the concept of the *strangers to ourselves*.

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva develops the idea of split subjectivity by suggesting that not only are we divided as subjects, as Freud proposed, but that this mysterious strangeness that lies deep within us and makes us foreign to ourselves is associated with “death, the feminine, and the drives” (185). Kristeva adds that when the self experiences this dangerous foreign part, it often rejects it and projects it outside of the self as uncanny strangeness, creating for itself “an alien double” as a defence against the “destruction it cannot contain” (184). Thus, through this mechanism of projection, the destructuring of the self becomes especially powerful. This experience destabilizes us, takes us to the limits of our subjectivity, the limits of our life – birth and death. So, for Kristeva, this disturbing and destructive presence of the uncanny otherness we intuitively sense inside is indicative of our repressed fear of the feminine, which is associated with death, but still does not go beyond the realm of the immanent:

The *death* and the *feminine*, the end and the beginning that engross and compose us only to frighten us when they break through, one must add “the living person [...] when we ascribe the evil intentions to him [...] that are going to be carried out with the help of special powers” ([Freud] p. 243). Such malevolent *powers* would amount to a weaving together of the symbolic and the organic – perhaps *drive* itself, on the border of the psyche and biology, overriding the breaking imposed by organic homeostasis. A

disturbing symptom of this may be found in epilepsy and madness, and their presence in our fellow beings worries us the more as we dimly sense them in ourselves. (*Strangers to Ourselves* 185)

So, the unfamiliar imaginary others, monsters, and doubles, breaking through from a different realm, are, as Kristeva proposes, familiar to our psyche. A prominent contemporary philosopher, Richard Kearney, echoes this argument in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, by claiming that “the human obsession with strangers, gods and monsters ... is symptomatic of the wound inflicted by the refusal to acknowledge oneself-as-another” (11). He also maintains that many monsters live within us, and the only way to find peace is to face the monsters and acknowledge that they are an integral part of us, and that “we are strangers-to-ourselves and that we need not fear such strangeness or ‘act it out’ by projecting such fear onto Others” (8). But to come to this recognition and accept this truth is in itself uncanny because it involves acknowledging the radically unfamiliar inside the most familiar – ourselves.

If we look closely at the way psychoanalysis describes this strange and uncanny part of the human psyche, we will have to acknowledge a connection between the experience of this hidden part of our psyche and the experience of the sacred.

There is no doubt that discovering the strangeness within can produce the feeling of anxiety and the experience of the uncanny. Recognizing an uncontrollable, uncontainable, and unnamable part of our total personality that is present and very powerful in us can be very traumatic to our psyche. But does the experience of such radical alterity have to be reduced and explained away as being a constituent part of our personality, or can it be an intimation of some objective transcendent reality outside of us? A similar affective response can be linked to our

encounter with that which we cannot rationalize – like a transcendent reality, for example. I suggest that the feeling of the uncanny is only a natural reaction indicative of the psyche's de-structuring in response to the psychic reality of being confronted with something that surpasses our human capacity to understand and make sense. This intriguing psychic response in the form of the feeling of the uncanny incorporates both a "religious dread" and "fascination," to borrow Otto's terms, and holds the key to our relationship with the uncontainable, unknown, unnamable, strange, and uncanny transcendent reality of the sacred.

Ontological perspective

In contrast to the above psychological tradition, famous German theologian, Otto, in his classic work, *The Idea of the Holy*, posits the existence of an objective reality of the sacred that he calls *das ganz Andere*, or wholly Other.

What is interesting about his work is the nuance of the relationship between the self and the sacred. Even though he locates this reality outside of the subject, and beyond the subject's ability to comprehend this irreducible phenomenon of *das Heilige* because it transcends human reason, he describes an internal space to which he ascribes the capacity for apprehending and experiencing this reality that is beyond all concepts and categories. It is unnamable but we can have an intimation of it through a personal experience of it. Thus, while such theorists of the sacred as Durkheim, Bataille and Kristeva work by positioning the sacred in the immanent realm as a psychological projection, Otto becomes a scholar of the sacred as a real objective irreducible numinous reality. James and Eliade also write in this tradition of regarding the reality of the sacred as transcendent. Otto's work is most helpful for this project because in drawing his

conclusions about the nature of our relationship with the sacred, he focuses on the psychological component of such relationship, thus, making it possible for us to make use of the psychological tradition described above without the danger of reducing the reality of the sacred to the realm of psychological projection. So, his work offers a bridge between the psychological, anthropological, and theological perspectives.

Otto explains that the experience of apprehending the sacred is accompanied by feelings of repulsion and attraction, fear and fascination – *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*. He directly connects this feeling of “religious dread” to the uncanny in the following passage: “It [religious dread] first begins to stir in the feeling of ‘something uncanny’, ‘eerie’, or ‘weird’. It is this feeling which, emerging in the mind of primeval man, forms the starting-point for the entire religious development in history” (14). Otto asserts that the ‘religious dread’ is part of an inherent response of the human psyche that gets activated by the experience of the ‘apprehension’ of the incomprehensible transcendent reality outside the self. He credits this internal feeling with the title of the original source of religion. He continues by saying, “‘Daemons’ and ‘gods’ alike spring from this root, and all the products of ‘mythological apperception’ or ‘fantasy’ are nothing but different modes in which it has been objectified” (14-15). At the same time, the *fascinans*, or the “attracting and alluring” aspect of the experience of the numinous is connected by Otto to “goodness, mercy, love” and, ultimately, “becomes all that we mean by Grace, that term so rich in import, which unites with the holy Wrath in a single ‘harmony of contrasts’” (145). Otto claims that the religious dread and fascination are internal impulses of a human being in the face of the experience of the numinous, and we need to “recognize this fact of our nature – primary, unique, underivable from anything else – to be the basic factor and the basic impulse underlying the entire process of religious evolution” (15).

The necessary discernment

Thus, while Freud, Kristeva, Jung and Otto all theorize the same feeling of uncanny in the face of a radical alterity, it is important to discern that for Freud, Kristeva, and Jung, the uncanny is merely a projection of an internal dynamic, while for Otto, the feeling marks an internal psychic confrontation with the transcendent reality. For him, the uncanny evokes dread by pointing to a reality radically different from the everyday one – a completely different mysterious order, *the wholly Other*, or *das ganz Andere* (Otto).

It is important to acknowledge that the experience of the sacred is dynamic and fluid, not rigid or fixed because it reveals the feminine nature of this experience. The sacred will not allow for a totalizing definition precisely because of its unexpected, ambivalent and uncontainable nature. It refuses to be defined with precision, thus defying the phallogentric logic of definitions and categories.

The inherent ambiguity of the sacred has been acknowledged by many scholars, including Durkheim, Otto, Bataille, and Girard. More recently, in his book, *Society, Spirituality, and the Sacred*, a contemporary Canadian theologian and sociologist, Don Swenson, describes the fluid nature of the experience of the sacred. His model proposes a continuum, which is partially based on Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, and includes the following elements: "dread – fear – energy – wholly other – being wonder filled – mercy and love" (2). What stands out in this continuum is the potential polarity of the experience of the sacred – it can range from overpowering dread to overpowering love.

It can both attract and instill dread in the one who experiences it. It is an experience that inevitably has a dramatic and even a traumatic impact on the subject threatening its wholeness

and stability. So, the experience of the sacred carries with it danger and unpredictability, it threatens violence, but it is there, and it is unavoidable. And our cultural and individual impulse to repress, project or abject it will only force it to come out with a vengeance in a powerful eruption of violence.

The immanent and the transcendent

Even though Eliade suggests a great divide between the sacred and the profane, poetic consciousness reveals the liminality of the two realities. In fact, Nichol's writing, as suggested by Henderson, can be read in alignment with the Hermetic tradition, where the sacred is in fact hidden within the profane and is available to be found.

Nichol's writing, especially in *The Martyrology*, reveals the paradoxical nature of the sacred by demonstrating a rich tension between the transcendent and the immanent aspects of the sacred. It is not a creative writer's place, however, to sort out the philosophical and resolve a serious ontological issue like this in his writing. It is rather to report accurately states of feelings, which, when they concern the sacred, undergo changes. Thus, one should not take a poet's writing to be an orderly series of philosophical propositions. It is not likely that any creative writer is going to maintain a consistent position, and it would be especially unreasonable to expect such a protean writer as Nichol to do so. Hence, it is understandable that in a critical study of Nichol's work, the sacred will remain a fluid concept. A writer's position is likely to change. This is true of any writer, but especially of Nichol who worked in such a vast variety of forms. We cannot tie an imaginative writer down to a stable and fixed point of view. We are dealing with the transient changing states of consciousness after all. Even the way Nichol captures this

paradoxical tension of the sacred is further evidence of how his poetic practice unfolds complexity, lability, and heterogeneity in subjectivity, lived experience and experiential thought.

What I am after in studying Nichol's work is the rich and deep description of the experiences of both the immanent presence and the transcendent otherness of the sacred. On the one hand, Nichol is dedicated to embodied language that reveals the immanent presence of the sacred by enacting it. On the other hand, he alludes to the absolute otherness of the unnameable transcendent reality of the sacred. Thus, like Otto, he points to an interesting and intricate interface between the two realities - an internal space, in which we can sense the presence of the transcendent phenomenologically in a moment of hierophany or illumination.

However, in Nichol's work, the only poetic tools that are capable of enacting a revelation are words and letters – they themselves become the ritual signs of passage between the two realities. Hence the paradox – we need to use language to take us to a place where language is powerless. For Nichol, language is a “fictional staircase” that can take us from this plane to that other, but it can also become inadequate as it is part of the immanent plane. Thus the act of writing becomes the act of expressing the poet's faith. Seeing Nichol's writing as both a form of prayer and an activity whose character is akin to the act of prayer opens up some interesting insights into forms and themes of Nichol's work. As in an act of prayer, poetic language is used by Nichol as a medium of connecting the sacred and the profane planes. This is precisely how language becomes sacred:

there are finally no words for you father
too many letters multiply the signs
you are the one

the unifying
no signifier when we cannot grasp the signified
saints in between

the world of men
women

the sign complete
the w & the circle turning
add the E

the three levels
linked by line

or the two fold vision
H to I

the saints returned to this plane

the emblems were there when i began
seven years to understand
the first letter/level of
martyrdom

(*TM*, Bk. 3, VIII)

This stanza points to “the one,” “the unifying” ineffable primary signified that causes the failure of all words and undercuts the cognitive thrust to capture the meaning. We cannot grasp the sacred being precisely because it is the *wholly Other*. Yet, even though we are told that “there are finally no words for you father,” words and letters continue to lead us on our search. They are vehicles of passage through time to a place beyond time. We often cannot grasp their meaning completely, especially in Nichol’s poetry, as he is using them in the most unexpected ways, as a code, a cipher, “emblems,” or mystical Kabbalistic symbols (Henderson).

Hence there is often a play of multiplicity present in Nichol’s poetic language marked by excess. For him, language participates in two orders – both the visible immanent order and the invisible transcendent one. The letters unify the space on the page – the manifest presence of words and the unspoken unmanifest potentiality of the white space around. Maybe the letters are the saints, the signs, the “emblems,” the symbolic code; they are the levels of meaning that take years to understand as they conceal at the same time they reveal: “the emblems were there when i began / seven years to understand / the first letter/level of / martyrdom.”

Thus, the graphic reversal of ME to WE in the poem yields a multiplicity of interpretations. First of all, there is a clear visual reversal of order – as above so below. The two orders together make a complete picture by mirroring each other. Perhaps, the sacred and the profane are not that separate after all. In this stanza, the two planes come together as the “saints returned to this plane,” and are now here among us on the profane plane of reality, “saints in between / the world of men.” This visual overturning of the planes might be pointing to the complete picture, “the sign complete,” a perfect “circle turning,” but only if we are able to achieve the “two fold vision.” Then we will be able to include what has been separated into the perfection of the circle, the yin and yang, the world of Men (M) and women (W), which in the above lines are situated in the exact order they are in the reversed symbol: “world of men / women.” Perhaps, we carry both the masculine and the feminine inside each one of us and need both to find wholeness.

In addition, both transitions – from ME to WE and from H to I – perform a symbolic multiplication of the I. ME is another form of I and, in this visual reversal, it becomes a plural WE. Visually, the letter H is I doubled and the two I's are connected in the middle or “linked by line.” So, I meets and is connected to its own double. Thus, Nichol's writing supports what it suggests propositionally by formally performing and enacting the multiplication of the I. Also, visually, the letter E might be read to represent the three cosmological planes– Earth, Heaven, and Hell all “the three levels / linked by line.” And if we look closely, we can find three I's positioned horizontally on all the three levels, thus, suggesting that I can have access to all the planes.

Thus, letters themselves participate in the revelatory order; they become a place for the sacred to break through from the other realm to this one and reveal itself through poetic language marked by its own inherent intelligence and alignment. The language is immanent, yet, Nichol uses it to bring us to the other order, he disrupts this order imposed by us in order to reveal another order, not only present, but connected to and hidden in the mirror reflection of this one:

it is all here father
as it has always been
all language names you
all description as i make it clear
the nine billion names of god
writ out in tongues no longer spoke these billion billion years
(*TM*, Bk. 3, VIII)

Suddenly, that for which there were no words in the previous stanza – “there are finally no words for you father” – is here, all here, and always has been, “it is all here father / as it has always been.” The purpose of “all language” and “all description” is to reach for God, to express faith: “all language names you / all description as I make it clear / the nine billion names of god” (*TM*, Bk. 3, VIII), and to acknowledge the presence of the ultimate alterity of the sacred. We are

asked to pay attention to the “here” of language to see that which is beyond all language. Thus, again language is revealed to be a part of both orders – the immanent and the transcendent.

Attempts to name that which is *wholly Other* are futile, hence “the nine billion names.” The word “billion” is repeated three times in two lines: “the nine billion names” and “these billion billion years,” perhaps, performing the function of the transcendent signifier – the referent is beyond our understanding, beyond measure, beyond time, prior to time. It literally and physically exceeds the literal meaning. In a similar way, the word “all” also performs excess of meaning – it is used three times in a short stanza, “all here,” “all language,” “all description,” and phonetically, it is also a part of the word “always.” Thus, by performing excess, language points to the infinite– that which cannot be named but pointed to.

Nichol trusts language to perform the work of transformation and transmutation of matter, like in alchemy. Being an example of open form, his writing style resists any manipulation from the poet, thus erasing his agency and giving primacy to language itself. A poet is simply a careful witness, whose task is paying attention to the way energy is moving in the moment. Thus, he imposes no limitations on the form of language in terms of rhyme, meter or rhythm. Instead, language itself imposes its form onto each present moment and erases the writer’s ego. He becomes a witness to the geomantic permutations of form emerging anew out of each moment’s presence, each form insisting on itself regardless of the poet’s will.

In an urge to connect with the numinous, Nichol is dedicated to the ritual of poetic performance, a desperate gesture of reaching for connection through writing as the sacred act of expressing his faith:

From the very beginning, in the tales of the saints themselves *The Martyrology* attempted to connect with the numinous, yet such is its integrity, it has continually foregrounded through its formal innovations the paradox that because there is no single

valid transcendental signifier the putative transcendental signified must always remain beyond the reach of language. The same notion of language both reveals and reveals the real. The text's awareness of this would have assured its continuation, for it is fascinated by the inexpressible, the mystery at the heart of language which language seemingly cannot say. (Barbour 77)

The gesture of trying to name the transcendent with the help of language that is immanent is futile as there are no words in language that can express the ultimate alterity, the text of *The Martyrology* is dedicated to continuously attempting to do so. Such dedication to reaching for a connection with the sacred in the face of the seeming impossibility to articulate it in words is striking and reflects the inherent tension between immanence and transcendence at the heart of the mystical experience. Poetic practice becomes a sacred activity of articulating the poet's faith, "Poetry, its language, is the numinous to Nichol: thus the saints" (Barbour 55).

The following chapter explores Kristeva's commitment to expose the sacrifice of the feminine in our culture. It also turns to the project of *écriture féminine*, which aims through the power of poetic practice to bring the feminine and the sacred out of repression.

Chapter 2. Writing to Revive the Feminine Sacred

*How do we confront that which we have excluded in order to be, whether it is the return
of the repressed or the return of the strangers?*

– *Julia Kristeva*

Julia Kristeva's ideas are especially important to this project because she allows us to radically re-imagine the connection between the poetic and the sacred through the feminine. When Kristeva approaches the subject of the sacred, she had quite a legacy to follow –Durkheim, Otto, Girard, James, Eliade, Freud, Lacan, Bataille, among others. However, she allows us to approach the sacred from a completely different position. Kristeva problematizes the fact that the official story of the sacred in Western culture has neglected to acknowledge the sacrifice of the feminine. She exposes these mechanisms of sacrifice and abjection of the feminine in Western culture as devices necessary for establishing a social contract – the Symbolic order of society.

In contrast to studying the sacred reality as an external phenomenon outside of the subject – located in the community for Durkheim, in the other for Girard, and in the transcendent realm for Eliade, James, and Otto¹ – it is the internal connection to and abjection² of the feminine that Kristeva investigates in her search for the sacred. Her project is to bring together the concepts of the feminine and the sacred in order to bring them out of repression. She explains that our culture is established on the sacrifice of the feminine and the maternal because both are experienced as excessive and threatening, and are therefore abjected. The feminine and the maternal are cultural waste, sacrificed in the name of the symbolic order and phallic authority. In classical Freudian psychoanalysis, such rejection and sacrifice of the feminine/maternal is a necessary stage of the subject formation process.

Freud's theory of subject formation revolves around the relationships of Oedipal drama among the members of the primary family. During an early stage of his psycho-sexual development, a (male) subject experiences sexual feelings towards his first love-object – the mother. As a result, he perceives the father figure as a rival, which initially causes hostility in the subject. At the same time, this Oedipal complex also necessarily accompanies the subject's discovery of his own superego and produces his motivation to symbolize in general.

Jacques Lacan develops the story by saying that in order to become a speaking/symbolizing subject, the infant identifies with the father and cuts off his identification with the mother. He also posits the existence of three developmental stages – the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The Real is the earliest and refers to the time when we

¹ Even though James and Otto approach the question of the religious through studying experience, which is closer to Kristeva's focus of investigating the internal work of the psyche, they still posit the reality of the realm transcendent to the self, while Kristeva does not.

² The concept of *abjection* will be examined at length in the following chapters, but to provide a brief definition here, "the abject marks the moment when we separated ourselves from the mother, when we began to recognize a boundary between "me" and other, between "me" and "(m)other" (*Powers of Horror*13).

are not completely developed as human beings yet and are overcome by our drives that are chaotic and excessive in nature. During the Imaginary or Mirror stage, the subject is slowly developing his sense of ego by recognizing and internalizing his image in the mirror as a whole, as opposed to his fragmented and disjointed sensations (*"The Mirror Stage"*6). It is important to note that Lacan's Symbolic stage in a way coincides with Freud's Oedipal drama because both theorists associate the entry into the next stage with the authoritative figure of a Father coming into the scenario to impose rules and regulations. This becomes a crucial point of understanding for this project as it clearly highlights the moment when the repression of the feminine occurs.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva takes on both Lacan's and Freud's theories of psychoanalytic subject development by arguing that long before the mirror stage and the Oedipal stage, semiotic principles and patterns of language are already present and operating in the child, before (s)he becomes the subject.

What is important about her contribution is the new relationship she posits between the subject, the feminine and the semiotic modality of language³. More specifically, she focuses on the preverbal stage of the development of the subject – existence as a body and as a psychic paradox – a pre-subject being fused in relationship with an abject mother, on the border between the semiotic and the symbolic. Thus, becoming a complete and separate subject is but a disorienting process that challenges and threatens the subject. There is nothing stable about this process but the oncoming waves of drives and desires, somewhat ordered by the rhythms of the maternal body. So, now we are presented with a new theory of the subject – a theory that

³ The "semiotic" is used throughout this work as a term defined by Julia Kristeva as a "precise modality in the signifying process" associated with "not only the *facilitation* and the structuring *disposition* of drives, but also the so-called *primary processes* which displace and condense both energies and their inscription" (*Revolution* 24).

complicates things, but in a way, opens new possibilities for thinking through the relationship between the subject and the meaning making process that founds language and culture.

An interesting connection between *chora*, the feminine, and the sacred emerges when we think how by suggesting that *chora* is the ultimate condition of possibility of meaning in general, Kristeva challenges all previous theories of language and the subject, as well as traditional theological implications. She emphasizes the fact that in the process of psychoanalytic subject formation, the maternal and the feminine are abjected and sacrificed in order for an infant to become an autonomous subject and to make space for the father's symbolic authority. Thus, the feminine, in the form of the semiotic *chora*, is repressed to make room for the masculine, which takes the form of the Symbolic Law of the Father.

She also associates the symbolic with the static structure of language rules, social order, and paternal law, all of which are marked by the quality of stasis. The semiotic, however, is connected to the body and to the idea of the *chora*, formed by the unconscious and its drives, which are always in a dynamic flux. Kristeva relates *chora* to the biological dimension of the subject that has its own logic of rhythm and exists prior to the time symbolic structures of language are introduced. She explains that the semiotic *chora* is transverbal, "the semiotic is not independent of language; it interferes with language, and under its domination, articulates other arrangements of meaning, which are not significations, but rhythmic melodic articulations" (*Intimate Revolt* 259).

She associates the *chora* with the enigmatic, the feminine, and the sacred and says that *chora* precedes the logic of language, culture and judgment by being the unnamable origin of all: a placeless place that challenges our normal principles of cognition and offers instead a

psychosomatic feminine modality of signifying. She explains, “Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space [...] is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment” (29). Thus, for the first time, Kristeva offers us a concept of the gendered sacred – the feminine sacred – *chora*.

An important point to clarify is that she points to the inseparability of the symbolic and the semiotic and the dialectic between them being “constituent of the subject” (*Revolution* 24). In fact, she emphasizes over and over again the necessity of the symbolic modality of language as integral to any signifying process. To be precise, the symbolic serves an important role of helping to negotiate the volatile form associated with the semiotic. It also helps articulate that from which it is far removed – the biological. Kristeva explains that “because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either “exclusively semiotic or “exclusively” symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both” (*Revolution* 24). Thus, to prevent a common misunderstanding of her argument, we need to specify right away that she never argues for a complete obliteration of the symbolic; her project is to simply bring to light the unacknowledged fact of the sacrifice of the semiotic *chora* in the moment of entry into language.

She also questions the motivation behind a child’s entry into language. Is it the fear of the Paternal law and authority, which had been the traditional psychoanalytic explanation, or is it the maternal love that serves as an incentive for a child to enter language? Both Freud and Lacan argue that fear of the Father drives a child into the stage of symbolic language acquisition. Kristeva’s theory proposes that love of the mother, pleasure and excess are as important as fear or lack in serving as an impetus for a subject’s entry into symbolic language. But this inherent

logic of fusion, connectedness and relationship that mark the semiotic *chora* is later repressed by the illusion of separateness and alienation:

Moreover, this transverbal semiotic refers to the archaic mother-child relationship and allows me to inscribe in certain modalities of language this feminine-maternal that Freud called a “dark continent” or even “a Minoan-Mycenean civilization” (from the name of the Greek civilization before that of classical Greece). This other logic of a feminine-maternal that defies normative representation and is situated at the antipodes of phallic representation, as well as at the antipodes of the phallic feminine, is my contribution to conceptualizing feminine, certainly in relation to the political but through the intermediary of the sacred. (*Intimate Revolt* 259)

What often gets overlooked in Kristeva’s work is that the subject she proposes is not only “in process” and “on trial,” but is also “in relation to (m)other.” This is crucial because it is precisely the relational aspect of the subject that allows him to connect with others and the world. Thus, our understanding of the subject is enriched by the newly proposed dimensions of interrelatedness and interconnectedness, inter-subjectivity and interdependence, inter-responsibility and love. Kelly Oliver brings to light the significance of Kristeva’s contribution to theorizing language as a vehicle for the love relationship:

Love provides the support for fragmented meanings and fragmented subjectivities. Love provides the support to reconnect words and affects. She [Kristeva] says that ‘love is something spoken, and it is only that’ (*TL* 277). [...] The living body is the loving body and the loving body is the speaking body. Without love we are nothing but walking

corpses. Love is essential to the living body, and it is essential in bringing the living body to life in language.

Psychoanalysis is a love relationship that builds spoken spaces through tranferential love. [...] Transference and countertransference are love relations that can spark the imagination and open up the possibility of re-imagining and thus re-signifying affects. (*Portable Kristeva* xxv)

For the purposes of this project, I suggest that poetic practice has a similar potential for building spoken or written spaces for articulating and re-imagining relationship with the self, other and wholly Other through love. Love manifests the conditions of possibility for life and language to take place. Love makes the subject's very being possible. Kristeva helps us remember that poetic language revives the primary meaning of language as love. Other languages of love are the language of art, psychoanalysis and religion. These practices provide psychic spaces for the subject to re-imagine his being, his desire, his social and cultural contracts, and his relationship to the world.

Écriture féminine

Kristeva's ideas on reviving the feminine principle underlying all signification – the semiotic modality of language – found a natural resonance with ideas of several other prominent French philosophers, such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Catherine Clément and others. Together they started a theoretical discussion about the necessity of finding an alternative to the dominant form of language. They proposed to search for *écriture féminine* – a truly feminine language and art. Although their arguments are distinct, the underlying assumptions of their

ideas can be described in similar terms. These philosophers argue that in contemporary society, feminine forms of discourse find themselves in the inferior role of the other of rational scientific language.

In order to disrupt the dominant patriarchal view of language that suppresses feminine forms of discourse, these thinkers posit the need to resort to new more feminine and poetic forms of expression. This new mode of language revolves around, using Kristeva's words, the "nocturnal secret and unconscious universe," exposing "the unsaid, the uncanny" ("Women's Time" 207). Feminine writing privileges a certain response to the world that is non-linear, non-rational and non-hierarchical. Rather, it is more intuitive, sensual, primal, heterogeneous and oriented towards the maternal and pre-Oedipal imaginary. Another important idea to note is that the above thinkers confront all those theories of language that rely on the concept of unified, static and stable subjectivity, like the Cartesian cogito, for example. For them, the subject takes a different incarnation – it is put "in process/on trial" and becomes a shape-shifting entity always in the process of becoming.

Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous oppose the structuralist view of language as a rigid and lifeless structure, a system of symbolic elements that has been cut off from the body. They rebel against this patriarchal vision of language because of its disregard of the material, maternal, and the feminine in favour of the ideal, transcendent and masculine. These writers are famous for their dedication to bringing the "sexuate" (Irigaray) body back into philosophical discourse about language. Although all three of them are indebted to the Lacanian tradition of psychoanalysis, they are critical of the fact that by staying exclusively in the symbolic realm, Lacan has left no place in his theory for articulating the drives, the body, or the feminine. All three also openly condemn the structuralist approach to language because it takes the speaking body out of the

picture by silencing it in favour of rigid rules, laws and other symbolic structures. They take a highly critical stance toward the idea that language can be reduced to a set of merely logical propositions. Kristeva's opening lines in *Revolution in Poetic Language* succinctly summarize this dissatisfaction: "Our philosophies of language, embodiments of the Idea, are nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs. Fascinated by the remains of a process which is partly discursive, they substitute this fetish for what actually produced it" (13).

To counter the above theories of language, Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray propose a vision of a new feminine language they have termed *écriture féminine* – that draws on its direct connection to the body. This school of thought proposes to consider the body as a semiotic system with its own language. They also claim that in today's culture, where difference is always apprehended in its hierarchical and oppositional incarnation, women's bodies have often been exiled or silenced due to their difference from the phallogentric order, against which they are considered. Thus, in their scholarship, a relationship between body and language takes on political connotations of defending heterogeneity and multiplicity in response to the existing cultural vision of a homogeneous speaking subject cut off from the body. That is why articulating the relationship between language and a body that lives, loves, desires, enjoys and speaks has become their joint project.

We, Westerners, are accustomed to applying our attention to and confronting ourselves with a still coded meaning, often forgetting the poetic, rhythmic, melodic, more generally, carnal requirements which ought to take part in the elaboration and the passing on of the sense.

– Luce Irigaray

In this paradigm language is seen as a deeply transformative medium that is directly connected to the material processes, thus making both meaning and subject fluid, unstable and relational. This dynamic meaning making process, which Kristeva has termed *signifince*, takes place between the “conscious and the unconscious, stability and instability, or negativity and stasis” (Oliver, *Portable Kristeva* xviii), puts the subject at risk (Cixous) and into the state of perpetual becoming (Irigaray).

Having briefly discussed the more general theoretic discontents shared by exponent of *criture fminine*, in the following section, I will analyse their unique individual contributions to the question of the relation between language and the body in order to enrich our insight into the feminine principle and its multiple forms.

Hlne Cixous: language as pleasure

Language englobes us and inspires us and launches us beyond ourselves, it is ours and we are its, it is our master and our mistress. And even if it seems too native or national, it happily remains foreign to those who write. Writing consists first of all in hearing language speak itself to our ears, as if it were the first time. To live language, to inhabit language, what luck and what a venture.

– Hlne Cixous

Pleasure is a central concept in Cixous’ investigation of the relationship between language and the body. She posits that in our phallogentric culture, women’s pleasure has been repressed or, in some cases, denied altogether, and needs to find its manifestation in a special

new kind of language. So, for Cixous, *écriture féminine* is a new way of thinking, experiencing and expressing one's pleasure in writing and art. Its foundation is female jouissance, and its purpose is to counter the male-dominated patriarchal cultural order and language codes. She goes further to posit a direct relationship between this force of jouissance to the questions of forms of knowledge and mechanisms of meaning-making:

I enter into myself with my eyes closed, and you can read it. This reading is performed here, by the being-who-wants-to-be-born, by an urge, something that wants at all costs to come out, to be exhaled, a music in my throat that wants to resound, a need of the flesh then, that seizes my trachea, a force that contracts the muscles of my womb and stretches my diaphragm as if I were going to give birth through my throat, or come. And it's the same thing. (*Coming to Writing*, 52)

Her position opens a way to a more democratic view of sense-making paradigms by suggesting that through the connection between language, the body and the unconscious, we approach the possibility of different kinds of knowledge. Thus, Cixous posits a possibility of creating a new language and a new knowledge that will be deeply rooted in the body. Poetic practice is compared to birthing, thus the pleasures and the pains of the body are driving the process of poetic articulation.

Cixous connects the body to the process of poetic writing using the metaphor of "traveling," "starting off," "walking, dancing, pleasure" (*Three Steps* 64), "a passage: toward the most distant, the nameless, the endless" (*Coming to Writing* 14). To become a true poet, she says, one has to go on a journey to "the heart of the country of the unconscious," and it is mandatory to "go on foot, with the body," and to "use our whole body to enable the world to

become flesh” (*Three Steps* 64). But to encourage this transformation, one has to start off from the familiar place and leave it behind, “one has to go away, to leave the self” (64-65). What is this self? How is Cixous’ vision of the feminine self different from that of the masculine self?

To illustrate the concept of a feminine self, Cixous uses such metaphors as “spacious singing Flesh” and “living, because changing I” (*The Newly...* 45). It is based on mutability rather than fixity. She says that a woman’s self is, paradoxically, best described by “her capacity to deappropriate herself without self-interest” (44). She warns right away that this doesn’t make woman an “undifferentiated magma; it means that she doesn’t create a monarchy of her body or her desire” (44). She allows for multiplicity and heterogeneity by creating a space for the presence of the other and his body and his desire, and for the self, or for the multiple selves in both, a space for the meeting of the selves in the moment, allowing both the opportunity to relate and change.

For her, the writing subject is an intriguing combination of passive and active elements – it is both “writing matter” and “producer of the text.” It exists only in the instant of enunciation. Her subject “has a tendency to lose its head,” to think with the heart, and to read “with its head cut off,” and thus, is capable of “apprehending the sentences’ cardiac truth.” The Cixousian subject is the place of the battle where “the heart stands up to the head and the soul takes on the body” (Calle-Gruber 215-216). Relying on the Lacanian theory of psychoanalytic subject formation, Cixous argues that women have preserved a closer connection “to the m/other, the body and hence to love” (*The Newly...* 40), thus, they have a privileged access to her newly proposed discourse that is situated close to the body, and even inside the body.

For Cixous, writing comes from within the body's "nether realms," "the inferior realms," from "behind thought" (*Three Steps* 118). The disposition and logic of this place, she claims, is different than regular thinking and speech. It is hidden "somewhere in the depths of my heart, which is deeper than I think. Somewhere in my stomach, my womb, and if you have not got a womb – then it is somewhere 'else'" (*The Hélène...* 203-4). Thus, the writing body is stronger and more powerful than the author and his thinking structures. The writing hand, she says will lead us to the place where "from the heart... passions rise to the finger tips that hear the body thinking: this is where the Book (Alive)-to-Live (le livre Vivre) springs from" (*Three Steps* 156).

In thinking about the new language, Cixous also addresses the subject of the other. She approaches it through writing as an ethical practice of articulating and safeguarding a new relationship with the other, a safe space for the other, for the difference without erasure and without binary thinking. Writing reveals our inherent bisexuality where both sexes are present, preserved and celebrated:

Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me – the other that I am and am not, that I don't know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live – that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me, who? – a feminine one, a masculine one, some? – several, some unknown, which is indeed what gives me the desire to know and from which all life soars. (*The Hélène...* 42)

Writing is a way to acknowledge the otherness within by giving it a voice, a written space and time to speak. It is a way to reach the unconscious and the uncanny in oneself, a chance to ask "who am I?" and then to add "who else?" and let the writing reveal it to the self who asks. Writing, then, is a way to accept the unaccepted and unacknowledged part of ourselves, the

shadow that cannot be accessed through an ordinary language, the multiplicity of selves – an *ensemble* (Cixous) of selves – an overwhelming vortex of the selves and expose as futile any attempt to define oneself once and for all, but to accept the ever-flowing reinvention through the present moment of writing. Poetic consciousness makes it possible for us to go beyond definitions and binaries, to apprehend the unceasing flood of unregulated drives and desires, and to feel the overwhelming multiplicity of such, thus offering a deeper appreciation of the openness of poetic practice to the semiotic forces of the body, that connect poetic to the feminine sacred *chora*.

Luce Irigaray: the *sexuate* speaking subjects

In a similar fashion, Irigaray posits the need not only for a new language, but also for a new relationship of the subject with language and through language with the other. For her, a speaking act involves a special relationship between two present, living, incarnate *sexuate* subjects. To be more specific, she proposes a “living communication with the other” to counter the established code and technique of dead language that translates into a paralysis of everything living, breathing, vital (*The Way of Love* 84). In order to speak with the other in the moment, she says, the old codes and conventions must be abandoned. Instead, a special attention must be paid to the interiority of the subject during the act of enunciation and to the space necessary between the two speakers. So, the two speaking beings are both producing speech and negotiating its meaning in the moment of enunciation, thus helping and, in a way, even enabling each other’s becoming.

It is in this context that she introduces her extraordinary concept of the divine that she situates in the space between two living subjects in the moment of their speaking with each other. This fragile divine can never belong to one of the two speakers – it comes into being only through their speaking with each other. This divine is created not only through language, but also through the participation of two incarnate subjects:

If transcendence is between us, recognizing you as other perhaps implies giving you up to your solitude, and also to your volume, to you, an incarnate subject: in you, outside of you, other than me, with air and perspective between us. Thus we are body and soul for each other. (*To Be Two* 13)

This irreducible difference, she claims, allows for an interrelational becoming. In fact, it is the sole guarantor of our return to our individual “to be” and will ward off the need for appropriation in the relationship between two. Irigaray writes: “difference can protect this existence: “I am if you are, to be together with you allows me to become. [...] What makes me one, and perhaps even unique, is the fact that you are and I am not you” (*To Be Two* 16).

Irigaray is highly critical of the tradition of “speaking about” and reducing “speaking with” to the “speaking together about the same thing” (*The Way...* 7-8). Speaking with each other is her idea of preserving the marriage between body and word. And it is our task to remain “faithful” to this marriage by speaking with each other. Then we are sharing “neither body nor language simply, but incarnation between us: the word being flesh and the flesh word” (*To Be Two* 12). Thus, the act of speech for her is somewhat equated with the act of love and care. Her vision of the new relationship between the subject and language breaks down the traditional instrumental logic of subject/object relationship, of mastery and manipulation of nature and of

the world, and transforms it “into the elaboration of a shared universe” (*The Way...* 9). In this vision, each speaking being must bring his/her own meaning into this elaboration, so that the dialogue can take place (*The Way...* 8).

Irigaray remains critical of the masculine culture of monologue and mastery (*The Way...* 6), while she praises the feminine aspect of culture for cherishing the relational aspect of language and difference, be it the difference between the two genders or between any two subjects (*To Be Two* 17). She suggests that we move away from our traditional monological culture of the singular (masculine) subject, in which women are not really subjects, but the other, against which men become subjects. Instead, we should move toward intersubjectivity, in which it becomes the task of both speaking subjects to “find tone, rhythm, meaning,” to “listen to the other’s love” and to “speak in a new way: speak love not only with gestures of the body but also with gestures of the word” (*To Be Two* 14-15).

Like Cixous, Irigaray argues that women’s pleasure and desire have not found their articulation in language or culture. In fact, they have been denied. So, it becomes her project to give back to every woman her “right to pleasure, to jouissance, to passion, restore her right to speech, and sometimes to cries and anger” (“The Bodily Encounter...” 43). Irigaray articulates the peculiarities of women’s autoeroticism in order to demonstrate a radical phenomenological difference between the sexual experience of men and women: “Woman ‘touches herself’ all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two – but not divisible into one(s) – that caress each other” (*This Sex* 24). Thus, using the morphology of the female body as a foundation for her argument, Irigaray posits a new definition of the feminine as “not one” by focusing on the specifically female pleasures by linking them to specifically female sexual organs:

She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*. [. . .] Woman's pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity, for example. The pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They each contribute, irreplaceably, to woman's pleasure. Among other caresses . . . Fondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading the lips, stroking the posterior wall of the vagina, brushing against the mouth of the uterus, and so on. To evoke only a few of the most specifically female pleasures. [. . .] *Woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined—in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness. (*This Sex* 28)

Thus, in Irigaray's vision, the difference that the woman's body represents serves as a foundation of resisting phallogentric sameness and introducing multiplicity into the cultural discourse by introducing two different sexuate subjects. Female desire "really involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse" (*This Sex* 29). So, it is precisely the multiplicity of women's desire and their pleasure that women can express through language, thus postulating the irreducibility of the feminine self.

In short, Irigaray's vision of transforming our way of speaking with each other as two incarnate sexuate subjects requires an awareness of difference, a wisdom of love, a language of

love, a subjective and intersubjective culture of caress and sensibility, a cultivation of the sensible perception, of reciprocity, intersubjectivity, respect, presence, and of double-intention. She believes that through the careful cultivation of the above, we can pave the way to a new thinking, new language, and new culture that allows multiplicity and openness.

To sum up briefly the above positions, *écriture féminine* challenges the existing phallogentric code that denies a place for any difference and silences those outside it. Instead, proponents of *écriture* call for the invention of a new language, which would allow a space for the articulation of women's subjectivity of difference as well as for the emergence of the feminine principles of signification that would enrich our understanding of language and culture. Even though their task of disrupting the current patriarchal codes and system of meaning initially caused a lot of enthusiasm, their particular solutions became a target for consistent criticism, to which I turn now.

I will summarize and respond to the three main lines of criticism directed at the above thinkers – namely, accusations of formalism, essentialism, and biological determinism. Although these three critiques are interrelated, I will present them one by one. While Irigaray and Cixous focus on developing a formal aspect of *écriture féminine*, some other thinkers see this focus as a weakness of the approach. For example, Kristeva does not think that this project can be accomplished only formally. She is explicit about the dangers of merging women's voices into one and claims that “writing as a woman means writing ‘in one's own name,’ otherwise, there is a risk of new ‘uniform’ writing” (“Women and Literary” 122). In their defence, Irigaray's and Cixous' arguments and ways of speaking are far from uniform, making it impossible to fuse them into one voice. Thus, perhaps, their work itself models their arguments and performs the

kind of writing they are calling for – they are dialoguing and participating in the meaning making process without merging into a unitary voice; rather, their voices make a chord.

Their insistence on the uniqueness of each feminine voice and the multiplicity of such voices shows the complexity of the new proposed language and stands in sharp contrast to the most common and, in my opinion, one-dimensional criticism of the *écriture féminine* – the accusation of essentialism (Jones, Fuss). Cixous explicitly rejects the idea of the essence of the feminine or of a “general woman,” in “The Laugh of the Medusa” and in the *The Newly Born Woman*. Her argument for a connection between the body and language simply focuses on the acknowledgment of the body and points to the possibility and the advantages of privileging multiplicity instead of singularity. In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous proposes her notion of *other bisexuality*, where each subject carries inside the presence of both sexes without an erasure of difference between them. Therefore, this new feminine form of language is not meant to be sex-specific. It is available to both male and female writers. In this way, exponents of *écriture féminine* are simply proposing a new feminine mode of coexistence of body and textuality.

Another way of addressing the “essentialist criticism” is by remembering that Cixous connects the feminine writing with the Pre-Oedipal or Imaginary phase, which precedes the formation of the binary male/female opposition. This is the time closely connected with the mother’s body. Thus, “Cixous’ notion of feminine writing can be both feminine and non-essentialist” (Dunn par. 4). The task of *écriture féminine* is to resist creating a new dogma, but instead to introduce the experience of multiplicity, heterogeneity and polyphony into language and culture of monotony of phallogentrism.

One more commonality in the voices of the Anglo-American critics is the anti-biological argument (Butler, Jacobus). They propose that gender difference is constructed exclusively in

language, and we need to focus more on the socio-linguistic, rather than a biological aspect of women. This is a dangerous step because, by ignoring woman's phenomenological experience, these critics accept the premises of highly conceptualized language and patriarchal logic, while Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous perform their argument precisely by using a formally new, heterogeneous, poetic and distinctively unique personal style of language. Moreover, they are not opposed to the necessity of social and political changes, in fact, they are asking for a new politics and condemn the present political order as patriarchal; but the place to start, they argue, is the body. Irigaray posits that these changes cannot occur until sexual difference – the most fundamental of all differences – is fully acknowledged. The most balanced critique, in my view, is proposed by Janet Wolff, who claims we can gain more insight by listening to both the unmediated phenomenological experience of the body and the discursive and social construction of the body (422). In other words, the truth lies in not juxtaposing the two paradigms, but in allowing a dialogue between the two perspectives and by learning from both. In this case, by resisting a stable fixed definition and/or categorization, raw phenomenological experience of the body offers a unique opportunity to radically revise the existing “discursive and social construction”. Thus, *écriture féminine* gives us a chance to reconsider and even interrupt our habitual response of reducing the fullness of phenomenological experience to labels and categories.

Écriture féminine offers a vision of language becoming a more democratic medium: instead of positing what one believes, thus turning the act of communication into a mere means of transmitting and imposing one's “complete” thoughts to the abstract other, the speaker is now present with and open to the incarnate other during the very moment of the act of enunciation, and is actively engaged with the other in co-creating meaning during this act. The meaning is

created in the space between the two speakers, allowing both speakers to evolve and to grow and expand in the process.

Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray associate the world of sensory intimacy and sensory experience with a certain type of language and knowledge, phenomenologically more accessible to women. So, it is a question of not only body and language, but also of new forms of knowledge. *Écriture féminine* wants to bring body, life, movement and love back into language, and the ethical relationship with the other back into politics. The exponents of this approach look past the structure of the language and give it back its materiality and sensuality. In this process, new forms of subjectivity and knowledge find their access through the body to language and through language to the realm of the social.

To restate the significance of the project of *écriture féminine*: it is a new way of signifying that calls into question and disrupts the Law of the Father, accentuates movement and alterity and promotes openness, flexibility, and heterogeneity to counter closure, reductionism, and hierarchy. The exponents of *écriture féminine* bring life, movement, and difference to language and draw the feminine principles of signification out of cultural repression. They resurrect language and give it breath, air, and the living spirit. They firmly root it in the material source with a new promise of life. They nourish it, and let it be without appropriating it, through love. They give us a chance to redefine and re-imagine the concept of the subject. We are now given a new idea of an unstable subject with less defined and more porous borders; a subject who is both in process and in relation to her own body and to the maternal beginning represented as a semiotic *chora*. This subject is in a different relationship to her self, language, the other and culture and accepts a new role in the meaning-making process.

Chapter 3. The feminine in Nichol's poetry

W

o men

we all begin in

that embrace our m's contained in (mother or m in the middle of the word?)

the soil forsakes us

we are lost

Kryptions we all came from

infant crying for our vanished homes

crumble in the face of fragmentary stone

remnants of our origin

shakes us

power's gone

orphaned I's

brought down to *their* mortality

(*TM*, Bk. 4)

On many levels, Nichol's texts are constantly returning the reader to the feminine, maternal beginning, which is the sacred source of life and of language. From the stanza above, we learn that he associates women with the origin: "W/ o men/ we all begin in" and that when we lose this original home, we lose the power of this original connection to the totality of life. By separating from this totality, we "crumble" and become fragmented "remnants of our origin." This separation makes us feel "orphaned," makes us grieve this loss by "crying for our vanished homes" and brings us down to our mortality. Thus, separation from the maternal is suggestive of the beginning of our death. We both long to return, but understand the danger and impossibility of returning to the maternal. Thus, the feminine maternal *chora* begins to haunt us as the impossible longing to return.

Nichol's texts often acknowledge the maternal gift, "one woman who was all women to me / one woman who grants all women to me" (*TM*, Bk. 3, IV). In one of the unpublished versions of the title pages and intros for *TM*, Nichol dedicated *The Martyrology* to his mother and his grandmother, "for the women in my life who've made it meaningful maw grandmaw..." ([*TM*]: *Misc. Title Pages and Intros for Early Versions* (1964-1970) n.p.).

But the return to the feminine in his work does not stop there. Not only does he acknowledge his indebtedness to the women in his life, but he also recognizes and accepts the wisdom of his own feminine side:

what comes forth from my mouth
born from the woman in me
handed down thru my grandma & lea
is what marks me most a man

(*TM*, Bk. 3, VIII)

By acknowledging that what makes him most a man comes from the woman in him, Nichol allows us to complicate and at the same time relax the relationship between gender and the feminine dimension of language that *écriture féminine* is trying to bring back. More importantly, it allows us to dispel the accusations of essentialism often associated with *écriture féminine* once and for all. Even though the logic of the feminine signification is drawn from the phenomenological experience of being a woman, this logic is available to both genders and can be discovered and experienced in each one of us.

The feminine, Nichol says, “comes forth from my mouth,” and thus, its inherent generative power is emphasized. It possesses the power to be born and to come forth, so one is not producing or manufacturing it, but simply yields to the force of the language that is coming forth through the embodied relationship with oneself as “what comes forth from my mouth” does not come from the mind. Body has its own logic, and even if it remains repressed for a long time, it can still “come forth” through the mouth. This is the gift of *écriture* that Nichol is giving to both genders.

Thus, by clearly aligning his poetic practice with the semiotic disposition of language, Nichol offers us a way to recover the feminine principle for both genders. By relying on the semiotic dimension, his poetic language exposes our cultural bias toward the patriarchal, symbolic, sensible, true, stable and orderly structures. His poetry gives us a chance to re-cover the forgotten pre-Oedipal experience of our relationship with language, the feminine language of multiplicity, allowing, fluidity and openness, thus enriching our impoverished experience of the masculine language of forcing and ownership achieved through naming.

Nichol is constantly challenging the cultural tendency to consider language as a static and closed system of units used to fix things in place by naming:

all language simply the knowledge of naming simply all it has become. oh once was a day remember that day you spoke to me & the names were gone forever I thot as then you did speak saying to me those things you said without names ... you spoke to me without names that day spoke to me through the fog my mind made ... i saw you enter the room to tell me your heart free of naming dreams of such freedom (8)

Nichol explains that speaking without naming belongs to “her.” Her words have colour, presence, freedom and can be seen; they are visual and concrete, while “his” speaking carries with it the curse of abstract naming. Nichol regrets those restrictions that are imposed on people, forces and phenomena by the nominative function of words, which is usually associated with the original authority of the Oedipal Father to establish meaning by sacrificing the other feminine dimension of language.

He also openly rejects the rigidity of traditional language imposed by culture as a measure of control, “i have given it up thrown away the rules by which my days were named thrown away the names they used to claim me” (7). Not only does Nichol equate names with rules, but also, in the original draft of *Journal*, he equates them with “tags.” He writes, “thrown away the tags they use to hang me,” then crosses out the word “tags” and changes it to “names” and also changes the word “hang” to “claim” (*Journal, 2nd Draft with Corrections* 4). Not only are “tags” and “labels” suggestive of assigning a fixed value to a human being, and “claim” suggests possession and control, but the word “hang” may also imply death or execution.

Nichol's treatment of the masculine and the feminine principles throughout *Journal* is phenomenal in its capacity to intricately weave together so many possible meanings and simultaneous interpretations of the text:

i lie in this bed sick at heart because you named me i lie in this bed sick with
 hate it is the hate fills me it is the hate stops me up i lie in this bed
 as you enter father you enter & you put your mark upon me i lie in this bed
 your mark upon me & i hate you you wrap me in your grey cloak you
 wrap me in hate & longing the sea beckons me i cannot reach it she is there
 she is that other you stand behind she speaks to me & she does not name me
 she speaks to me but she does not mark me i am free & she speaks to me (8-9)

In *Journal*, someone named “he” appears over and over again and performs the violence of “marking” and “naming” the one who writes: “he came along & put his mark upon me now i am faces & names & ache with longing i rise with that mark upon me & step thru the window she disappeared when he entered with his grey cloak & his naming” (9). Every one of the multiple meetings with “him” is described as nothing short of disturbing. It is “him” who walks in and stands behind “her”; it is “him” who names and marks and at one point in *Journal* cuts into her face with a razor scarring it forever. It is “her” who speaks without naming and disappears the moment “he” enters. This repeated encounter can be read as a commentary on the psycho-linguistic violence experienced during the entry into the language – a traumatic substitution of the semiotic by the symbolic which inevitably happens as one enters the language.

Who is the “she” and the “he” of *Journal*? Is it a Freudian family caught in an Oedipal drama? Are we witnessing a psychological trauma resulting from violence? Is the violence

sexual, physical, emotional, or a linguistic one marking a traumatic entry into language? Is it merely a description of the violent relationship between the symbolic and pre-symbolic stages of language acquisition, the sacrifice of the feminine, maternal, and the sacred during the entry into the symbolic realm of the Father?

We learned from *Journal* that the power of naming belongs to the father, and that the naming is the “mark of the father” (8). We also learn that “she” has the power to liberate the writing subject from the naming, from the mark and the rule of the father. In one of the unpublished drafts of *Journal*, Nichol wrote “Your father’s mark was on you & she was not there,” followed by “to release you from that naming” (*Journal, 2nd Draft with Corrections* 11), which was later crossed out from the draft, but is revealing of the power to release, to liberate Nichol originally attributes to her, who is speaking without naming.

But who, Nichol asks, is before naming? Who does the father stand behind? Can this be read as a cultural commentary on privileging one modality of language over the other in our Western approach? More specifically, is he referring to this imbalance created and maintained in our culture by abjecting the feminine and the sacred at the moment of subject’s entry into the symbolic stage of his development?

To substantiate this reading a little bit more, we need to return briefly to the description of the different stages and shifts in the subject formation process posited by psychoanalytic theory. We learn that before the symbolic stage of language acquisition comes another very important stage crucial to this study – namely, the pre-symbolic, the pre-Oedipal one, which later gets repressed. DeKoven explains that “the conclusive repression of presymbolic language is coincident with the oedipal phase, which in turn is coincident with full mastery of the use of

symbolic language,” which is “dominated by the signified” (20). Unfortunately, starting with this stage, the pre-symbolic state of language is ignored or forgotten, and “the signifier becomes a more or less transparent communicator of meaning” (20). Poetic or experimental writing relies heavily on this forgotten or repressed pre-symbolic state on reviving the importance of the signifier:

In this presymbolic state, language reaches us as repetition, sound association, intonation: the signifier. What for Derrida is a suppressed cultural/historical past of nonlinear writing can also be seen as a repressed psychological past, in the individual, or presymbolic language. Presymbolic language shares with much experimental writing this ascendancy of the signifier: the play of intonation, rhythm, repetition, sound association. Symbolic language is similar to conventional, grammatical, logocentric writing: they both encompass the ascendancy of hierarchical order, sense, reason, the signified. (DeKoven 20)

The conventional relationship between the signifier and the signified is established through naming, thus reducing the experience of that which is to a label assigned to it. Nichol is often explicitly mourning language’s true potential as opposed to simply “the knowledge of naming” (8). Time and again throughout the Journal, the symbolic principles of naming, fixing, and stasis are competing with the more feminine semiotic principles of dynamic flow and blurring everything into a sacred unity that forms the totality of the negative space surrounding the contours of the naming, not unlike an “ocean which is all oceans holy”:

names seem irrelevant or
i name in any case

no place which is all places to me
no time which remains the same
blurring & overlapping
we exist within a loop of stillness
time flows both ways
it is always year i day i hour i of our lord
praise him write his name in sand
water or the wind blurs

one ocean which is all oceans holy
(*TM*, Bk. 3, IV)

Striving for clarity and precision, we stop cultivating our ability to be vulnerable by staying open to the complex hurricane of human senses and emotions, to the “blurring and overlapping” of memories and experiences that, paradoxically, can reveal a special place, perhaps, an internal one, in which we exist “within a loop of stillness,” the eye/I of the storm. In it, the naming is unnecessary as the ocean represents the totality of undifferentiated experiences, the sacred dimension of human life, that part of us that recognizes the oneness and the nothingness of every category, and the futility of writing “his name” in the sand only to show us that some realities, like the sacred, cannot be named, but can be held in the metaphor of “one ocean which is all oceans holy”.

The metaphors of the ocean and of the sea are very powerful in both texts. Nichol creates a powerful allusion to the *chora* through merging the sea with the feminine: “surely I will rise from the bed to find her I will rise from the bed & find the sea surely she’ll be standing there she’ll be there I will hold her & she will not name me” (9). The text of *Journal* supports the reading of the image of the sea and the ocean as a metaphor for the primordial, and the feminine,

for the semiotic *chora*. Nichol continues to implicitly compare “her” to the sea throughout the text by substituting the feminine pronoun “she” for the sea.

The author is haunted by the magnetic pull of the feminine beginning, “the sea beckons me i cannot reach it she is there she is that other you stand behind she speaks to me & she does not name me she speaks to me but she does not mark me i am free & she speaks to me” (8-9).

The *chora* is always present in our unconscious and always calling us back. And although we know the return is impossible, the longing and the desire are still there:

it is the name that drives you it is the name draws you you think it is the sea & you rise from your bed you think it is the sea & you leave behind the one who did not name you he puts the mark on you & you take it up father father the mark is on me father you cover my body in names & longings cover my body with screams and holdings there is no sea it is nothing calls you. (8)

So, we have an impossible task – to find a way to recuperate the loss without the actual return. That first cut from the maternal that is necessary to the psychoanalytic subject formation has never healed. We had to leave a place of safety to which we cannot return but we remember the feeling of completeness and of absolute security and still long for it.

It is also easy to connect the concept of the sea to the notion of the oceanic feeling, which, according to Freud, is another name for a religious feeling of belief. The image of the sea also naturally associates with the dissolution of the subject in the pre-formal chaos, not unlike the ritual of baptism symbolizing dissolution in the primordial waters; to the safety of the maternal field:

how far had i come i do not know my name today once was a day as once was another
time my own life began a different course there was no one there was only sea forever
& ever as ever my own wish to leave it tho i swam free oh what a day that was i was
the sea & the sea was in me (12)

He juxtaposes naming to the possibility and to the freedom of using language for other purposes. Readers learn from the *Journal* that there are so many other aspects of language that need to be appreciated and simply enjoyed – for example, pure sound, musicality, rhythm, silence, longing, fear and desire: “i am full of this longing i thought i meet another & i place my longing on her i place my longing in my voice & say hello hello she says her voice is filled with longing” (11). By relying on the principles of *écriture féminine*, Nichol’s poetry is striving to return us to the forgotten oral, aural, auditory, vocalic, musical, rhythmical embodied relationship with language. It is striving to perform an impossible return to the maternal *chora*.

This longing permeates *Journal*. The subject is haunted by his almost obsessive desire to go back to the mother, to the beginning that is feminine and presymbolic in its nature:

maybe theres a point you can start from mother where it all ties together the unifying oh i
do shift plots or points of view stepping in & out of people who are not real to me so
involved in apologies & shame because i am not really me alright mother i start over
again i start over again with you just so the head can rest from wandering like i always
wanted to mother always wanted to stay there in your arms for hours (69-70)

Thus, the writing subject in *Journal* comes dangerously close to crossing the boundaries of one of the most powerful sacred cultural taboos – love for the mother. This exquisitely

expressed forbidden longing to return to the mother is present like a persistent painful pulse, adding an unsettling quality to the text of *Journal*:

i am still dancing mother still turning in the circles we described all description part of
you inside you marking the limits of the page of what i say maybe i say nothing
maybe its simply me saying its over in a different way all the sense i'd known caught up
in you caught up in being part of you the heart is broken mommy broken in two & yes its
painful mommy yes I miss you & no i can never have you really not the way i wanted
you. (70)

A heart that was once one is “broken in two,” and the pain of this break is still powerful. The separation wound never heals, and we are “caught up in being part of you [mother],” and the pain never goes away. And even though the literal return is impossible, what remains possible is a metaphoric literary return through language – a symbolic journey back to the feminine maternal beginning.

Thus, the above examples clearly show that a commitment to similar principles of openness, multiplicity, allowing, fluidity, characteristic of *écriture féminine*, guides Nichol's poetic practice. In many ways, his writing exhibits features of semiotic style that Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous tried to bring out of repression and back into language. For example, he draws the readers into appreciating the side of language where content yields to form and process.

A reader is a witness to such material aspects of language as visual rhythm, the arrangement of space and a stylistic use of typography, sound play, the incantatory power of words, chants, puns, nonsense, paradox, musicality, flow, silence between words and thoughts,

streams of (un-) consciousness, etc. All these features align his writing with the feminine semiotic style:

To the extent that it [experimental writing] relies heavily on aural signification – on the signifier itself – experimental writing is presymbolic, an expression of the pre-Oedipal union with the mother's body, a gesture, against the repression of the Rule of the Father, towards releasing into written culture the power of the Mother. (DeKoven21)

Nichol's language is embodied and reaches us through the visual/oral/aural aspects. It speaks through the senses and bypasses the mind, and yet is able to reach some other dimension inside a human being that allows us to remember language how we once knew it. Nichol's use of the language is striving to bring the feminine into language and break the existing patriarchal norms with the help of the feminine and the maternal semiotic *chora*.

He privileges the semiotic order by treating language as embodied, a reflection of emotional and psychic energies flowing through the body: "words are extensions of our fears and longings" (*Journal 7*), "bled my mouth dry of words" (*TM*, Bk. 2, "Book of Common Prayer") "try to write the poem i breathe in" (*TM*, Bk. 2, "Book of Common Prayer"). The reader is forced to abandon the abstract, disembodied, rational meaning and come back to the long-forgotten level of participation in the signifying process through experiencing meaning viscerally:

now there is a voice sings
transcribe the aching
i learn by learning

(*TM*, Bk. 2, "Auguries")

How does one “transcribe the aching” through language? Logical language cannot do this, but a “voice [that] sings” aspires to give body a voice, thus, striving to express body thought. The reader is brought to the possibility of experiencing how embodied language bypasses the mind and speaks directly to the senses. This direct communication can be confusing to the mind, “the mouth / takes up the feeling & / confuses / the fused words move out / where the ears were / a numbness grows.” (*TM*, Bk. 1, “saint and”), “these puns are obvious & seal the mind / blinding the eye / which is the imprecision of the word” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Book of Common Prayer”). This struggle of mind to grasp the exact meaning through words, and of its ultimate inability to understand the world of senses and feelings through words can also be heavy and frustrating for the mind, “a mind’s passage thru a weight of feeling,” “questions words cannot understand” (*TM*, Bk. 1, “saint and”). Thus, an order of meaning, different from the logical or symbolic, is shown to be operating. It is, once again, feminine semiotic modality that is revealed through Nichol’s poetic form.

Nichol often exposes the failure of ordinary language to convey bodily meaning when it comes to real experiences like pain and pleasure:

real pleasure

saint reat

the poem can’t provide

so many times the flesh aches with loneliness

& this marble this phony architecture you hide behind

well

.....

& the flesh does ache

& the night is lonely to belong in
(*TM*, Bk. 1, “Scenes”)

In the above stanza, the phrase, “this marble this phony architecture you hide behind / well” is highly suggestive. Architecture can refer to both physical environment of buildings that separate us from each other, in which we hide in our loneliness, but also, because of the earlier mention of the disconnect between poetry and “real pleasure” that it “can’t provide,” I think it is possible to read Nichol’s words as a comment on approaching language as a mere structure, which is as stable and rigid as “marble” and “phony” because it disconnects us from the real experience of the body. His poetry is trying to reconnect the two as he attempts to write from a place of unity of body and mind.

Interestingly, even though Nichol often acknowledges the impossibility of containing lived experience in the rigid structure of language and of attempting to convey an embodied meaning by simply naming feelings and sensations, as in “this nameless ache upon the chest” (*TM*, Bk. 1, “Book of Common Prayer”), he finds a different way to express it through his poetry than the symbolic signification, resorting to more feminine semiotic incarnation of language oriented towards the unity of body and thought.

Nichol’s spiritual search for meaning is closely connected to his search for innovative forms of poetic writing. He is creating a new language that has the power to jolt the reader emotionally and to somehow capture emotionally intense states:

Poetry is an emotional commitment. It is YOU in a naked state. Emotionally raw (is this a justification?) states are poetry. Which is to say emotionally raw states are emotionally

involved states & emotionally involved states are totally involved states. Total involvement is necessary for the writing of a poem. Unless you FEEL it emotionally, physically & intellectually a poem cannot communicate. (*Unnumbered NTBK: 1963-1968?*, n. pag.)

So, as readers, we are offered an opportunity to cultivate our ability to “FEEL” and to achieve illumination through an expanded and subtle refinement of our sensual perception. Thus, language, as in *écriture féminine*, is liberated from being a “marble architecture,” a dead cold structure, disconnected from the body, behind which we hide in our loneliness, and is instead generated from and operates in a place where body and mind are one, and where senses give meaning to the passing moment:

this moment passes as the senses rise
touch ascends with vision
taste smell & sound the image tests the real
world without end
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Auguries”)

Nichol articulates the bodily experience, focusing especially on the synaesthetic presence of all senses together in the moment. A sense of touch, vision, taste, smell, sound and image are all coming together in the present moment to create a perfectly confusing “real” world of emotions, feelings, bodily sensations, pain and pleasure, a world that is limitless in its aliveness, a “world without end” that cannot be contained in abstraction. Thus, Nichol is constantly looking for new ways of signifying, outside of symbolic abstraction and for new poetic forms of expressing body-thoughts, thus, his writing relies on the embodied semiotic dimension of language in very prominent and unique way.

Among the multiple senses, Nichol gives special powers to the sound:

now i dream i walk by the sea & the sea is sound the waves wash over me & the waves
are sound oh these words are useless i swim in the sound & the sound surrounds me
i swallow the sound i scream the sound the sound is me & the sound surrounds ah i
remember christ i remember i lie here in this circle of trees my heart heavy with
remembering in the sound my heart is light in the midst of the sound the hope is
endless (*Journal* 17-18)

So strong and passionate is Nichol's love of the sound that he gives it almost magic power: the sound even acquires a spiritual power of healing – it can lighten the heart and to give hope. The sound is usually expected to appeal to only one of our senses – the auditory one, but Nichol increases the power of sound to engage more senses: the sound becomes tactile, visual, one can “swallow” it “swim” in it, “walk in it.” Actually the sound breaches the border between inside and outside, suggesting a regression to the stage when the experience of the senses is synaesthetic, and there is no distinction between inside and outside. At this stage, all sounds belong to the body. The sound is living vibration that permeates the speaking and the hearing body; it “surrounds” and connects everything in the acoustic space by the mere power of vibration. The poet becomes the embodiment of the sound – “the sound is me.”

The embodied power of sound can also assault lexical meaning and transcend it: “a screaming only you can hear” (*TM*, Bk. 1, “Scenes”). Another line reveals the transcendent power of sound, “sound repeating itself beyond perfect zero” (*TM*, Bk. 1, “Scenes”). Here, the repetition of the sound is akin to a mantra repeated again and again in meditation, so that the

lexical meaning of the word is dissolved, but the sound has a new visceral meaning – that of bypassing the mind and inducing a certain “totally involved” state:

these words i write if less familiar ... all these words are only nothing all these words
are only sounds i dance with the sounds i sing with the sounds the sound is all the
meaning that there is the sound is the loving the sound is the longing oh god i am
so full of sound i open my mouth & sound escapes i open my mouth to let the sound
escape my body fills with it i vibrate with the sound i hate the words the words
destroy the sounds with useless meanings the meanings pile up & the sound is lost i
scream with the sound i live in the sound the sound flows around me i am lost in it
oh surely this is knowing to live & breathe & celebrate the sound all heaven is sound i
am caught in the sound father you named me but gave me no sound it was a flat
lifeless thing this naming (*Journal* 17-18)

Nichol renders words useless in their attempt to express the ineffable embodied meaning. But the power of live sound can take us to that place where body-thought can find expression through embodied language: “i live in sound.” In that body-mind place, the sound is equated with feeling, “the sound is the longing,” with the only meaning “the sound is all the meaning that there is,” which, the text suggests, is love: “the sound is the loving.” We even see spiritual and energetic connotations of the sound: “i vibrate with the sound” and “all heaven is sound.” In contrast, Nichol calls the naming power of words a “flat lifeless thing” and “only nothing,” saying he hates the words for doing violence to the sound: “i hate the words the words destroy the sounds with useless meanings the meanings pile up & the sound is lost.” He juxtaposes the function of naming to the potential of poetic language to present us with a polyphony of meanings opening simultaneously in multiple directions and creating a collage of possible

readings. In this way, naming means losing the essence of experience, especially the ineffable mystical experience of the Being: “the jews knew / that if they never named you they would never lose you” (*TM*, Bk. 3, VIII).

Nichol often compares the sound to the limitless sea in which one drowns, to which one surrenders. The sea is of sound is powerful and overwhelming. The movement of surrender and “opening” is of utmost importance here as it stands in direct opposition to the thetic impulse to close, capture and fix in place by naming through language, “laughing at the unreality of the name the naming / it is the stuff of myth or lies” (*TM*, Bk. 3, VIII). The two modes are incompatible. In fact, his texts posit them as mutually exclusive. As we learned above, the world of senses and experience is real and limitless, while the “naming” is “the stuff of myth or lies.” Thus, we see a clear juxtaposition in Nichol’s poetic practice of the two modes of signification – the masculine symbolic mode and the feminine semiotic one that his practice privileges.

The above discussion supports the reading of the masculine and the feminine in Nichol’s writing as two dominant principles found in language and culture. There is sufficient evidence that shows how an individual’s entry into the symbolic order of language coincides with her “capitulation to the dominant, protecting Father-as-cultural-principle. The acquisition of culture, in human society as we know it, is the institution of what Jacques Lacan calls the ‘Rule of the Father,’ or patriarchy” (DeKoven20). This shift results in a powerful repression of the presymbolic stage and its inherent logic:

... [it] come[s] at the cost of repressing, again simultaneously, presymbolic language and the infant’s omnipotent, magical unity of the self with the outer world, of which presymbolic language is the expression. The symbolic language of the Father, of

patriarchy, is in fact a compensation for that lost omnipotent unity: a means of dominating and controlling the newly alienated outer world. In Lacan's theory, the repression concomitant with acquisition of symbolic language, which he sees as the repression of the ascendant signifier, creates and wholly constitutes the unconscious: the exclusive content of the unconscious is the 'autonomous' or 'supreme' signifier.

(DeKoven 20-21)

The cost is high. Our culture has impoverished itself by denying the feminine, and both men and women are suffering the loss. Language, which is becoming more and more technical and homogeneous, is only a reflection of the guiding logic of perpetuating the principles of control and domination, and can mean a very different future for the next generation. We can enrich our language and our relationships with each other by finding ways to bring back the feminine principles of openness, fluidity, acceptance, and, most importantly, of allowing otherness and heterogeneity.

Derrida says that if our culture is to survive in the long run, we are to find our survival in the feminine force, which is literally a guarantee of the continuation of life; we are to move from the symbolic and "phallogocentric" use of language to the semiotic feminine mode:

insofar as i am and follow (je suis) my father, i am dead, i am the dead man and i am death. insofar as i am and follow my mother, i am life which still goes on, the living man, the living woman... surviving is the mother, survival is the name of the mother. this living on is my life, which it goes beyond, and the name of my death, of my dead life, that is the no and the name of my father, that is to say, my patronymic" (in Scobie "Surviving the Paraph-raise" 61-62).

Nichol's dedication to the more feminine (semiotic) forms of signifying makes his writing take on a transformative quality. What gets transformed in the process of writing and reading is the writing and reading subject's relationship to the self. Critics have also noticed this "magic" dimension of language as live power and presence in Nichol's poetry:

His writing is both kinetic and transformative. He always perceives language as a transformative process he could participate in, not as a static tool he could only use: language is magic, alive, a mysterious presence at the heart of our every dealing with 'the world' ... No matter what he wrote, what primarily attracted him to language were its transformative powers. (Barbour 20-21)

Nichol's writing points beyond itself, beyond the page, beyond the symbol, beyond meaning to silence and music. Lexical meaning becomes dissolved in the revelation of all other possible meanings – unconscious, pre-verbal, instinctual, musical, semiotic, energetic signatures. It points to the transitions taking place in the consciousness of the writer allowing the readers to experience these transformations in their own perception. The reader is encouraged to abandon his quest for a certain kind of knowledge or trying to understand the meaning of the text on the level of regular logic of referentiality. Instead, he is invited to surrender to the senses and the unconscious: "Meaning emerg[es] from the physical impact it plays upon our senses. The reader with wakening sensibilities perceiving language through the body, proprioceptive, as Olson. Feeling for taste and smell. In perhaps an erotic excess" (Karasick 303).

In this "erotic excess" of the sensual language, the denotational power of language is replaced by a new kind of meaning that does not tell the reader about a certain phenomenal object of study positioned outside of him, but makes the reader and his meaning-making thought

processes the “object” of his own investigation. Thus, it informs the reader about himself, as well as about the nature of language and culture, and exposes the otherwise hidden cultural processes of creating meaning.

Language becomes the master, and the subject becomes the apprentice. Nichol reveres language as a powerful dynamic mystical force, a living breathing sound whose power one can experience in the body. Language itself is revealed as a sacred process of creation that transforms anyone who enters it. The following two chapters will look closely at such transformations.

Chapter 4. Poetic Language as the Other of Language

What makes language poetic? Roman Jakobson, one of the first structural linguists, offers a definition that marks an important stage in the evolution of the concept. He extends the “poetic function” beyond the works of poetry and contrasts poetic language with metalanguage. He gives as much importance to the formal elements of language as he does to the content, thus, acknowledging that form has its own level of meaning. In his seminal work, “Linguistics and Poetics,” Jakobson explains that although a poetic function most commonly and dramatically characterizes poetry, it can also be found in prose. He offers an in-depth analysis of the poetic function of language:

The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence. In poetry one syllable is equalized with any other syllable of the same

sequence; word stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress; prosodic long is matched with long, and short with short; word boundary equals word boundary, no boundary equals no boundary; syntactic pause equals syntactic pause, no pause equals no pause. Syllables are converted into units of measure, and so are morae and stresses.

It may be objected that metalanguage also makes a sequential use of equivalent units when combining synonymic expressions in an equational sentence. Poetry and metalanguage, however, are in diametrical opposition to each other: in metalanguage the sequence is used to build an equation, whereas in poetry the equation is used to build a sequence. (339)

In other words, poetic function operates by projecting equivalence from the axis of selection – choosing one element out of a set of “candidate elements” that could occupy that place in a syntagm – onto the axis of communication. Thus, within a sequence, various elements can be chosen along the axis of selection to produce a new meaning of the sequence by introducing new semantic context but without affecting the formal syntagmatic structure of the sequence. As importantly, poetic function throws the construction of message into relief.

The above definition reveals the focus of the structuralist approach on the formal structure of language and lack of attention to the relationship between language and the speaking/writing subject. Emile Benveniste’s contribution to exploring poetic language is of great value because he problematized the structuralist thesis of considering language merely as a system of abstract interchangeable signs. Specifically, he extended our cultural understanding of language beyond a mere structure by bringing such new elements of language into focus of his

drive-discharge through language is in excess of meaning and representation. The materiality of language itself can discharge drives through the symbolic but always in excess of the symbolic. (*Ethics...* 2)

Thus, poetic language, being the other of ordinary language, expands our understanding of *semiosis* by allowing those aspects of language that are usually considered to be “non-signifying” to signify, and to signify powerfully. This reversal reveals another form of meaning – actually, the meaning found in the form itself – thus, exposing the very mechanism of meaning-making, and how it represses the semiosis of the feminine material dimension of the signifier in order to rely on an abstract symbolic model of language cut off from the speaker. Kristeva explains how the arbitrariness of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, proposed by the structuralist approach, can be hypothesized as “motivated” by certain principles uncovered by psychoanalysis in other signifying systems:

this principle of motivation [lies] in the Freudian notion of the unconscious insofar as the theories of drives [*pulsions*] and primary processes (displacement and condensation) can connect “empty signifiers” to psychosomatic functionings, or can at least link them in a sequence of metaphors and metonymies; though undecidable, such a sequence replaces “arbitrariness” with “articulation.” The discourse of analysands, language “pathologies,” and artistic, particularly poetic, systems are especially suited to such an exploration .

(*Revolution...* 22)

Freud revealed the existing relationship between linguistic form and psychic structures by exposing how the repressed motivations or sublimated conflicts find their expression in slips of the tongue, free associations, jokes, the play on words, etc. Also, primary processes of

condensation and displacement are found both in dreams and in poetic language. In other words, in that special other incarnation of language where the mechanism of repression is somehow deferred, the other of consciousness can be met.

Thus, psychoanalysis as a field drew attention not only to the hidden parts of the human psyche, but also to the other side of language. To summarize the main claim thus far, what we speak of does not represent the totality of our psycho-linguistic activity, just as what we perceive through consciousness does not reflect the totality or the richness of our human experience. There remains another hidden meaning that is not on the surface of language and that, therefore, takes some time to arrive at – “learn the meaning behind the meaning said” (Nichol, *TM*, Bk. 1, “Saint Reat”). Freud also focused on how to elicit that other meaning through the psychoanalytic techniques of dream recollection and interpretation, analysis of verbalized free associations and fantasies, as well as gaps in language, ruptures, and leaps from one idea to the next. The attention has now shifted to the relationship between the unconscious and its expression in language.

We are beginning to comprehend that besides the articulation of symbolic meaning, poetic practice acquires other qualities – for example, destruction of the symbolic meaning, the cathartic release of the drives, and the renewal of psychic balance. Jean Graybeal offers a comparison between psychoanalytic and poetic practice in terms of their different contributions to the subject’s self-discovery and recovery from the “symbolic collapse” of meaning:

Although poetry, religion, and psychoanalysis all deal with the ‘subject’s battle with symbolic collapse’ by releasing the drives into the Symbolic without threatening its collapse, psychoanalysis is an ‘elaboration’ of the psychic causes of suffering. Poetry and religion, on the other hand, are ‘closer to catharsis.’ [...] Whereas poetry ‘displaces’ and

‘dissolves’ semiotic forces, analysis names them. Like poetic discourse, analytic discourse is involved in the creation of metaphors which, through the process of imagination, transfer semiotic forces into language. (9)

We are getting to the heart of a crucial understanding of poetic language. Instead of performing the most common function of ordinary language, which is to render information, poetic language is given a special power to restructure the psyche by enabling a certain transformation of consciousness and allowing a healing through a cathartic release of the repressed material – reaching and expressing that which cannot be explained but can still be experienced and pointed to through the power of poetic language to bypass the mind. This prepares us for a deeper understanding of the symbolic collapse of the writing subject.

Kristeva compares the power of poetic practice to that of psychic revolt and explains that through the power of imagination one can confront the following:

the unity of the law, being, and the self to which man accedes in jouissance. [...] The permanence of contradiction, the temporariness of reconciliation, the bringing to the fore of everything that puts the very possibility of unitary meaning to the test (such as the drive, the unnamable feminine, destructivity, psychosis, etc.): these are what the culture of revolt explores. (*Intimate Revolt* 10)

Thus, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and ineffability of the feminine privileged in poetic practice expose the need for the homogeneity and uniformity prevalent in our culture. At the same time, the force of contradiction, the movement of negativity, desires and pleasure undermine the false stability of conceptual structures, which can be to a degree useful, but become dangerous when they are used to “claim” the richness of experience and represent it. The

chaotic nature of experience is threatening. Poetic language embodies and thus opens us to this primordial, primary, or elemental way of thinking or perceiving.

In its feminine semiotic incarnation, poetic practice effects “erasure of the subject/object borders, assault of the drive: language making itself tonality (Stimmung), memory of being, music of the body and of matter” (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 9). It is a sacred process of meaning-making and reinvention – of the world and of the self – where all meanings are possible in each moment of potentiality:

they are all me
one way
 not me
another
 tightened focus rather
centre of a principle uncertainty

(*TM*, Bk. 5, Chain 2)

We are constantly undergoing the process of self-destruction and self-renewal. The process is invisible and symbolic, but potent all the same. It affects one’s position in the world, allows one to reconsider one’s relationship with reality and renegotiate the fixity of all socio-cultural contracts:

nova then.
we are made new, made over
even as the old order falls
a part a round
us our deus
numbered

(*TM*, Bk(s) 7 &, “St. Anzas V”)

We are allowed to begin again in the present moment. This sacred activity of re-beginning also manifests its transformative, healing, cathartic, rejuvenating, and reconstructive power – just like religious and psychoanalytic discourse, poetic practice can help us reinvent the way we imagine ourselves and others. Such remaking happens in the moment of psychic rebirth, experienced during the sacred rituals, and apparently, the same moment of infinite potentiality is available to the subject in poetic practice, and it opens a new source of energy and a new impetus for subjects to reclaim their freedom to be lost in language, to be found through language, to be made, unmade and re-made through the power of poetic language, the power not unlike that of sacred creation.

In his book, *Poetry and the Sacred*, Vincent Buckley proposes an interesting formula of inverse proportionality to explain the relationship between the presence of the sacred in poetry and in society:

I do not think it tendentious to maintain that the religious impulse [...] persists in a remarkable and perhaps astonishing way in poetry, so that we may say that, even in a desacralised society like our own, there are some poets who, as a mode of life, concern themselves with estimating, defining, and recreating manifestations of the sacred. In fact, in a heavily desacralised society there may be a few poets whose emphasis on this activity will be more intensive and exclusive than it would have been in a society more habitually open to the sacred dimensions of life. (17)

In a desacralised culture like ours, the feminine and the sacred are othered. They are repressed in the name of the uniformity and sameness. Poetic practice engages both without naming them, without claiming them as familiar, but by extending language itself beyond its

limits to the realm of radical alterity – poetic language becomes the other of language. Sacred requires a site to manifest itself. Poetry, as a medium, makes possible the manifestation of the sacred. So, poetic practice creates its own sacred temporality, its own sacred space and meaning. It becomes the sacred creation itself.

In his work, Nichol often shares his belief in the sacredness of the language activity itself:

I began to become more conscious that I had a belief, in essence, in the sacredness of the activity of language – not in the particular language necessary. ... But I think it's the activity of language itself, which is different in each language space you enter. I have a profound belief in *that* as a sacred activity – that is to say, *something* goes on.

(“The Sacred in Writing” 334)

Even though the presence and power of this mysterious self-generating activity, found in language, are unmistakable, the mystery underlying the creative process itself remains unnamable. It can only be pointed to using words that do not name but point – words like “that,” “something,” or “thing”: “I have to somehow have the ability to follow where the thing itself leads me” (334). This concept of being led by the activity of writing itself opens a new connection between poetic writing and the unconscious that safeguards our primordial relationship with the sacred.

Jung was also captivated by the special nature of a certain act of writing, similar to what Nichol is describing as a sacred activity. Jung articulates the difference between two types of writing acts, and the main difference between them is the presence or absence of personal will. The first kind is completely subjected to the authorial intention of the poet and is aimed at a very specific result. The form of such writing is “entirely subordinated to his artistic purpose; he wants to express this and nothing else” (“On the Relation” 157). But this research is interested in

the opposite mode of writing in works that align the creative process with a power larger than the writer. Jung describes them as follows:

works which flow more or less complete and perfect from the author's pen. ... These works positively force themselves upon the author; his hand is seized, his pen writes things that his mind contemplates with amazement. The work brings with it its own form; anything he wants to add is rejected, and what he himself would like to reject is thrust back at him. ("On the Relation" 158)

It seems to echo Nichol's perception of his own writing practice, where language is in charge of the process, and the writer is only a careful listener, or as Nichol called himself "an apprentice to language." Words and lines arrive as if by magic if the writer is in a certain open and perceptive state of mind:

(driving in the dark towards Palo Alto
almost asleep in the back seat of the car
the first lines of this poem came
eight hours after that walk thru Berkeley
even as these lines arrive
two days later at the edge of the Pacific at Del Mar
the lines arrive
like waves
beat at the shore of some knowing
(*TM*, Bk(s) 7 &, "Scriptures: 12th Sequence")

What is interesting about this description of the process of the lines arriving is that in order to be in a highly perceptive and receptive state of mind, the poet does not necessarily need to rely on the help of the conscious mind. In fact, the opposite might be more helpful: being in a

meditative state of relaxed attention – “almost asleep” – can make one more attuned to the present moment when the poem is emerging in its pure unexpected form, not contaminated by the personal conscious mind. It is often in the act of the author’s abandoning the ordinary logic of the profane that the sacred can manifest itself and reveal its presence in what might seem as a chance happening:

as conjunctions, letters, forces,
the coincidental
truths the mouth shapes despite itself
...
raw puns elevate me
lift me closer to the mystery
divine word to divine
the pen twitches above the page
dips down
a flow of language tapping in
keyed or written as written
(*TM*, Bk(s) 7 &, “St. Anzas V”)

Instead of relying on the conscious construction of the poem, Nichol gives importance to chance, “the coincidental truths” that are spoken despite one’s will, the mystery, the power of “raw puns” to elevate one to the mystery, and the tapping into the “flow of language.” These “chance” connections between the elements of the poem are rich with possibility and multiplicity – they are pure joyful discoveries for both the writer and the readers. Jung can help us understand the role of the unconscious in the inner workings of great works of art that are able to make such chance discoveries:

While his [sic] [artist's] conscious mind stands amazed and empty before this phenomenon, he is overwhelmed by a flood of thoughts and images which he never intended to create and which his own will could never have brought into being. ... He can only obey the apparently alien impulse within him and follow where it leads, sensing that his work is greater than himself, and wields a power which is not his and which he cannot command. Here the artist is not identical with the process of creation; he is aware that he is subordinate to his work or stands outside it, as though he were a second person; or as though a person other than himself had fallen within the magic circle of an alien will. ("On the Relation" 158)

Looking deeper at this "alien will" at work, we might ask – what is its origin? What is it that the artist submits himself to? What is achieved by surrendering the ego and merging with the flow of otherness coming from within or without? We are faced yet again with the unnamable alterity inherent in the creative process itself. Nichol often speaks about his tremendous respect for this mysterious process at the heart of language activity and explains that he has learned that "once I respect that activity of the language, then through the language I am literally led to things that I would not arrive at otherwise" ("The Sacred in Writing" 334). Thus, the language is the originary creator, and the writer is the listener who is attuned to the mysterious flow and is being led. Jung offers us a way of looking at the author of such creative process as merely "a reacting subject" ("On the Relation" 158). He continues to say that under certain conditions, a poet is not aware of this alien will guiding his work, "The poet's conviction that he is creating in absolute freedom would then be an illusion: he fancies he is swimming, but in reality an unseen current sweeps him along" (159). The only truth of this process that is obvious is the power larger than the artist moves him:

the mystery of poetry
that i am caught up in
carried out on
the word
of god
 of mouth
 of honour
(*TM*, Bk(s) 7 &, “St. Anzas V”)

The poet is “caught” and “carried” by the flow he connects to, he is “subordinate to his work,” he yields control to the mystery of the process itself and simply trusts the wisdom of words and letters and sounds. This process is far from predictable or peaceful. The creative urge arises from the unconscious with a certain violence and danger, which, according to Jung, lie in its unpredictable, “capricious and willful” as well as “imperious” nature (“On the Relation” 159):

The unborn work in the psyche of the artist is a force of nature that achieves its end either with tyrannical might or with the subtle cunning of nature herself, quite regardless of the personal fate of the man [sic] who is its vehicle. The creative urge lives and grows in him like a tree in the earth from which it draws its nourishment. We would do well, therefore, to think of the creative process as a living thing implanted in the human psyche. In the language of analytical psychology this living thing is an *autonomous complex*. It is a split-off portion of the psyche, which leads a life of its own outside the hierarchy of consciousness. (“On the Relation” 159-160)

Interestingly, Nichol also refers to the creative process as a “living thing” that controls or “grips” the writer, and in addition to “catching” and “carrying” him, can also devour him as it is, in his words, “omnivorous.” Nichol’s work teaches us that a poet’s task is to listen and perceive

the sacred unfolding of the poem instead of imposing his own will on the process of constructing the poem. He is to go to the interior place through meditation and to sharpen his perception, his instinct and his intuition and his trust that if he is able to attune to the inherent rhythm of the poem, if he is able to hear, he will be guided:

to hear everything!
my waiting eardrums tremble anew,
nameless delicate breath explodes,
a terrible inspiration now grips me
omnivorous
unexplainable
(no truly available ideas (no substance))
could ordinary language display wisdom?
ideation, naming,
demands man's actual control.

("Translating Translating Apollinaire 17" 150)

The contrast between the "unexplainable" and "omnivorous" power that "grips" the writer through a "terrible inspiration" prevalent in the poetic process and the "ordinary language" with its simple mechanical processes of "ideation" and "naming" becomes clear in the last few lines of the stanza. The last line offers a culmination of the meaning in revealing the main difference between the two forms of language – the concept of "man's actual control," which is necessary in the ordinary language, whose "wisdom" Nichol questions. This control is absent in poetic writing, and the author is at the mercy of the dormant forces of the psyche that are also gateways to new meaning obtained through a chance revelation.

Jung explains that such class of poetic works created from the unconscious often exceeds comprehension of both the writer and a reader because “we are dealing with an event originating in unconscious nature; with something that achieves its aim without the assistance of human consciousness. And often defies it by willfully insisting on its own form and effect” (“On the Relation” 160). So, the form itself becomes the revelation of the other order that is characterized by its own force of natality. Self-birthing, overflowing creative process..... interestingly, what was a revelation for the writer has a similar revelatory effect on the reader. It is almost like if the consciousness of the author is in a certain “open and receptive” state, he can capture it in the writing and create the same effect in the reader’s consciousness. With this kind of literary work, a reader has a much more difficult job:

we would have to be prepared for something suprapersonal that transcends our understanding to the same degree that the author’s consciousness was in abeyance during the process of creation. We would expect a strangeness of form and content, thoughts that can only be apprehended intuitively, a language pregnant with meanings, and images that are true symbols because they are the best possible expressions for something unknown – bridges thrown out towards an unseen shore. (Jung, “On the Relation” 160)

Thus, this kind of writing stems from a special state and requires the same special kind of state from the reader. The language does not point to or refer to readily available, comprehensible reality. It fights back. It is opaque and resistant. It points to the ineffable, the indescribable, *das ganz Andere*. It shocks us with the absence of common sense, and yet, a strong intimation of some other deeper meaning that remains ungraspable, but not unperceivable. This kind of writing is harder to understand or “decipher” as it relies heavily on the power of symbol,

which is “the intimation of the meaning beyond the level of our present power of comprehension” (Jung, “On the Relation” 161).

However, there is meaning beyond comprehension. There is some unconscious recognition or understanding that is present in the totality of the mind and psyche. Remember Nichol’s “the lines arrive / like waves / beat at the shore of some knowing” (*TM*, Bk(s) 7 &, “Scriptures: 12th Sequence”). There is some knowing that is already there on the shore, which is a metaphor for the mind, in its complexity of conscious and unconscious processes, receiving the gift of the poem. This other meaning can appear as non-meaning first:

pun’s spun
an agrammatical construction
which is asense, an essence
like no sense you ever knew
a 6th or 7th sense
(*TM*, Bk(s) 7 &, “St. Anzas V”)

But the deeper meaning will slowly reveal itself if the reader intuitively follows the poem and opens to the possibility of widening his perception and cultivating new senses we never knew. If we open to such works that are not readily open to us, we might experience their real long-term transformative effect on our psyche. Jung explains the power of such “openly symbolic” works to haunt the reader:

their pregnant language cries out at us that they mean more than they say. We can put our finger on the symbol at once, even though we may not be able to unriddle its meaning to our entire satisfaction. A symbol remains a perpetual challenge to our thoughts and feelings. That probably explains why a symbolic work is so stimulating, why it grips us so intensely, but also why it seldom affords us a purely aesthetic enjoyment. A work that

is not symbolic appeals much more to our aesthetic sensibility because it is complete in itself and fulfils its purpose. (“On the Relation” 161)

In other words, to submit oneself to the power of the work guided by the unconscious is to be open to the violence of the work, the intrusion of the work on one’s senses and one’s imagination; it’s risking one’s sanity for the sake of asking questions that have no answers. Jung explains the autonomous complex as:

a psychic formation that remains subliminal until its energy-charge is sufficient to carry it over the threshold of consciousness. Its association with consciousness does not mean that it is assimilated, only that it is perceived; but it is not subject to conscious control, and can be neither inhibited nor voluntarily reproduced. Therein lies the autonomy of the complex; it appears and disappears in accordance with its own inherent tendencies, independently of the conscious will. (“On the Relation” 162-3)

Jung’s vision of poetic process is crucial in helping us better understand the power of poetry to reach the collective unconscious and through it, attune the reader to the primordial world. The collective unconscious is “a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind” (Jung, “On the Relation” 164). To build on this definition, poetic reaches a dimension within human beings that is primal, mythological, sacred, and vital:

Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he entralls and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring. He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, and evokes in us all those beneficent forces

that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find a refuge from every peril and to outlive the longest night.

That is the secret of great art, and of its effect upon us. The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back into the deepest springs of life. (“On the Relation” 166)

Thus, poetic practice aims to reactivate that creative source and to connect us to this dimension that has been neglected, abjected, forgotten and denied. It is the primal, primordial sacred centre that is also connected to the collective unconscious. And whoever can reach it, invoke it and re-create it in language, can reach the relationship with the sacred within each one of us. Jung calls this the “secret of great art.”

Conclusions

Thus far, in this chapter, we have been exploring the relationship between poetic process and the sacred, and at this point, i think, we can venture a hypothesis that the process of poetic creation is not other to the process of sacred creation. They are connected by an invisible dimension of reality that reveals the underlying primordial sacrality and unity of all things.

Nichol acknowledges the difficulty of explaining this underlying unity and totality through ordinary language that demands dissecting it into categories and parts:

The other thing making it difficult to talk about it is obviously there's unity in that act and the only way I can talk about it is divide it into sections. There's me and there's the moment of the writing and there's the language that's leading me, but in some real sense, when it's all working, it's all one activity. I'm not dividing it up, I'm not stopping and thinking, where does the poem want to go, or whose turn is it to lead in the dance, I'm just doing it, and I'm writing the thing. And that activity has come to seem to me the essence of what I was reaching for as a kid in my religious experience. (334-5)

Thus, it is not through a thematic engagement with the sacred on the level of content, but through the form and materiality of language itself that the process of poetic creation is both sacred and feminine in its mystical openness and surrender to the absolute other.

Poetic language can induce a transformation of consciousness and invoke the sacred by expanding the language function beyond the discursive level. Thomas A. Williams, for, example, identifies this as the *yantric* function of poetic language. In the seminal study of by Madhu Khanna, *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*, yantras are defined as powerful symbols used in meditation and sacred rituals to help a person in her spiritual journey. They “function as revelatory symbols of cosmic truths and as instructional charts of the spiritual aspect of human experience” (Khanna 12). Yantra is seen a powerful symbol that invites the individual to return to the primordial center and wholeness of all life. “Every yantra is a sacred enclosure (temenos), a ‘dwelling,’ or receptacle” of the divine (Khanna 12). “Williams draws attention to the enigmatic manifestation of the *yantric* function within the poetic process:

[it emerges] quite mysteriously from the sounds, rhythms, images which together make the whole work. On a discursive level, a poem may make statements *about* the absolute;

on the yantric level, which, mistaken for *statement about*, may even seem nonsensical, it opens a way into the absolute. (49)

Poetic process can reorient ordinary consciousness by attuning it to the primordial spiritual truths buried deep in the unconscious mind. Instead of describing or explaining the experience of the sacred, poetic language reveals the process of sacral creation by embodying it, becoming a sacred dwelling in its own right, thus, inaugurating its own sacred reality. By drawing attention to the very process of creation, the poetic principle becomes originary and reveals its inherent generative force, which is also associated with the feminine. Poetic language does not strive to contain the sacred forces, to impose a symbolic order on the primordial chaos with its own valid logic that, however, is threatening to our society ruled by the Law of the Father. Poetic practice allows the sacred to manifest through the text and induce the experience of a revelation in both the writer and the reader. The state that is intended is then invited and is sometimes induced. Buckley describes this process as follows:

poetry can treat process as manifesting the state to which it aspires; in very different senses, that state is in each case a sacred one; the perception of it is in each case a sacred awareness; in both cases religious poetry is being used not as a reminder of what is already known, but as a way of establishing a sense of the sacred which, without such a use of language, could not be established at all. (47)

Poetic practice does not strive to describe the sacred, but is dedicated to revealing the sacred process of creation in the moment. So, the focus is not on expressing the sacred – the famous ineffability thesis. More than that, the sense of the sacred is suggested and invoked. Incantations. Magic power of language. The power of sound. The breath. The living spirit. One

can almost see the spectre of the sacred haunting the text. Radical poetic writing makes us question the reality of things. It exposes the paradoxes and contradictions of reality. Just as the subject of the psychoanalysis reveals the alterity within, so does poetic language reveal an alterity within ordinary language and alterity within reality. That alterity is Otto's *das ganz Andere*, the Jungian shadow, Kristeva's semiotic *chora*, Freudian uncanny and unconscious, a double, a spectre, a repressed other.

Poetic text emerges on the magical intersection of breath and spirit, flesh and faith. It can induce a certain state in which the manifestation of the sacred becomes possible through a revelation or a hierophany:

For poetry is an art and act which combines the forming of a verbal statement with the completion of a rhythmic movement both on the page and from within the psyche; and it usually does so by heightening imagined or observed particulars to the condition where they have a force as symbols. If this art and act are atavistic, they are also surprisingly difficult and complex. In fact, they serve something of the purpose of a sacralising act; they are resorted to in order to set aside certain experiences or places or people or memories as representatively revealing ones – in however attenuated a form, sacred ones.

(Buckley 20-21)

When even a poet is surprised by the revelation language brings, an understanding emerges that language is not a tool, but a force, a medium that has almost a supernatural agency. Thus, poetic practice is a special act that invokes the other inside the subject and the other realm of being. Through this invocation, it becomes a combination of both a conscious intention and an act of attempting to open the subject to a more complete picture of herself and the world.

Buckley explains the concept of religious poetry to incorporate this sacralising nature of the work and redefines religious poets as those who:

establish a sense of unity in their poetry and who are speaking not of religion in poetry but of poetry as a religious act; and that they are locating the religious nature of that act neither in some thesis about the autotelic status of poetry nor in some contention about the basic themes or subjects for poetry but in terms of how the poet is brought as a religious being, concerned with human life and an actor in its drama to create works which themselves carry his religious being, fortify creation and exist as, in a sense, sacred spaces. (9)

In our attempt to develop a deeper understanding of poetic language “as a religious act,” as Buckley calls it or as a “sacred activity,” as Nichol calls it, it would not be inappropriate to suggest that the sacred activity of language is in the act of attunement – attunement through poetic language to adjust our perception to the invisible realm of the sacred. It is done through a mystical and mysterious alignment that is also feminine in nature as its direction is opposite to the masculine push forward – instead, poetic practice allows and opens to the absolute alterity and lets it in.

What makes language poetic? Moving from the constraints of the structuralist definition of poetic language, with its focus on the formal, structural features of language, to a post-structuralist view allows us to reach a deeper understanding of poetic language. In particular, the connection between poetic language and the unconscious becomes obvious. The ability of poetic language to open to the dormant forces, connecting us to the unconscious and to the feminine semiotic dimension opens it to the possibility of otherness inside and outside. Poetic practice

becomes writing by surrendering the writer to the language. The other of language can reveal the otherness of the sacred in each moment of composition. The primordial thinking, relationship to the body and the sacred reality, stored in the unconscious is released into the language through allowing the feminine side of language to come alive.

The following chapter discusses specific ways a poetic practice can reach those parts of our psyche that ordinary language cannot access and shows how it can effect powerful changes in the psyche by relying on similar mechanisms of transformation engaged by the sacred rituals.

Chapter 5. Poetic Writing as a Sacred Ritual

In this chapter, I turn to the exploration of another connection between the poetic and the sacred by looking specifically at the parallels between poetic practice and sacred rituals. I will rely on Eliade's accounts of sacred rituals and on the theoretical ideas of Kristeva, Bataille, and Cixous to demonstrate how poetic forms of writing can allow us to approach the experience of the sacred by embodying it, and how poetic forms of writing can themselves become vehicles of passage and can enable a transformation of consciousness from the profane into the sacred mode of being and experiencing. The poetic, however, does not only serve to transport the reader into the other realm of being. It is, in itself, the other realm and can be experienced *as* a sacred realm one can dwell in. So, the poetic is both the means and the end destination of the individual's journey to the sacred.

We live in a disenchanted culture where many vital relationships have been severed. We are alienated not only from each other, or from our own selves, but even more disturbingly – we are virtually removed from the realm of the sacred. The relationship between modern man living in Western society and the sacred is described by Mircea Eliade as a peculiar form of denial:

he [modern man] wants to be, and declares himself to be areligious – completely rid of the sacred. On the level of everyday consciousness, he is perhaps right; but he continues to participate in the sacred through his dreams and his daydreams, through certain attitudes (his “love of nature,” for example), through his distractions (reading, theatre), through his nostalgias and his impulses. That is to say, modern man has “forgotten” religion, but the sacred survives, buried in his unconscious. (“The Sacred and the Modern Artist” 82)

Even though due to this denial, modern man has lost his ability to consciously experience the sacred, according to Eliade, he is still nurtured and guided by his unconscious, whose impulses and imagery are “charged with sacrality” (“The Sacred and the Modern Artist”83). Modern artists were among the first to recognize this potential of the unconscious and the need for a new language that will allow us to express the traces of the sacred lying dormant in our unconscious. They were also the ones who proposed new ways of writing that could once again recover the sacred dimension of life.

Each realm of being in the world has its own corresponding form of language it speaks through or embodies. While the common utilitarian language is instrumental in facilitating our daily affairs and our everyday communication, it reveals its impotence for functioning in the other realm, *das ganz Andere*, or *the wholly Other*. Eliade himself points to the failure of the

everyday language to access the realm of the sacred. He exposes the uselessness of the “utilitarian language of everyday life” in rendering the experiences that refer to the sacred mode of being (*The Sacred and the Profane* 16). Eliade explains that after the “death of God” had been publicly proclaimed, the traditional religious language and its conventional imagery and symbolism also proved unfit for expressing the sacred experiences of the modern man (“The Sacred and the Modern Artist” 81). The obsolescence of the old forms had been disclosed.

As a result, in their effort to find a proper medium for expressing the sacred, modern writers and artists begin their quest for new modes of expression. They start by abolishing the traditional forms and pronouncing their “fascination for the formless” and “elementary matter.” They become interested in descending into the “secret or larval modalities” of matter (“The Sacred and the Modern Artist” 83). There, they discover a whole new language – poetic language, which may just have the potential to serve as a vehicle of passage between the two realms of being. Kristeva, Bataille, and Cixous, among others, point out this quality of poetic language that involves a leap into the darkness and the falling down backwards into the uncertainty and ambiguity of the sacred that is unpredictable and can be both generative and destructive at the same time. The act of poetic writing embodies the symbolic transition into the darkness, the void, the *il y a*, the sacred, the prohibited. This transition bears an uncanny resemblance to the symbolic transition effected during various religious rituals described by Eliade as a means of accessing the realm of the sacred.

According to Eliade, The foundation for all rituals lies in their access to sacrality, which is always achieved through a symbolic death of the subject in the profane world. It is often by means of enacting the cosmogonic myth of circular creation and destruction of the world that religious man can experience the sanctity of existence once again. During these rituals, one re-

enters the “sacred dimension of life” and gains access to circular, reversible, and recoverable time that is “eternal mythical present” (*The Sacred and the Profane* 75-82). Eliade insists that this return to the original time has a therapeutic purpose, which is “to begin life once again, a symbolic rebirth” (*The Sacred and the Profane* 82). But before the symbolic rebirth can take place, the world has to go back to the chaos – immersed and dissolved in primordial waters.

Various death rites involve such common themes as “entering the belly of the monster, or being symbolically ‘buried,’ or shut up in the initiatory hut,” which is “equivalent to a regression to the primordial nondistinction, to cosmic night. To emerge from the belly of the monster or the dark hut or the initiatory ‘grave’ is equivalent to a cosmogony” (*The Sacred and the Profane* 195-196). As will be shown later in this paper, the same symbolic initiatory schema of death of the subject and his ensuing rebirth into can be found in poetic writing.

I propose that it is possible to consider the act of poetic writing as a ritual of transgression in a sense that it has the potential and the power to open a secret passage into the realm of the sacred. It challenges the unified, fixed, and stable position of the phenomenological subject. The unstable subject of poetic writing assumes a variety of alternative positions – all of them outside of the fixed *thetic*⁴ locus. Some of these new positions are those of abjection, absence, death, crisis, loss, excess or expenditure, as well as multiplication, pulverization, and the perpetual, fluid becoming.

Georges Bataille was one of the most radical modern thinkers who tried to revive the sacred for the contemporary Western culture. Bataille’s work supports the view of writing as re-enacting the cosmogonic myth by forcing the writing subject to undergo the ritual of destruction

⁴ Kristeva defines *thetic* as a “break in the signifying process, establishing the *identification* of the subject and object as preconditions of propositionality” and that “produces the positing of signification” (*Revolution* 43).

and rebirth. For Bataille the act of writing unveils the sense of the sacred by resorting to the concepts of the impossible, expenditure, loss, void, excess, eroticism, sacrifice and death. Its precise mechanism is paradoxical – it seems that man’s only hope for rebirth and renewal stems from his ability to accept losing himself (Lala, “The Hatred of Poetry in Georges Bataille’s Writing and Thought,” 114-115). In *Visions of Excess*, Bataille speaks precisely about the dangers contained in the power of poetic text to evoke the sacred. The sacred threatens violence and death because it requires crossing the boundaries of the profane and exposing the logic of the profane language and its claim of situating itself as original to humanity. All limitations must be overcome by the one who creates, the one who paints or writes, but there is also no knowing in advance if the awesome power of the sacred “will consume and destroy the one it consecrates” (245).

In Bataille’s thought on writing and the sacred, death is awarded a crucial role. Namely, the access to the sacred, he says, is achieved when the subject is threatened with death. For Bataille, death contains a “miraculous element” that opens a possibility for transformation. In “Sacrifice, the Festival, and the Principles of the Sacred World,” he describes the special power of death. Death, in his view, “discloses the imposture of reality,” showing that the “real order” is not real at all, but just an undetected lie. Death reveals a deeper meaning of life through its absence: “The power of death signifies that this real world can only have a neutral image of life, that life’s intimacy does not reveal its dazzling consumption until the moment it gives out” (46-47).

For Bataille, the act of poetic writing takes the writing subject to the border of the impossible where he is always threatened by the loss and death of his subjectivity. Lala explains that Bataille’s writing subject is in the state of crisis induced by the disappearance of the love-

object and of meaning, the loss of self-identity and all stable forms of narrative. At this moment, “language, the body and the subject reach their own limits in this trial imposed by the impossible and by death” (Lala 107). Having gone through the trial of loss and destruction, the writing subject then “recovers in the symbolic order in order to recompose himself differently and communicate the implications of the experience which produced him.” He, thus, speaks from the position of his own loss, and a position of his radical absence that is death (Lala 108).

In Bataille’s writing, there are places where the writing subject “comes to die, to dissolve, and be born again, or, more precisely, to lose himself in order to recompose himself differently, since loss is the enabling condition of symbolic enactment” (Lala 108). His subject relentlessly goes through the pulsions of dying and immediate recovering and renewal. Thus, Bataille’s act of writing comes close to that of sacrifice, offering within the symbolic order, the possibility of recomposition, transformation, and rebirth. It also bears an uncanny resemblance to Kristeva’s process of *signifince*, in which the subject perpetually revolves between the two modes of language – the symbolic and the semiotic.

For Kristeva, poetic language reinvents the writing subject and puts her in question by undermining her established transcendental positionality. One way the subject escapes the rigidity of the transcendental ego is by becoming the “subject-in-process/on trial” (*sujet-en-process*) who constantly moves between the two modalities of language – the symbolic and the semiotic. Through this process of revolving, the thinking, judging, speaking and writing subject is taken out of the neatly ordered symbolic realm where the ego is guaranteed its unity and cohesion by its being a product of language and the structure of predication. Instead, poetic writing pushes the subject into the undifferentiated sea of drives and pulsions, into the semiotic *chora*, which Kristeva defines as sacred, thus allowing for a semiotic irruption that can shatter

the symbolic order and its boundaries, creating an opening into the sacred, but not before it also destroys all the borders between the subject and the object. It is a total symbolic annihilation of the writing subject that creates both the potentiality and the necessary conditions for her re-emergence and her symbolic rebirth.

The subject is first dissolved in the semiotic, undergoing a variety of experiences that could be read through Kristeva's concepts of the abject and *chora*, both of which problematize the boundary between the subject and the object. *Chora* precedes the symbolic signification and offers instead a possibility of a different psychosomatic feminine modality of signifying. In this "protospace," the meaning remains transverbal and musical, and the subject is not restricted by a fixed, stable, thetic locus. Instead, the subject's experience can be better understood through the metaphors of dissolution, as well as that of perpetual cycle of deconstruction and re-construction, death and rebirth. In this unceasing cycle, after undergoing semiotic annihilation, the subject is then reassembled again in the symbolic only to re-enter the semiotic.

Eliade investigates an example of the widespread ritual of baptism and explains that with the immersion into water, the subject undergoing the baptism achieves the "regression to the preformal reincorporation into the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence" and "a dissolution of forms." With the emergence out of water, a "cosmogonic act of formal manifestation" is performed with the added bonus of purification and regeneration (*The Sacred and the Profane* 130). In a similar way, for Kristeva the boundaries of the writing subject, who immerses into the ocean of her unconscious, her drives and pulsions, are dissolved into the pre-Oedipal unity, or *chora*, that precedes the psychoanalytic subject-formation.

In *Journal*, such dissolution of the subject's boundaries in the totality of the "sea" is a repeated experience: "once was a day as once was another time my own life began a different course there was no one there was only sea forever & ever as ever my own wish to leave it tho i swam free oh what a day that was i was the sea & the sea was in me" (12).

With the emergence out of water, a "cosmogonic act of formal manifestation" is performed with the added bonus of purification and regeneration (130). As has been mentioned, in Kristeva's thought, a subject is always "in process," endlessly going through the signifying process of thetic positing and negativity, becoming dissolved in the semiotic and then reconstructed again in the symbolic modality of language, thus re-enacting the cosmogonic myth constantly. In this way, the rituals of death and resurrection are recreated in the act of writing.

The practice of poetic writing forces an invaluable awareness of the limits of one's subjectivity. This new awareness of one's limits is uncanny, and just like Bataille, Kristeva is interested in investigating precisely those places at the limits of language and of one's subjectivity, where one's being and self-identity is threatened. Poetic language puts the subject in-process/on trial/ in crisis by taking the control over the signifying process away from the unified subject. In the process of *signifince* the subject becomes split between the two modalities of poetic language - the semiotic and the symbolic, and between the two realms - unconscious and conscious.

Kristeva points to the revolutionary power of any artistic practice, and poetic language in particular, to allow this transgression of the unity of the phenomenological subject, the subject of the symbolic. For her, it is precisely in the moment of practice that the subject is "pulverized" and is walking the borderline between the sacred dimension of the semiotic *chora* and the

profane realm of the symbolic. Kristeva explains that this process of *signifince* leads to the “transformation of the thetic position: the destruction of the old one and the formation of another” (*Revolution* 59). Hence, the opportunity for constant reinvention, re-beginning, transformation, regeneration, and rebirth. In this process, the semiotic fluidity is alternating with the symbolic demarcations that, in the midst of this fluidity, become necessary articulations of the thetic cut.

For Kristeva the experience of practice or engagement with aesthetic productions has the power to reveal to the subject her hidden processes and thus allows self-awareness as well as self-creation and re-creation. In this process, she insists, transcendental ego is only one element of subjectivity, one stage of the process of meaning-making, because both meaning and the subject are fluid and relational. The subject is once again an open system and is being constituted by oscillating between the conscious and the unconscious, stability and instability, or negativity and stasis.

Initially, in the pre-subjective state of interconnectedness with the *chora*, a child is experiencing a fusion with that which is the receptacle of all being and becoming, the source. So, the original subject/object dichotomy is set up only after the *chora* has been repressed. Therefore, the *I* first establishes itself through abjection. This is the primary repression that demarcates the subject’s boundaries by abjecting the mother, but this is not final. Even after the secondary repression that happens during the mirror stage and establishes the binary of self/other, the repressed abject comes back again and again threatening the borders and reminds the subject of its undifferentiated existence in the maternal body where no difference and no subjectivity is possible. It is an uncanny presence, awareness of which the subject is destined to

repress because if he acknowledges it, it will annihilate him/her. Kristeva describes this horror and this uncanniness in the opening pages of her *Powers of Horror*:

And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. [...] A massive and sudden emergence of the uncanniness which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.

(2)

The experience of abjection in Kristeva reverberates the experience of nothing in Heidegger. Both draw and threaten the borders of the self at the same time. Anxiety is the only way to grasp the nothing, but it comes through a radical collapse of subjectivity, of the *I*, of the ego, and of all meaning. This encounter of both the nothing and of abject has a revelatory quality to it, it reveals one’s own being, and, paradoxically, it is constitutive of subjectivity (Mcafee 120-121). Mcafee calls this recollection a life-long process, in which a subject is doomed to be continually threatened by the repressed *chora* and the forgotten abject, which, in Kristeva’s thought, are both incarnations of the sacred:

Loss inaugurates being-a-subject, and thereafter abjection marks this loss. Uncanniness is the recollection of that inaugural loss, the reminder of the *chora* that one has

forgotten/repressed. Bringing together Heidegger and Kristeva we can say: subjectivity is constituted by being held out into the nothing that abjection marks. (122)

The remarkable experience of the semiotic *chora* through language is a liminal and uncanny one as it threatens psychosis and disintegration of the subject's borders. But Kristeva sees the benefits of this experience in that it "opens psychological life to infinite re-creation," and this same circular movement is at the basis of Freudian psychoanalysis as an "invitation to anamnesis in the goal of a rebirth, that is, a psychological restructuring" (*Intimate Revolt* 8). Kristeva says that through poetic language one can attain "a child-like state of language," "an experimental psychosis," in which the subject's unity is annihilated (*Intimate Revolt* 10). She offers an even more precise explanation of the complex concept of the breach of thethetic in relation to the transgression and the dissolution of symbolic unity:

Poetic mimesis maintains and transgresses thethetic unicity by making it undergo a kind of anamnesis, by introducing into the thethetic position the stream of semiotic drives and making it signify. This telescoping of the symbolic and the semiotic pluralizes signification or denotation: it pluralizes the thethetic doxy. Mimesis and poetic language do not therefore disavow the thethetic; instead they go through its truth (signification, denotation) to tell the "truth" about it. (*Revolution* 60)

Thus, the poetic does not cancel either the thethetic unicity or positionality. It simply transgresses it and exposes the thethetic mechanism of signification or denotation by introducing the semiotic plurality of the drives and giving to this plurality the power to signify. This feminine semiotic multiplicity constitutes the power of poetic language to question and undermine the static truth and the mechanism of its construction.

In addition to this description of language mechanisms, Kristeva proposes a notion of the writing subject that is never unified – its unity, “compactness” and “self-presence” are dissolved precisely in the moment of practice. The unified subject becomes vulnerable because this direct experience incorporates a border on which the subject may shatter (*Revolution* 203) and become a non-unified pulverized consciousness, which is just a place, a locus for the signifying process to take place through constant intense moments of rupture and renewal. Thus, the subject becomes an excess:

never one, always already divided by what Sollers calls a “double causality,”
simultaneously “outside” and “inside” the subject, divided in such a way that the
subjective ‘unity’ in question is expended, expending, irreducible to knowledge,
“bordered” by laughter, eroticism, or what has been called the “sacred.” (*Revolution* 204)

The above description echoes Bataille’s ideas of general economy where the subject of writing becomes an excess and expends itself precisely in the act of writing. The sacred is not the easiest object of writing, he says in “War and the Philosophy of the Sacred,” since its nature implies obliteration of its own limits and “destruction of any object,” as well as breaking the equilibrium in favour of destruction (120). Bataille describes the sacred as moments of consumption of the subject “that are so intense that they are frightening (because death soon seems to be its limit)” (118). Bataille calls it a sacred fusion. He describes it as a world or a state, “where nothing is separated and a special effort is required to remain outside the undetermined fusion” (114).

The very nature of the sacred as fusion annihilates any limits between subject and object, and destroys any objects as fragments. The sacred totality of being is hiding behind a thin veil of

the profane reality, but in order to protect ourselves from the ominous presence of the sacred, we try to isolate objects and separate them from this totality, so we can maintain the illusion of control and objectivity, like in a scientific paradigm. Bataille exposes the futility of such exercise:

... suppose that the sacred, far from being, like the other objects of science, subject to separation, is defined as the exact opposite of abstract objects (things, tools, and clearly definable elements), precisely as the concrete totality itself is resistant to it. Certainly, at first sight, this seems false. The sacred cannot be identified with concrete totality, at least to the extent that the profane itself must comprise part of the totality we must propose if we are to define the sacred. But when one looks closer, what is the profane if not the sum of objects abstracted from the totality? The sacred world is a world of communication or contagion, where nothing is separated and a special effort is required to remain outside the undetermined fusion. *It could even be said that the profane state is the necessary prerequisite for abstraction of the object from the totality of being.*" (*The Absence of Myth* 113-114).

Bataille's definition of the sacred as fusion, unity and totality of being helps us understand the separation, alienation and isolation that the profane logic seems to perpetuate. Another helpful distinction we can elicit from the above definition is the distinction between the logic of abstraction and the totality of experience. Abstraction requires clarity and precision, while experience of merging with totality threatens disorientation and promises vulnerability and possible annihilation of the subjective borders.

The idea of fusion of the subject and object is also reverberated in Kristeva's ideas of both *chora* and abjection. We have already learned that in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she defines *chora* as "a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (25). And in her essay "Approaching Abjection," she defines abject as a liminal notion – neither subject, not object, but it is the "in-between" of them – that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (4).

For Kristeva, artistic experience is rooted in the abject and is the cathartic experience par excellence, as it "utters it and by the same token purifies" (17). The aesthetic task for her is similar to that of "descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct" where it retraces the "fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression." She adds that in this experience, "'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject" (18).⁵

At the "level of downfall of subject and object, the abject is the equivalent of death. And writing, which allows one to recover, is equal to a resurrection" (26). She adds to this description of the fusion yet another aspect, which is:

like a lining, more secret still and invisible, non-representable, oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward the fragility – both threatening and fusional – of the archaic dyad, toward the non-separation of subject/object, on which language has no hold but one woven of fright and repulsion. ("From Filth to Defilement" 58)

⁵ Kristeva's earlier work focused almost exclusively on the poetic and on avant-garde literature. Later, she acknowledges certain limitations of such an approach and expands the scope of her work to investigating other aspects of culture that can carry out the work of loss and mourning.

This non-representable uncertain and unstable fusion that replaces the stability of identity is directly related to the semiotic *chora* and the sacred. Kristeva explains this complex connection more specifically in *Intimate Revolt*: “this transverbal semiotic refers to the archaic mother-child relationship and allows me to inscribe in certain modalities of language this feminine-maternal that Freud called a ‘dark continent’ or even ‘a Minoan-Mycenean civilization’ (from the name of the Greek civilization before that of classical Greece)” (259). Poetic practice is more aligned with this “other logic of a feminine-maternal that defies normative representation” and stands in opposition to the logic of “phallic representation” (259). Thus, Kristeva’s analysis of poetic process articulates a strong connection between the feminine, the sacred and poetic, offering rich implications to the study of the subject of poetic practice – the *subject in-process*.

The Cixousian “self” is also walking the cosmogonic circle, maybe even running or dancing it. Hers is a *subject at risk* - she risks losing herself, wasting herself in the present moment, the moment of writing. But then she gives birth to herself, to writing, to the world. Cixous talks specifically about the power of femininity in this creative endeavour of writing: “She gives birth. With the force of a lioness. Of a plant. Of a cosmogony. Of a woman” (*Coming to Writing* 31).

Thus, for her, writing is a commitment to encountering the mystery head-on, no expectations, no predictions, no knowing ahead of time, just the certainty of the encounter ahead and a promise of a metamorphosis where danger is as possible as *jouissance*. Cixous admits that when she writes, she does not know “I-Who.” Instead, she describes herself as “blurry, several, simultaneous, impure,” “the very demon of multiplicity.” She admits to being scared by this violent metamorphosis that happens during the act of writing (*Coming to Writing* 29), but even

though going towards the dissolution of meaning implies risking one's psychic unity, yet, for her, just like for Kristeva and Bataille, this process also holds a key to the possibility of renewal.

Death is a necessary part of life, and the symbolic cycles of cleansing, purging, destruction, purification, and rebirth are indispensable for daily renewal:

death
the infernal fire
i am burned alive daily
(Nichol, *TM*, Bk. 3, VIII)

The constant circle of death and rebirth is perpetuated in writing. Writers are endangered species, literally. They are in real danger of madness and self-dissolution, they are walking the boundaries of the sacred. The writing subject only exists in the present moment of writing, and at that moment it is constantly transformed, by dissolving and re-emerging in the already familiar schema of a cosmogony. It is a "space pervaded by restlessness" that prohibits one to say, "I am" (Cixous, *Coming to Writing* 25). Thus, the stasis and solidity of the subject is sacrificed in the name of the process of constant becoming and re-creation of the self. The subject needs to risk itself in order to re-begin. This risk is necessary. It is necessary to lose oneself. It is necessary to die in order to be reborn.

Aware of this transformative power of language to mediate between the two mutually exclusive modes of being, the sacred and the profane, masters of poetic writing, like Nichol, return us to the sacred cycle of life, death and resurrection. They enter the sacred circle to face this annihilation only to be reborn again by the power of love channelled through the miracle of language: "In the assault of love on nothingness. My voice repels death; my death; your death; my voice is my other" (Cixous, *Coming to Writing* 4). A poet is like "Orpheus descending into

hell,” but instead of going to the mythical place, (s)he is descending into the semiotic “toward the confrontation with the object of loss, nostalgia, melancholia – in other words, that maternal form which may be conjured up as a dead mother, an absent mother.” This is a “totally vulnerable” step because “the poet pursues the vulnerability of the psychic experience to the very edge of nonmeaning” (Kristeva, *Interviews* 193). The danger of poetic writing for the psyche of the writing subject is explained in Kristeva’s comparison between narrative and poetic modes:

In the narrative experience the subject has access to more options for working things out with respect to moments of crisis, hallucination, loss and risk of psychosis. The poetic experience is more openly regressive, if you will; it confronts more directly the moments of loss of meaning, and perhaps also the maternal, the feminine, which obviously represents the solicitations of sexual pleasure and gratification and, at the same time, risk and loss of the self. (*Interviews* 193)

In theorizing connections between the poetic experience and the sacred, the loss of boundaries of the self seems to be of utmost importance. We must pay special attention to the unstable moment of emergence of meaning and its constant questioning and reconfiguration, its immersion in *physis* and coming out of it⁶. In this regard, subject borders and other liminal places are the gatekeepers between the two realities – the sacred and the profane:

I am convinced that this new millennium that seems so eager for religion, is in reality eager for the sacred. By this I mean the human desire to think (not in the sense of calculating but of questioning) that distinguishes human beings from other species and thus, *a contrario*, brings them closer to them. This human distinction, which has been

⁶ *Physis* is “what emerges from itself (for example, the emergence, the blossoming, of a rose), the unfolding that opens itself up, the coming-into-appearance in such unfolding and holding itself and persisting in appearance-- in short, the emerging-abiding sway” (Heidegger 15).

called the sense of the divine or the sacred, is contained for me – as a writer, psychoanalyst, and semiotician – in the emergence of language itself. The semiotic, with its maternal dependencies, seems to me to be the distant horizon to which thought gains access when it tries to think of itself at the borders of physis and being immersed in it.

(Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva* 447)

Thus, the semiotic modality of language that is aligned with the feminine and the sacred shares a boundary with the symbolic modality, and poetic practice offers a rare means of transgressing this boundary and annihilating the symbolic law in order to reinvent it:

Poetic language is explicitly involved in the destructuring and structuring of language at the ‘outer boundaries’ of the Symbolic. Because the authority of the Symbolic requires unity and autonomy, the semiotic disposition in poetry destabilizes the Symbolic even while recreating, and in order to recreate a new Symbolic. For Kristeva this is the nature of all signifince. Poetry reveals the nature of all signifince through its practice. (Oliver, *Ethics ...* 4)

Conclusions

What this chapter has attempted to demonstrate is that access to the sacred can be gained through a variety of language mechanisms, all of which challenge the unified and solid position of the transcendental subject. This transgressive passage is achieved, in short, through “altering of the *thetic position* – the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one”

(Kristeva, *Revolution* 59). Kristeva defines this process as *signifince* and explains that society represses it precisely because it threatens the boundaries of the subject, the accepted signifying

system and of society in general through the awesome transformative power that is so dangerous because it contains potential for engendering a revolution:

What we call *signifince*, then, is precisely this unlimited and unbounded generating process, this unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language; toward, in, and through the exchange system and its protagonists – the subject and his institutions. This heterogeneous process, neither anarchic, fragmented foundation nor schizophrenic blockage is a structuring and de-structuring *practice*, a passage to the outer *boundaries* of the subject and society. Then – and only then- can it be jouissance and revolution. (17)

This explanation helps us better appreciate the “unlimited” and “unbounded” generative power operating through poetic creation, and which can be seen as an allusion to the ontological and cosmologic creation. Compared to everyday utilitarian language that is used merely as a static symbolic system, an object or a tool, poetic language is dynamic and alive. Unlike many other language philosophers who have focused on the operation of absence, separation or metonymic replacement of things by words in language production, Cixous, Kristeva and Bataille privilege the presence and the mystery of language, its awesome transformative power, and its ability to open the subject up to the sacred dimension of life.

Their subject is dynamic and vital, just as writing itself, and always presents itself in-process (Kristeva), in the moment of practice (Cixous), or expenditure (Bataille). And in this dynamic movement an opening appears that allows the subject to articulate a new vision of language, of subject, and of culture as a whole. In this opening lies a potential power and the agency of change. Their vision of language lies outside of the system, outside of the profane reality, dangerously close to the border of the sacred.

By sharing their vision of language as a dynamic process tied to the becoming of the writing subject and her jouissance, the above thinkers contributed greatly to promoting language from its former status of an instrument, a tool, an object in the subject/object relationship to the status of a live medium, in which a subject finds itself changed, transformed, transubstantiated. There is a poetic view of language and a political one too. It is extremely important that their efforts to revive the sacred be continued, in order to challenge the techno-scientific preoccupation of the modern culture.

Chapter 6. Subject Transformations in Nichol's Writing

The present chapter proposes that liminal places, spaces and states of mind are extremely potent for Nichol in *The Martyrology*, as they are able to reveal boundaries between the two realities. In the space between this world and the other, the writing subject finds his own doubles, specters and the uncanny alterity within and without. The poet finds voices and presences that are beyond words or understanding. He finds liminal spaces that do not hold any answers – instead, they often intensify the questions but can also dissolve them through a powerful revelation of knowledge.

Nichol's writing reveals his fascination with transforming, expending and recreating the writing subject that he keeps discovering during the process of poetic writing, "moi et me /

instrument on which it's played / bound to another" (*TM*, Bk. 4). Poetic practice enables a variety of symbolic transformations of the subject:

you must return
from dust to dust
thru worlds of burning energy
(*TM*, Bk. 1, "Saint Reat")

We must return to the invisible reality we came from, having burnt alive first in this one, like a phoenix undergoing the cycle of destruction and rebirth. This play of *signifince*, in which the subject is dissolved and re-constructed in the endless cycle of death and renewal, permeates many of Nichol's texts. The concept of I is often reimagined, redefined, given away, sacrificed or exchanged for the presence of otherness, "the magic thinking trick of seeing yourself as other than what you are laid bare & the crumbling as the self caught unaware" (Nichol, *TM*, Bk. 3, VII). Other examples testify to Nichol's acceptance of the essential necessity of violence of self-destruction as purging and cleansing, "i understand the necessity of destruction / the fire that purges" (*TM*, Bk. 3, VIII). But this fear of and attraction to death reveals in turn another strong persistent drive – to not cease to be after death. To be reborn, renewed, regenerated, "all stars at galactic centre must be older black dwarfs drawing us closer to be crushed into the nothingness from which we came only to form again some other era" (*TM*, Bk. 3, VIII).

One of the most important purposes of all seasonal rituals, Eliade teaches us, was to celebrate the new beginning and to absolve, resolve and release the old. In a similar way, Nichol's poetic practice offers to the writing subject a promise of psychic release and renewal in each moment by causing a temporary destruction and an immediate reconstruction of the psyche:

to rid of me
the ugh in
thought
i spell anew
weave the world
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

The “i” dies and is reborn through language because the poet “spell[s] anew” a new world. What is “the ugh / in thought”? Is it not the excess of meaning? If the word is spelled without it, as Nichol often does, simply as “thot,” the meaning of the word is still conveyed by sound, so nothing is lost. This stanza likens the “i” to the unnecessary “ugh,” thus suggesting it is simply an excess “to be rid of.”

The transformation of the writing subject is one of the most captivating features of Nichol’s *Journal* and *The Martyrology*. The reader can never be quite sure who this speaking “i” is. There are no guarantees that the “I” of language is attached to any stable signified at all. It appears to be an empty, floating signifier relentlessly renewing itself through the process of poetic creation. Sometimes the writing subject is changing slowly between personas, roles, genders and numbers. Sometimes, the transformation is more radical, and the subject is cast out, expended, sacrificed. In every case, the stability of the writing subject is exposed as fiction.

Confusion

Often, confusion is the state preceding any enunciation of the subject’s position – the subject becomes “the cloud of unknowing” facing the impossible task of articulating his perception of his own being:

clearly the mirror focus blur
fear for your safety

this is harder to write

what flows between confuses you
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Sons and Divinations”)

The imagined clarity of its position simply vanishes during the moment of poetic writing. The self is harder to see and consequently, “harder to write.” The stasis is unachievable as the semiotic flow takes over. Also, the unsettling effect of liminality becomes apparent. Boundaries function as guardians of our safety, but “what flows between,” what does not fit, what leaks through the boundaries threatens them and blurs the focus, so we are to fear for our safety, or at least to experience the vulnerability of feeling unsettled and utterly perplexed by the loss of certainty:

began this poem in sureness
now the truth’s obscure behind the body’s veil

it is that sense impossible becomes the poetry
shields me from the i within the lie
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Clouds”)

In reading *The Martyrology*, time and again one comes up against the loss of “sureness” and the loss of the “i” in the name of approaching the impossible through poetic practice, or the impossible of the poetic practice: “impossible becomes the poetry.” But the truth is not disclosed permanently, it remains veiled as it hides “behind the body’s veil” and reveals itself in the

moment only to become obscure again, thus, making the process of its uncovering, *aletheia*, the constant and continuing task of the poet.

The poet's instrument is words. He goes to them in a desperate gesture to express the ineffability of the truths he discovers:

how i cling to words who have little to say
the words or me that illogical confusion
as love is when words rule the mind
(*TM*, Bk. 2, "Auguries")

He has to start with words that "rule the mind", but in the next moment, he has to discard the logic of words as impotent when he encounters another truer "illogical" logic of confusion and love. It is an unending struggle to use the words that "have little to say" in the search for ways to express the beingness of the present moment that Nichol is committed to.

Fluid subject

Throughout *Journal* and *The Martyrology*, Nichol communicates this confusion by expressing the writing subject as fluid. For example, in the following short section, Nichol describes a conversation and a sexual encounter between two people who constantly turn into each other. The writing subject first starts to speak from the first person and from a masculine point of view, "i said to her i said i am no longer perfect cant you see it dont you know it you do know it dont you you know i am no longer perfect i have broken that perfect silence she smiled & said nothing" (21). Then, without any explanation, he begins to speak as a woman in the same encounter, also from the first person, "i took his hand touch me i said he trembled

touch my breasts i said he did not touch them” (21). After the sexual encounter, the lines between the two are blurred completely, both in terms of gender and number, “i love you i do love you i said he lay inside me my cock inside me i do love we i said we lay inside me our cock inside me we do love we we said yes we do love we we watched the clouds blow over we lay inside us lonely” (22-23). Nichol’s writing subject does not maintain a singular nuclear identity. (S)he speaks using the first, second and third person pronouns, both singular and plural, both feminine and masculine without signaling the moment of transformation.

In a similar way, the subject of *The Martyrology* is also dynamic and appears to be in flux, escaping into a space between two subjects, changing, shape-shifting, multiplying or splitting, but always remaining unstable and undetermined. Sometimes this confusion, loss and ambiguity are followed by a more violent transformation of the “I” into a shadow, double, unfamiliar uncanny alterity within the familiar and the known. It explodes certainty and exposes the discomfort of not having it:

i do know you

how you dwelt in that place filled with questions
the rest (written in a book) destroyed my childhood
began this drifting focusless twist of speech i
you reach towards saint reat
(*TM*, Bk. 1, “Saint Reat”)

In the above example, poetic practice creates a textual space for the two doubles to acknowledge each other’s presence and engage in a conversation. There is the act of distancing through the text of the speaking “I” who dwells in language, and whom Nichol calls “the focusless twist of speech.” Thus, in the process of poetic writing, the writing subject is sacrificed

to the sacred power of language itself. It becomes a textual production, or a textual effect of sorts: ‘no one is forgotten we’re just rewritten. he’s letting my voice intrude briefly...’ (*TM*, Bk. 4). Throughout *The Martyrology* and *Journal*, there is a constant dialogue between the first and the third person narrator. The writing subject is split into two or many – the “I” undergoing the experience in the poem and the “I” of language, acting as a detached witness.

This kind of writing subject is born and dies in the sacred space and time of the text itself, in the liminal space and time between being awake and being asleep, between first and third person: “(we woke up before dawn [...] caught between the i & he, am image of Dilmun in his mind, caught between first & third person na(ra)tivity)” (*TM*, Bk. 4).

In these lines, one finds a transformation of the “first person” into “third person,” a “nativity” of a new speaking subject through the act of speaking or “narrativity.” Its birth – “nativity” – coincides with its birth through language by identification with the speaking subject – “na(ra)tivity.” The use of parentheses portrays nativity being pregnant with narrativity – it is through the language impulse itself that the writing subject is being born and reborn.

A strangeness and a distance are introduced into one’s own perception of himself. One’s identity and its stability are questioned. The ordinary “I” becomes “he,” and the new “I” becomes just a voice of language telling “his” story. Language subsumes the illusion of the speaking subject. The new “I” simply becomes another presence, a speaking subject created by language and driven by the rising of feelings and “confusions.” One splits into two: “sink back in my chair aware you are near me / who inscribes your story as best he can” (*TM*, Bk. 3, VII). One does not recognize the double living in the mirror or inhabiting one’s skin:

having lived in that world of choice
your voice cracks when feelings rise
confusions &
step sideways to regain your balance
the chance is taken

the part of yourself least recognized
merges with the mirror
your fingers do not know your skin
(*TM*, Bk. 2, "Auguries")

The experience of discovering his doubles in the mirror are described as frightening and disturbing, "you step from the mirror / startle me" (*TM*, Bk. 2, "Auguries") and "look in the mirror / knowing you have found the beast" (*TM*, Bk. 2, "Auguries"). Such proliferation of textual doubles is very common in Nichol's writing:

(sometimes (at night) i doesn't know who he is (why? (that's wrong – the sequence should read wxy – the h interpolated into the unknown) h is his) not in that old schizy sense (i.e. he doesn't know who i is) but a perception re entity in its entirety ('at night' because he is all alone & 'sometimes' because it's accurate) the lacking of a total

the
problem is in summing up prematurely (false). he is 31 (yesterday) but i's what? (joking to a friend he said ' i used to be 18 to myself but i'm catching up')... (*TM*, Bk. 4)

In this representative example, again one witnesses how the strangeness within is expressed by Nichol referring to himself in the third and in the first person simultaneously and openly questioning the meaning of "i." The most intimate knowledge of "i" turns into the most

erie and uncanny realization of alterity. We think we know ourselves only to discover that we ultimately do not.

We learned from psychoanalysis that ‘Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided.’ (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 181). So, this proliferation of doubles and multiplication of the subject manifests as a defence mechanism against the fear of death. It is an obsession to be, to exist, to continue to be and to obtain meaning through language, “i am one am many / the need to be obsesses / simply as i would speak to you” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Auguries”). The “many” within also points to the feminine within the writing subject – its multiplicity, heterogeneity and its fluidity in the moment of enunciation. The subject can gather himself into a point of stasis and unity at one moment of enunciation: “i am one” and almost simultaneously he finds his own otherness and multiplicity: “am many.” The subject can split into many and lose its unity and borders in the process of interacting with the sacred medium of language.

Death and ego dissolution

Mystical and poetic experiences of losing one’s boundaries can be disorienting, de-centering, even utterly frightening in their overwhelming character and their insistence on uncertainty and fluidity. One can feel her own dissolution into emptiness: “i have become nothing but my own emptiness & longing” (*Journal* 12-13). For Nichol, this “emptiness” seems to be a prerequisite for the creatively productive state that draws less on rational meaning, and more on desire and longing that together become a generative force. Sometimes, the poet’s textual position becomes more radical:

i am wary of that impulse within me
would have it out with my i
how can i cast itself out
out of the process i must be true to
is part of the dissolution
the disillusionment
create a third person when the i's can't get along?
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Here, Nichols explicitly announces his desire to get rid of the subject for once and all, with no promise of regeneration. It is a fine tension between the experiences of “dissolution” and “disillusionment.” At other times, a destruction of the self takes on a more violent character, “you take the change of getting broken” (*TM*, Bk. 3, VII) before the writing subject can move on:

today there is no one to speak to but my reflection
soon gone

smash this mirror

moving on
(*TM*, Bk. 1, “Saint Reat”)

The image in the mirror, which can be read as the poet's perception of the illusory alienated self we take as our own being, a self-image, must be “smashed,” destroyed for something else that remains to carry on. In many mystical traditions, the loss of self as a condition for being found, founded or re-founded as a new self. The poet is just a remainder of such violence, “whatever rips the mind apart survives” (*TM*, Bk. 3, VII), and what remains is but a trembling:

meanings for existence
gone
the stuttered b
ing
that is living
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

The poem performs a complete expenditure, a complete loss of self and a complete loss of all meaning with no promise of a new meaning – the writing subject is lost in the process of inquiry into the mystery of the unknown. What remains instead of the former self-image is only the “stuttered b/ ing” in the process of living: the unfolding process of the spontaneous manifestation of beingness or the dynamic flow of life.

Madness

The author seems to enter into the field of loss of meaning, expenditure, death and madness voluntarily, welcoming madness in a gesture of self-sacrifice: “sweet sanity / these are the tricks the mind plays / fire storms within the brain / sweet sweet madness” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Clouds”). Artists often thrive on and are also plagued by this other mode of perception and can thus be vulnerable to madness or “falling off the edge”:

i get lost

poem-maker cloud-hidden
you were one & the same

isn't it plain why saint and called you fool?

this is a cruel world you rule
a rough road

saint reat's load's too heavy for his years

raises his fears too high

drove him out of his mind
into that other
(*TM*, Bk. 1, "Saint Reat")

The experiences of being lost in and subsumed by otherness permeate Nichol's texts. He often speaks of the loss of I and the accompanying transition from one mind into "that other mind," which suggests a different state of consciousness, perception, and experience. Sometimes this other mind is obscuring the other reality from perception, sometimes, this Other reality is found within this familiar reality, which only makes it more uncanny:

maybe the maybes can come to be!

suddenly it makes sense, is it the poem makes us dense?
or simply writing, the act of ordering
the other mind
blinding us
to the greater vision

what's a
poem like you doing in a
poem like this?
(*TM*, Bk. 1, "Scenes")

Maybe we can allow some degree of doubt into our position of absolute certainty and absolute arrogance: “maybe the maybes can come to be!” In the act of writing, which becomes the act of discovering, we can be surprised by a spontaneous turn a poem might take. We can access “the other mind” and the “greater vision” that are not accessible to the ordinary consciousness.

Intrusion of alterity

Such archetypal figures as mystics, shamans, madmen, who have somehow found access to the sacred, share with poets a state of temporary madness. This state allows them to leave their egos for a brief moment of time and embody otherness. The key is surrendering control and letting things come without censorship. This allows for a release of built-up psychic energy. The intensity of discharge is unmistakable. There’s certain degree of violence in this catharsis. The psyche and the ground are all shaken up. Rhythm permeates both. It connects a man to a newly created sacred universe each moment. It is a cosmic dance that unites, reunites, attunes and re-attunes man to cosmos. In both practices inhibitions are released, and moral defenses are down, so that pure primal vital force can take over. It is scary to surrender one’s will to trust the impulse, the urge, instinct, intuition and chance, but it can also be revelatory.

Having been absorbed and dissolved by a rhythmic movement of the train, the poet enters into a radically different dream-like state, a trance of sorts, which allows the presence of otherness to come in and speak and move him and take over his speech:

watching from the train window
i am moved beyond it in a dream

walk the fields dumb & trembling
as in a poem i cannot remember writing
someone walks beside me whispering
.....
too lost in words to ever leave them
too full with love of speech as feeling
(*TM*, Bk. 3, III)

A poet acknowledges this other presence, gives it attention and even listens actively to discern another voice that is whispering beside him. Another voice invades the silence and receptivity that results from being present in the moment and listening deeply. The poet gives over his will to the alterity of language – he is “too lost in words to ever leave them,” or to find a way out of them. He has given himself over to language as he is “too full with love” with the feeling of the embodied speech and dissolves in it, becoming vulnerable in the process of poetic trance as the words “dumb & trembling” suggest.

He surrenders his own voice to the moment’s voice with its energy and its mystery, “this morning i listened for your voice / somewhere in the howling” (*TM*, Bk. 3, III), or, in another example, “this morning i awoke knowing i must write this down knowing i could no longer keep silent inside myself the words must live outside myself” (*Journal* 34). The process of poetic composition changes from imposition and a forceful making by the poet into a careful and humble tending to what naturally wants to reveal itself in the moment, “most days it goes nowhere most days i stare at my pen wondering if the it will maybe if they were my words im thinking if it were my speech i said” (*Journal* 49). Nichol has the courage to face the alterity of the vast emptiness and not knowing what that is, taking our mind to the edge of that, which is less than emptiness:

a vast place full of emptiness or less

i don't know what to say

father i confess ignorance of what the next phrase is

(*TM*, Bk. 3, III)

The poet actually does not know what comes next. The process of composition becomes the act of attunement and active listening. The next phrase simply comes, “the lines arrive / like waves” (*TM*, Bk. 7, “Scruptures: 12th Sequence”), or it does not, “words fall / i cannot pick them up” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Auguries”). Writing ceases to be an active undertaking, but becomes instead an exercise in opening to the unknown mystery of being.

In its most peaceful form, this alterity is recognized simply as inspiration, “I knew when I headed home tonight / the whole poem graphed in my mind / I'll never make it / some things are stronger than words” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Book of Common Prayer”). Sometimes, this alterity moves inside and manifests itself as unknown selves living inside us:

saint rike rides across the sky

dave's poems & mine

letters from the selves we never knew

(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Auguries”)

Sometimes, though, in its most violent incarnation, such alterity can take a form of “presence,” which is so powerful that it feels threatening:

broken rigidity yields “freed form”

stood in the place the north wind blew

was it a face

or simply a presence
spoke
lifted the skin you wore
& changed you

you were never the same

those cells were prisons

unyielding stone

took and broke them

freed form
(*TM*, Bk. 1, “Saint Reat”)

This presence can, if we let it, break one open and “lift one’s skin.” The reward is “freed form,” literally, in poetry and, perhaps, figuratively, in life. This presence that arises in an altered state of consciousness between sleep and being awake is a messenger from another reality: “it is a presence close to sleep / speaks from that too familiar world” (*TM*, Bk. 1, “The Sorrows”). This reality is uncanny in its familiarity – it is “too familiar,” suggesting that we are already aware of it, perhaps, always have been.

Chora

Sometimes the speaking “I” finds his death by merging with “the longed for beginning” that is reminiscent of the *chora* – a presymbolic beginning of life where a fusion with the

maternal precedes the experience of a separate subject and haunts the psyche in the form of a repressed desire to merge with it again:

the i dies finally
merges with the land's scape
scope increases
the folded page
writes its way into
the longed for
beginning
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

This merging Nichol refers to is marked by the same fusion, totality and interconnectedness that Kristeva suggested as characteristic of *chora*. Such belief in the truth of oneness is found throughout *The Martyrology*. For example, “all things are one in the end” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Book of Common Prayer”) or:

sweet truth of oneness
duality that does not see

sweet sweet vision

sweet clarity
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Book of Common Prayer”)

Similarly, throughout *Journal*, the obsessive desire of the main “character” to go back to the beginning – to his own mother – to the maternal stands out as key. Is it the unconscious desire to go back to and be dissolved in the re-experience of *chora*? In a way it is a reverse movement, but if we consider it a part of a larger movement – the picture becomes quite

different– it can be read as a spiraling movement forward – a cycle of regeneration and rebirth taking its feminine maternal (semiotic) beginning as a basis, as a strength and regenerative impulse. It is a movement of Phoenix – to burn and be reborn only to be reburnt again – a neverending cycle of “being and no being” in Nichol’s own words: “today i am so sure of my own death today there is a quick image of no image moment of being no being again endless cycle quick bliss of ignorant darkness knowing” (*Journal 3*).

Throughout his texts, separation is exposed as an illusion belonging only to the profane world. We are learning about the illusory nature of the boundaries that cannot really contain us:

i wanted an image or a metaphor
something to contain me
within the flow of language presses in
screamed so loud my father ran to save me
not knowing i needed to fall in
that place where all space holds you
(*TM*, Bk. 3)

In the above example, subjectivity becomes dissolved in that other uncontainable place without concepts and before the subject – *chora*. Thus, language give us a chance to experience surrendering control and falling into the flow and the totality of the flow that dissolves all images and metaphors that pretend to be able to contain the “I.”

I as the other

Through his poetic practice, Nichol investigates and radically revises the notions of the writing subject and of the poetic process itself. He persistently addresses the “fundamental

mystery of ‘otherness’” in relation to both. Nichol’s famous manifesto of 1966 is almost exclusively devoted to the question and the experience of otherness that intrudes upon one’s idea of self and requires the self to exit and thus create some space for the other through language:

Otherness, Other we come up against again and again

now that we have reached the point where people have finally come to see that language means communication and that communication does not just mean language, we have come up against the problem, the actual fact, of diversification, of finding as many exits as possible from the self (language/communication exits) in order to form as many entrances as possible for the other. (*The Alphabet Game* 142)

In this “Statement” manifesto, following in the footsteps of Arthur Rimbaud, he speaks about a distinct experience of recognizing that “even the “i” is an ‘other’.” He explains further, “as you begin to explore it, ‘i’ separates out from you & becomes different from the ‘i’ exploring, like those beautiful nested dolls you find in Ukrainian gift shops” (in McCaffery “InTens/tion” 78). This suggests self’s multiple natures, or a cluster of different identifications that act as quasi-separate agencies. Poetic practice becomes an open feminine space pregnant with the multiple other selves, a space that can hold the sacred mystery of otherness without cannibalizing or trivializing it.

In an interview, Nichol explains this proliferation of forms of the writing subject, “I think that there are literally different selves, that that conglomerate of different selves that we are is, in this case, bpNichol. And writing is one of those selves” (qtd. in Scobie 24). This dimension of otherness present in Nichol’s writing suggests that the writing subject has been replaced by the mystery of language itself: “the fall of the saints is also the fall of the “i,” the humbling of the “i,” and allows language to encounter “we” and “Lord” and Other. He continues to theorize that

“this Other may be the transcendental authority of *TM*, almost literally its “transcendental signified” (Davey 51). The space of the subject is empty until it is being filled by language itself, which becomes the incarnation of the saints: “In *The Martyrology* where language forms the material sub/stance of the writer, words-as-saints are also saints-as-words. They are the sacred figures that enable the ‘i’ of the writer to address and explore the open spaces of writing without resorting to lyric closure” (Miki, *Tracing* 18). The writing subject of *The Martyrology* is dissolving into language itself, “Barrie inscribing himself as a guest, non-hierarchically. Then the dissipation into the framework of language. And his reappearance as he will, as a phantasm, fleeting. Reintroducing the continuous present” (Karasick 303).

The “i” becomes simply the witnessing “eye,” tracing the flow of “thots” and language. Miki takes the concept of the split subject further and compares the task of the writer to that of a martyr by drawing on the etymology of the word “martyr” and linking it to the function of a witness, “the martyr gives his “i” up to the flow of language and simultaneously, through his craft, functions as a bridge for readers to participate in his consciousness of things (Miki, *Tracing* 28-29). Barbour speaks of a similar function of the writing subject. The latter is sacrificed as an active agency and becomes a sort of a perceiving sensing, non-judging witness – an eye without the mind:

Nichol’s willingness to create an I/eye in *The Martyrology* which is always a floating signifier, emptying itself of specific referentiality, rendering a vision of the self as disjunctive, fragmentary, and open, reveals his acceptance of the breakdown of the stable entity of the self in our time. (Barbour, *bpNichol and His Works* 83)

One of the most interesting and important aspects of the signifying process is a state of mind that is induced by the onslaught of poetic meaning, which sometimes takes the form of the dissolution of meaning, exposing the arbitrariness of names and dissolving fixed names in the sea of the semiotic undercurrents:

how far had i come i do not know my name today once was a day as once was another
time my own life began a different course there was no one there was only sea forever
& ever as ever my own wish to leave it tho i swam free oh what a day that was i was
the sea & the sea was in me. (*Journal 12*)

Thus, poetic process connects us to a more primal state of being that diffuses the ego and offers a more synesthetic experience of surrender to the senses and to the primacy and confusion of the senses, but also a sense of no self, of dissolution in union with all life. States between waking and sleeping are especially potent in teaching us to relinquish conscious control. In this process, the subject often gets dissolved in the trance induced by language itself and by experiencing the loss of clarity and “a literal fuzzing in the mind”:

faint edge of sleep
a literal fuzzing in the mind
as tho the edge of
what was held clearly
became less defined
the penalty paid &
your father recognized
for what he is

For W

HA!

the is

(*TM*, Bk. 3, “CODA”)

Thus, the fall of the “I” gives rise to language itself with its inherent process of signification. Once again we are faced with language’s poetic intelligence that reveals an order other than an order one imposes through syntax and logically complete closed meaning. Poetic language in its radical openness and otherness reveals a presence of another order: “language alone leads the poet on, yet he is led to discoveries which touch upon self, world, and cosmos. The letters assert their own meaning – not that of philosophy or science but that of language-in-flux” (Barbour 64).

By opening itself to the presence of the sacred, by literally incarnating the sacred, the practice of poetic writing is permeated by radical otherness and opens a new literary, phenomenological and psychic dimension. It can take us “ever further inwards to the central mystery at the heart of speech” (Barbour 65). We witness how writing can provide space and time for the writing subject to deal with the radical alterity of life and death. McCaffery goes as far as positing “death as an unavoidable element of writing and essential to the written space; death as the other, as the absence-which-i-cannot-be (“InTens/tion” 79).

Thus, poetic writing as a practice is a sacred activity that has the power to question the borders of the subject, of the self, of life and of death in the very moment of poetic creation. The moment when the self can be born, lost, and reborn as other-to-the-self, as in Rimbaud’s famous phrase, “the I is an other.” Thus, both the cosmological and the signifying cycle are vividly present in the texture of Nichol’s writing: “Constant interplay of destruction and creation which

constitute process” could be traced to the invoked cosmology of Egyptian mythology, or through the process of writing itself (Miki, *Tracing* 23). The text itself becomes the sacred ground for asking the most important questions about the nature of being and, more importantly, its relationship to non-being.

So, Nichol’s texts expose a seeming stability of the writing subject as fiction and instead, teach us about the gesture of surrender to alterity by incorporating it. This surrender of the subject and his search for meaning to the alterity of language is a political gesture of self-sacrifice and is part of the continual process of meaning-making through continuous destruction and renewal of oneself.

Chapter 7. Writing as a Sacred Activity

Poetic writing opens the gateway from profane reality into the sacred one. It has the power to radically transform the faculty of perception, thus allowing us to perceive the invisible reality of the sacred. It changes our perception of time, space, and reality. In this chapter, I am turning to the work of bpNichol to allow his writing to illuminate the relationship between the poetic and the sacred and to support a hypothesis that poetic language is a powerful medium for tracing and inducing an altered state of consciousness, and that poetic and the mystical experiences share many similarities in terms of special states of consciousness.

What distinguishes Nichol from many other writers is the fact that his work is often devoted to examining the process of writing itself or, to be more precise, to questioning the very process of meaning-making. He draws attention precisely to the state and the functioning of

consciousness during the moment of composition. Through his writing practice, he creates what he calls “a belief space” and a special state of consciousness – faith state – that allows a “crossing-over” into a different reality. Thus, he uses poetic to take the reader to the edge of the sacred reality.

Nichol’s texts are – not unlike many of the mystical texts – reaching for connection with the sacred. The opening section of *Journal* begins by addressing heaven, “lift me up lift me up oh heaven” (7). His writing offers abundant testimony that in a way, poetic writing is a form of prayer. In almost every line, the poet invokes our relationship with the sacred. For example, “i could not find the words to fix them here / this act this moment of confession or prayer” (*TM*, Bk. 3, IV); “none of this made sense till i looked up / raised my head above the earth to study heaven” (*TM*, 2, “Sons and Divinations,” 3); “poetry’s a kind of prayer / daily devotion to your teaching” (*TM*, Bk. 3, V).

The belief space

Nichol is explicit in expressing his intuition that language is a sacred activity. This is evidenced in almost all of his texts, but Nichol’s most powerful testament to his personal commitment to engaging the sacred in his writing through a certain state of mind comes from his famous essay, “Talking About the Sacred in Writing.” This supports my reading of the parallel between poetic and mystical consciousness:

my relationship to the sacred, to some sense of goodness, of the beyond, otherness in that sense, has all the elements of ‘pataphysics – which is to say, the way I tend to think of ‘pataphysics is that very often you climb a fictional staircase that you know is

fictional; you walk up every imaginative stair, you get to your imaginary window and you open your imaginary window, and there is the real world. You see it from an angle you would not otherwise see it from. So there's a sense for me in which I will start to follow a line of thought that I think of as fictional, or that at least I consciously know is fictional, and yet I find myself in a mental space – in a belief space – where what is happening in the moment of the writing takes on a kind of absolute reality at that point in time. (“Talking About the Sacred in Writing,” *Meanwhile*, 333)

What becomes apparent from looking at this excerpt is the importance to Nichol of a “mental space” – a “belief space” – where reality of the moment merges with the reality of the writing and becomes this new reality. In this inner space that poetic writing opens up, fiction stops being fiction, imagination is no longer imagination, and “there is the real world” coming into the author's awareness out of nowhere, as if from a previously hidden dimension. This inner space is a crucial discovery for us in Nichol's work and will continue to reveal its power to allow for the sacred to manifest itself. Thus, poetic practice creates a sacred space for potential hierophany.

Sacred space

Nichol's description of the process of his poetic writing shares many key features and functions that characterize a sacred ritual. Some of the most important functions are a changed perception of space and time, and a change in perception of reality – a substitution of one reality for another one that aligns itself with radical alterity. In *The Martyrology*, Nichol reveals, invokes, and constructs another reality, which echoes Eliade's description of the sacred realm:

i need a space in this world to call home
a place in these words a centre i can move from
.....
fill this air with your blessing father
we are together in this holy place you made for us
spinning slowly round our star
(*TM*, Bk. 3, V)

Multiple examples of another world – “spectral & strange” appear throughout *The Martyrology*. For example, “i occupy a world / you move in is that other,” “goodbye to this world,” “the hills turn red / if you ever cross over,” “elephants drag your words over impossible hills into the valleys beyond,” “it is another world vaguely seen” (Bk. 1, “Saint and”), “world w/out end / crossing over / into a different tongue/ du monde de la tigre” (Bk.1, “Scenes”), “bring my lady / back from that sea she’s crossed / tossed in a grey world of / her own” (*TM*, Bk. 1, “The Sorrows”), “grew up twice / once in the world we came to call heaven / once on earth” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Clouds”), etc.

By combining the power of faith with the power of poetic language, Nichol reveals the sacred nature of the universe. Words and letters become magical spells, and a new world is created through language, letter by letter – “word” becomes the “world” with a simple addition of an “l”:

every letter
invokes a spell
ing is
the power
letters have
over me

word shaping

addition of the I

(*TM*, Bk. 3, “CODA”)

Readers get the opportunity to cross over and see a glimpse of another reality. This disturbing, but powerful transition is enabled by language. A “different tongue” can take one into a different world:

world without end

crossing over

into a different tongue

(*TM*, “Bk. 1,” “Scenes”)

Poetic writing takes one to a time and space that are void of referentiality. All references are suspended in the present moment of writing in order to receive the gift of a new perception. In order to perceive that other order, we must surrender our need to impose our understanding and certainty. First the world as we know it disappears. Then the seer of the world. And then, the world and the subject are seen anew:

there must be a beginning made

a starting over a writing down

times when other voices do not distract

there must be an order in all things

to be discovered not imposed

there an invisible world opens

a heaven or a hell
(*TM*, Bk. 1, I)

Thus, imposition of one's personal will is not something that interests Nichol. It is discovering that other underlying divine "order in all things" that he is after. Not only discovering, but also bringing it out of its concealment, summoning it, if you will, through his devotional practice of writing. But this other reality is not readily perceivable.

Senses

We learn that the presence of that other uncanny and unfamiliar world cannot be explained through reason or described in regular language. It can be felt or sensed. The shift in consciousness is achieved through expansion of one's capacity to perceive, or as Miki called it, the "widening of perceptual frames" (15):

under the moon

lie on the hill

feel the wind blow
from that country where no man goes that lives
(*TM*, Bk. 1, "Saint Reat")

This new awareness is unsettling. It is uncanny to face the alterity and the uncertainty of the sacred reality within the ordinary profane realm precisely because it is hidden, mysterious and more powerful than us:

one chain apparent thru the life work
i grasp the edge of vision & am frightened
no man holds the dragon but is held by it
learns to direct & shape its will within him
sacred energy to be fed properly
fires which are lit within us daily by the holy act of food
(*TM*, Bk. 2, "Sons and Divinations")

This "sacred energy," personified as a sacred "dragon" has a hold on us, and personal will does not stand a chance in comparison with the sacred will. This power imbalance is frightening but insightful in that it shows the futility of personal will and requires instead an attitude of surrender as "no man holds the dragon but is held by it."

We are following the poet into the unknown, into the ultimate darkness with no map to lead us back out. We must trust in the wisdom of the journey and the humility of surrender, which:

moves from the know on
into the un
prefix delimiting the road
out of the two year darkness of the mind
no music i could find to lead me
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Poetry is our compass, but it is not showing us a way out of darkness. In fact, it is showing us the way in – into reality with no return journey:

poetry had shown you the way to go
a question only of returning
a pointless path to follow they said it leads but to death
(*TM*, Bk. 2, "Sons and Divinations")

This stanza suggests that the “pointless path” we follow is our life that goes only in one direction – towards death. There is no possible “return” per se to the beginning of life, to its source, but there is a way forward through poetic language and its power to create, to re-create and to re-symbolize, thus, to re-negotiate reality. In our journey through life and towards death, language is the path that offers a possibility of making sense of the journey.

These wor(l)ds on a page are entrances into the ultimate alterity – death. The poet and the mystic meet there on the edge of these two worlds. They have the courage to go there while alive and meet that experience. We, as readers, are invited to take the journey with them:

knowing i walked
the bottom of the sea

that heaven was up there
on that world in the sky

that this was death

that i would go there
when i came to life
(*TM*, Bk. 1, “The Sorrows”)

The invisible border between life and death is made visible through this poem. A question arises: is this death a final and permanent condition, or is this death a necessary step on our way to a new form of life? Is this the symbolic death mystical texts often tell us about? Death to this world, so we can be reborn in the other reality? My reading of Nichol’s writing suggests that it is the latter as death never seems to be the final destination in his poetry, and after describing the moment of this symbolic death, he continues to write about life. Ultimately,

Nichol's poetry takes us on a journey towards death only to initiate us into that other higher order. Thus, poetry becomes a prayer, a sacred space of spoken faith where we can do the impossible – to face death, so we can continue to live:

we meet death
it is unexpected

you saints these poems are prayers
i don't give a fuck about your history

father in heaven
(*TM*, Bk. 2, "Friends as Footnotes")

Words become the vehicles of passage from one reality into the other. But interestingly, words themselves also become this other reality. Words become worlds, as Nichol showed us. The subject is pulverized in the religious dread or "trembling" and what remains is alterity. It is other. During this poetic and mystical moment of meeting his own death, the writing subject meets the sacred:

only the words you trust to take you thru
the next breath
 moment
 time &
falling again saint and
your hand moves across my face
i am seized with trembling
death in the room
removes the window's glass
this is that place you'd dreaded

“something’s” clear
that dark cloud which is nothing draws you nearer
as you knew it would
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Friends as Footnotes”)

The presence of death haunts our unconscious. Nichol makes this fear explicit and allows it to enter the present moment and reconsider the meaning of death. He shares his poetic awareness of the “joy” such symbolic conscious death to the profane world could bring. One is reminded of the mechanism of sacrifice where one exchanges one’s awareness of the profane for the awareness of the sacred that is gained in leaving the profane realm through the ritual of sacrifice:

death is simply energy recycled another state
realize that moment’s joy it could be
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Sons and Divinations,” 4)

Poetic practice serves as a purgatory in which the lens of perception is wiped clean: “that speech cleanses /.../ [the poet] rode it thru the other side whatever rips the mind apart survived” (*TM*, Bk. 3, VII). What is the role of volition in the act of transformation? Is the will power involved at all, or is it just by grace that we are able to shift our perception and see a new reality? We learn from his writing that it is grace that enables a revelation, a discovery, an epiphany. He writes, “sometimes the worlds fold forever / into other worlds” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Auguries”). Nichol’s texts suggest that the personal will is suspended, and the hands are folded in the prayer for grace to come in and cleanse and change the poet’s ability to perceive the sacred reality:

“free will”
as i was taught it

free to live

free to die

will has

nothing to do with

the will you write

to write

(*TM*, Bk. 7, “bp:if”)

We learn from Nichol that poetry is written through the body. Rhythm, heartbeat, breathlines, sounds and silences are all crucial elements of poetic practice:

breathing over & over

history’s written in my body

architecture of the too tight muscles will not bend where they should

startled eyes moving in & out

aware the sound is there

occupying space i am afraid to enter

(*TM*, Bk. 3, II)

Thus, both breathing and sound become vehicles of passage and instruments of transgression as well. They both have the capacity to viscerally transport us to a threatening space of fear and alterity. Thus, poetry offers a possibility of mystical transport beyond words, into the realm of absolute otherness.

Impermanence

One of the key characteristics of the experience of glimpsing the sacred reality is impermanence. It is both the impermanence of the perception and the impermanence of the perceived reality. Both are shifting. Escaping the eye. Flickering. Somehow, in the moment of poetic openness, this world is “passing thru” into another reality. The other reality does not have a clear description – it is still more of a liminal space or a placeless place:

passing thru
into that space between
one layer & the next
not cloud world but another
spectral & strange
passing thru
into the greyblue
sky over everything
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Nichol’s poetry emphasizes the transiency of the mystical moments and the impermanent character of the special altered states of consciousness. But by their momentary appearance and disappearance, these states mark the entrance into a different kind of reality, a different state of mind, of perception that is always escaping our efforts to grasp or describe it. Nichol says, “It [belief space] has the effect of a kind of flickering – that is to say, it’s always flickering, I’m there, I see it, I absolutely believe it. When I move away from it and I’m no longer in that state, I find it hard to imagine the state of mind I was in when I wrote that thing” (333).

The impermanence and ineffability of the mystical experience have been mentioned by many mystics and are described at length by James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The

mystical state is not permanent and cannot be grasped or named, but it can sometimes be glimpsed in the present moment, which leads us to a discussion of the transformation of profane into sacred time through the miracle of poetic practice, revealed through Nichol's texts.

Sacred time

There is an apparent commitment in Nichol's texts to re-imagining regular concepts of time. Human beings need sacred time for renewal and healing. There is only one place in time where we can glimpse the presence of the sacred. It is the present moment that opens into itself and into eternity. Nichol writes that we need "dreamtime" to remain sane, and "the man who has no 'dreamtime' goes insane" (*TM*, Bk. 3, V). Thus, writing transforms regular time into sacred time by gathering one's attention into the present moment and replacing the concept of linear causal time with the experience of "the active present of the writing," which can be read as the "eternal mythical present" (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* 70). Its main function is to effect renewal and regeneration:

o music music
there is the mind
a line of that's its own litany
sung slightly out of tune
i know the imperfections in my voice
know choice is a matter of emotions
commitment to a place & time
the active present of the writing
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Henderson notes a special connection between Nichol's exploration of the present moment and the sacred, a relationship that becomes a catalyst for spiritual transformation. He calls *The Martyrology* "a poetry of faith" and says the poem is "preoccupied with spiritual transformation. ... The exploration of the 'active present' in *TM* is often an exploration of the sacred and its limits, and how it appears in our lives" (111). Thus, the present moment of composition is the opening into the sacred.

By focusing on the present moment, Nichol allows the reader to experience a different dimension of time. This temporal dimension in his poetry echoes a description of "sacred time" described by Eliade in his foundational work *The Sacred and the Profane*. The sacred time is defined as the "primordial mythical time made present" (68). Eliade explains that the purpose of all sacred rituals is to gain access to this circular, reversible, and recoverable time that establishes the sacred dimension. Nichol's writing creates a similar effect that allows the reader to access and actually, while reading, experience the different dimension of time comparable to the one described by Eliade as sacred. In this dimension, future and past meet in a paradox of the only real time – the present moment. Thus, Nichol reconceptualizes the nature of time as non-narrative, broken, non-linear, cyclical and eternally present. For example, in an interview, he admits "that's been my personal experience in life, that things erupt. Things erupt into the present" ("Interview" 318).

Reading Nichol, one can clearly see how notions of time are magically transformed in the process of poetic composition. Both the moment and the eternity become the workshop of the poet. In this alchemic process of composition, regular concepts of time bend and melt or disappear altogether and are replaced by the intuitive poetic perception of the sacred time. Sometimes the sense of space and time gets dissolved: "there is a sense of space or time / goes

missing” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Friends as Footnotes”). Sometimes the present remains the only perceptible time and replaces past or future. Present moment is linked to the poetic form of time, and becomes a container for the timeless: “form then is what the present takes / seen as the past moment bursts forth” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Sons and Divinations”).

Nichol’s attention to the eternal sacred present tends to dominate the text: “i want to write the history of this present moment / brings me here pen in hand” (*TM*, Bk. 3, III). The poet’s unwavering commitment to transporting the reader into the present moment forces the reader to experience the depth, the multi-dimensionality, and the eternal quality of the present moment, perceived as sacred: “focus in language ‘is’ not ‘was’ ” (Bk. 2, “Friends as Footnotes”); “this moment is / everything present & tense” (Bk. 2, “Friends as Footnotes”); also, “everything bends toward this moment / surely as these words move worlds move” (Bk. 2, “Sons and Divinations,” 4).

The connection between Nichol’s understanding of time and his literary lineage is impossible to miss. His open admiration for Gertrude Stein can be traced through his explicit recurrent references to her poetics of the “present continuous” throughout the text of *The Martyrology*. For example, “there is a music in the moment comes together / joyce thot he knew or that insistence stein found” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Sons”). Or, in another stanza:

she is right you know saint rand
stein did say
the hardest thing is making the present continuous
living day to day
(Bk. 2, “Friends as Footnotes”)

The position of the writing subject in the present moment turns into a non-position – it is as if the writer is replaced by a simple flow of subjectivity and present attention – in the present moment. The dynamic non-subject is attuned to the flow of language, and becomes it. To acquire a truly poetic consciousness, one has to cease to be in order to “flow”:

i want to explain
as composition does
only this present moment
actually past
i stop writing when i cease to flow
(Bk. 2, “Friends as Footnotes”)

The act of poetic writing becomes the act of searching one’s soul and observing the things that come up, without the arrogance of assuming authorship for these ideas – instead, they are “thrown up” “out of the moment,” and the only thing that is required is “commitment to a place & time / the active present of the writing” (*TM*, Bk. 4). This is a commitment of attention to the present moment without any subjective intention:

saint orm
i throw up these poems
out of the moment of the soul’s searching

part of the process of gaining focus

never could

lost that dimension a long time

the ryme of

breathing
(*TM*, Bk. 1, “The Sorrows”)

These moments offer a possibility for a renewal of seeing – edges of perception are
potent places offering new vision:

edges of
perception re
new ways of
sea
 ing’s
 old line’s
(*TM*, Bk. 5)

Lines of poetry, lines of thought, breathlines are all renewed in these liminal spaces in
one’s mind and one’s expanding perception. Nichol seems to suggest that expansion and growth
happen on the “edges of perception.” These moments of renewal have a revelatory potential –
inspiration takes over, new awareness arises, words are being dictated, perceived and channeled
or “moving” through the poet “to be said,” and the poet is being led and moved:

this is not the moment when the writing comes
only the awareness thru another light
a choice of words moving to be said
pray god do let the consonance lead me

broken rhythm as the mind is
needing peace
to sleep in language years or weeks
(*TM*, Bk. 3)

In this gesture of mystical surrender of his agency, a poet can become a channel for the “actual” reality to speak through him. The necessary condition is for the poet to suspend or remove his own conception of “I” and become instead an instrument of praise. By dissolving his persona, Nichol becomes emptied out – becomes nothing but a gesture directing the reader towards the other concealed reality that reveals itself in poetic practice:

i is singing scale

i hails you

.....

if i let the actual speak

it will reveal itself

.....

we work

the changes

always

to reveal

lest the actual re-veil itself

(*TM*, Bk. 4)

According to Eliade, the sacred “founds the world in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world” (*The Sacred and the Profane* 30). One of the main functions of such founding is to ground all human phenomena in the sacred centre – to build an “axis mundi,” if you will. Nichol often speaks of this centre in his poetry, “there are many roads to that centre / many ways to go” (*TM*, Bk. 3, III). In order to create such sacred center or a ground of reality, a poet is to restructure space through his poetic practice. Nichol attributes a similar space-restructuring function to writing. Simply put, poetic writing structures and re-structures the

psychic space, making room for the sacred and in opening up this powerful inner “belief space,” causes one to tremble:

if i ever share with someone other than myself
this feeling of trembling

is it a selfish act to write saint ranglehold
to structure space this way for yourself
(*TM*, Bk. 3, II)

This space allows the poet to prepare himself for a very special communion or communication with that other reality. He enters a “belief space” anticipating nothing short of revelation. The poet himself becomes the symbol of such communication between the worlds. He becomes “a universal pillar, axis mundi” (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* 36). Eliade explains the meaning of this symbol:

Where the break-through from plane to plane has been effected by a hierophany, there too an opening has been made, either upward (the divine world) or downward (the underworld, the world of the dead). The three cosmic levels – earth, heaven, underworld – have been put in communication. (*The Sacred and the Profane* 36)

All the three cosmic levels of other worlds are found throughout Nichol’s texts – on earth, in heaven, in the skies, at the bottom of the sea. To be more precise, these other worlds are not actively searched for and found. They suddenly open through the window of the present moment in what is reminiscent of religious epiphany. As we learn from the above example, “there an invisible world opens / a heaven or a hell” (*TM*, Bk. 3, I). The key word is “opening.” It is both the opening of the poet’s perception and the opening of the sacred reality. Both are

epiphanies marked by the revelatory nature. Davey notes about the compositional principles of *The Martyrology*, “such writing is not strictly wordplay, because the relationships that emerge are presented as revelation rather than construction” (47). The poet admits he usually stumbles upon these shifts as this reality suddenly opens onto other:

that moment then saint and
that moment you stumbled thru a cloud into the world saint rike
discovered
you didn’t believe your eyes did you

this is a difficult thing
no longer trusting senses
we dream up ruses
abuses make them seem more real
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Auguries”)

This other reality is concealed and cannot be uncovered by force, only called out, invoked, summoned. Until then, it remains hidden in dreams, dream-worlds, and alternative states of mind. These other worlds can be threatening indeed, especially, since they are not located in another place, from which we are separated, but are hidden right here in the parallel reality in “the worlds at the edge of vision” and “half perceived auras round the rims of life” and are revealed by simply changing one’s perception:

in dreams
you could’ve seen if you’d stopped to think

what threatens now
comes from the worlds at the edge of vision

half perceived auras round the rims of life
(*TM*, Bk. 1, "Saint Reat")

The other worlds are invisible and do not need to take up the physical space. Only a psychic one. The space of one's imagination and a changed perspective. They can sometimes be glimpsed by surrendering control and intentionally moving into being lost:

of those things we understand this is the greatest mystery
knowledge deceives us
believing we move in our lostness purposefully
discover new worlds as and did
knowing nothing he came to that place saint rike now lives in
(*TM*, Bk. 2, "Auguries")

Perhaps, one of the main differences between imagining our human situation in a profane or a sacred way is the relationality of the subject in the sacred world. He is not alone. Neither is he isolated or separate. That illusion dissipates in the moment of altered awareness. The subject is in relation to everything, and everything is sacred. Both prayer and poetry teach us about this unity:

praying i realize you are part of me
all of you as i'd foreseen
it is not the mystery that deepens
it is the sense of awe
(*TM*, Bk. 2, "Sons and Divinations: fasting sequence," 5)

Higher order

Through the ritualized practice of poetic writing, the writing subject is building a relationship to the sacred. There is an intuition of a “higher order of things” a longing for connection, but no clear way to bridge it, so a poet is trying to enact the connection through language:

you grew up frightened

always that distance between
no way to bridge
the greyness of the rim worlds

curled before the fire
imagined a higher order of things

never knew this life
because you occupied another
(*TM*, Bk. 1, “Saint Reat”)

The connection happens through a change in consciousness. The poet is a bridge between different states of consciousness and awareness. He is building invisible “transparent connections”:

this bridge must
connect two states of consciousness
written weeks apart
form a link your mind can follow
paths my thots have taken
transparent connections
(*TM*, Bk. 5)

While the poet is a bridge, and poetic language is a vehicle of passage, the poem becomes a gateway into that other reality. Nichol writes, "i could step thru the door into the world this poem opens" (*TM*, Bk. 2, Auguries). There is a longing to reach and connect clearly haunting the text of *The Martyrology*. For example, "all speech become a reaching over distances" (*TM*, Bk. 2, "Clouds"). Desire to reach is often connected to the act of speaking. Speech is given a unitive quality, "wind home / how shall I reach you with all speech gone?" (*TM*, Bk. 1, "Saint Reat"). Most connections are sought in the other realm, "push towards *He(a)ven* / shown in my life / writing" (*TM*, Bk. 5, "Chain 3").

Connection

In previous chapters, we discussed a power often associated with the sacred and the feminine to unite things, to embrace them, and to include them into a totality. For Nichol, poetic incarnation has a similar power. Besides connecting the three levels of cosmos, the profane and the sacred world, poetic language also unites body, breath, and spirit through sound, "speech is the holy act / linking as it does the whole body" (*TM*, Bk. 3, V).

In another example, the phrase "sky over everything" (*TM*, Bk. 4) once again reveals the unitive quality of this belief space – its capacity to fuse, include, embrace, and unite. Poetic language serves to create connections and to bridge the two realities, "if speech reaches / it is some other place" (*TM*, Bk. 3, VIII). Poetic language can create invisible bridges not only between different realities, but between different states of consciousness, which, in turn, can allow these realities to emerge and be perceived. Thus, poetic practice serves the function of

dissolving the illusion of separation and creating a symbolic connection to the sacred in the invisible realm of perception:

we will not drown in this july air
tho one hurls one's lines
as a drowning man
or a falling fool
might
praying for
connection
some bridge between himself & the void that threatens
(*TM*, Bk. 5)

Conclusion

Thus, we have attempted to show that poetic writing initiates a powerful and spontaneous shift of perspective, perception and experience. One's perception of reality, time, space and even one's self undergoes a dramatic transformation. Nichol's ability to alter perception through his writing did not go unnoticed by critics. They acknowledge the many forms this transformation takes – from expanding the present moment into eternity to completely erasing the sense of time and building an “atemporal” moment of language in the space of the page. For example, Lola Tostevin describes how a “sense of history” in Nichol's writing is superseded by the present moment of writing:

... the story behind history always refers back to language, the physicality and musicality of language moving through the moment of writing, moving through time making his sense of timing atemporal, the moment, the reciprocal envelopment of past and future.

And just as his sense of timing displaces the limits of time, his sense of word-play and rhythm displaces the limits of language... (78)

Thus, poetic language aims to recover the most important lost human connections, with both the visible and the invisible worlds. Scobie noticed this persistent drive for connection in Nichol's poetry. He explains, "central figure of Nichol's work is separation – of the child from the parent, of the signifier from the signified, or friends from each other – and the humanist drive of his writing is a heroic attempt to overcome such separation" (18). Barbour echoes this observation saying that Nichol "seeks a spiritual link through his writing" (Barbour 219). Ann Munton notices that "the over-riding principle of *The Martyrology* [is] the principle of connection" (214). Munton goes further to specify the recurrent kinds of connections Nichol seeks through his writing as "the search for reconciliation with the father, with death, with language, with poetic form, and with a religious being" (213).

Rafael Barreto-Rivera proposes that this desire for connection is the most important function of the poet in *The Martyrology*:

In relation to this deity, the poet's most significant role is
... praying for
connection
some bridge between himself & the void that threatens
drivin' long
writing poems that come out song
sound tracking a life...
(in Barreto-Rivera 101-102)

As we have attempted to show, dealing with the "void that threatens" permeates *The Martyrology*. It is accompanied by poetic effort to face this void and make sense of it – in other

words, to do the impossible. Rafael Barreto-Rivera sums up poem's main themes as follows: death, making sense, making meaning, healing, redemption, prayer, calling to God, searching for redemptive power in language. Writing becomes "refuge" a "healing space," "the poem and the act of writing become parts of this redemptive mission" (107).

Poetic writing becomes a place to search for and to find faith. It becomes a transformative and a healing medium in the face of death and loss. The poem itself becomes a sacred refuge from the profane. Poetic writing does not take one's attention away from death. Its healing power lies in its capacity to create a moment and space to encounter the radical alterity of death, that perfect vehicle that transports one from the profane realm into the sacred one. Nichol also reveals to us most intimate secrets – namely, that on the border between life and death, for example, during suicidal moments, poetry becomes a prayer for salvation and the salvation itself:

i wanted to end it

step into my room happy
still this nameless ache upon the chest

i wanted to reach you one more time
.....
held in this room i'm sitting writing to you

prayers

as if you were there & heard me
(*TM*, Bk. 2, "Book of Common Prayer")

Critics agree that death is a central phenomenon in the Martyrology. For example, analyzing *The Martyrology*, Barbour suggests that the text “confronts the basic human fears which the poem will return to again and again, especially those of the other and of death, and then it moves beyond: ‘it is not the mystery that deepens / it is the sense of awe’” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Sons and Divinations”)” (58).

In the face of loss and death, the poem becomes a prayer, a search for meaning, a screaming. In the face of death, a poem offers a shelter. Barreto-Rivera describes Nichol’s approach to “each death” in *The Martyrology*, “what he experiences is not only the pain of the loss itself (and the attendant partial loss of self), but also a retreat into an inner sanctuary” (106). Thus, we can conclude that poetry and prayer occupy the same psychic territory, “these things as I have noted them here / are taking place have taken / are the true & proper province of poetry & prayer” (*TM*, Bk. 3, I). We learn from Nichol that language can be used to create faith, or to be more precise, speaking is the act of overcoming one’s doubt. Poetic writing itself becomes the act of expressing one’s faith:

city days

the grey dirt & damp soot
disturbs my prayer
who would speak to you
knowing you’re there
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Clouds”).

Because of its non-referential nature, poetic language has the capacity to offer an opening, a possibility, a chance to point to the experience of the sacred. In his essay on the

sacred, Nichol explains that it is poetic language itself that allows him to articulate this “faith state” the best:

This has forced me to redefine, for myself, a notion of what faith is – that is to say, in some way I suppose I have the faith to follow the fiction far enough for it to get me to some kind of real perspective. I have to have some consciousness, then, of what I am doing and of where it seems to be imaginary, but nonetheless I get to a space which seems to give me a real perspective. This also makes it tremendously difficult to step aside from that process and talk about it. The best talking I’ve done about it, in a way, is in the poems I’ve written ... (333)

Nichol’s use of poetic language opens a full spectrum of relationship between poetic and the sacred. A poem becomes a prayer, a meditation, a chant, an invocation, a scream, a cry for connection, redemption, or salvation, initiating a shift in consciousness that reveals the sacred dimension in our life:

we have struggled a millennium
without your name
no power to invoke but our own
noun of your being absent
no other nouns cohere
.....
& it is death i see
which is the absence of the strength to call you
the power to invoke your name
gone in the shifting game of allegiance
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Poetic practice becomes a sacred activity, not unlike a personal sacred ritual. Language acquires the power to connect us to a special state of mind that alters one's experience of time and of one's existence in two parallel realities at the same moment – a quantum collapse of sorts. The present moment becomes the miraculous opening into the sacred. It becomes fecund with the opportunities to expand one's perception and one's consciousness to glimpse the presence of the sacred – it opens one to the experience of life, death, religious dread, regeneration and rebirth.

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade explains that through sacred rituals, the world is renewed, and its sanctity is restored (75), “the sacred dimension of life is recovered,” and the “sanctity of human existence” is experienced again (89). By symbolically participating in the annihilation and re-creation of the world, man too was created anew; he was reborn, for he began a new life” (79). Various rituals reactualize cosmogony with a purpose for healing. Their meaning lies in “starting time over again at its beginning, that is, restoration of the primordial time, the ‘pure’ time, that existed at the moment of Creation” (78). In this ritual, all the past with its sins is forgotten, abolished, consumed and annulled (79) and one has a chance to “begin life once again” and to undergo a symbolic rebirth” (89).

Writing poetry does not aim at describing or explaining the experience of the sacred. It becomes the experience of the sacred itself. A journey into the unknown through language and its “signs of passage,” “journal journey / jour du nalney / move thru the signs of passage” (*TM*, Bk. 4). Eliade explains that symbols are “vehicles of passage from the one space to the other” (*The Sacred and the Profane* 25). For Nichol, poetic practice becomes such symbolic vehicle of transforming consciousness during a ritual passage:

the w rite of consciousness
a transparency's
too often viewed opaquely
lack of seeing
lack of being
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

He compares “write” with a “rite” of consciousness. The purpose is not to articulate the ineffable. Not to tell us about it, nor describe or explain it. It is not to recover the sacred or return us to it. The poetic transition from the profane and into the sacred is nothing but an invisible symbolic, psychic and or affective transport. Nichol’s writing allows me to propose that we can see writing poetry not only as a means to reconnect us with the sacred reality, but also as a form of sacred activity in and of itself. It is not only the means of reaching that dimension of life that is ontologically prior to the reality of writing and needs to be recovered. The very act of writing can be seen as a manifestation of the sacred itself.

Chapter 8. Writing to Redefine Literary Practice

Revolutionary poetic experiments radically alter existing literary practice, moving it from the field of hermeneutic interpretation to the field of phenomenology. The roles of the writer and the reader are redefined, and so are our perceptions of time, space and one's physical and psychic reality. Poetry allows language to shift its function from performing its limiting mimetic function of pointing back to the real world to engaging its full power to alter one's perception, enter another state of consciousness and induce an experience of the sacred. Out of this transformation, emerge new powerful epistemological questions, as well as new definitions of writing and reading practices themselves.

Nichol's texts masterfully engage the semiotic dimension of language⁷ to redefine the reading experience and give it another dimension of alterity, which can sometimes be

⁷ as defined by Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language*

uncomfortable, and yet, even more powerful in its capacity to open the reader to a new perception. The illusions of referentiality, logic of rationality, transparency, linearity and ease of consumption are exposed. Instead, Nichol's texts create conditions of possibility for a reading movement that breaks with the traditional narrative model of linear progression and takes a form of a directionless progression, a flow, and sometimes an expansion of perception in concentric circles. Readers do not have a goal to achieve or a final destination to follow. Instead, they have to explore the experience of releasing control, surrender of will, the experience of trusting the flow of the text... of life. This can be experienced as both a discomfort or a bliss, depending on the level of the reader's need for control.

In most of his texts, Nichol admits surrendering his will and control to the poetic process and to the power inherent in language: "late at night / writing words that will not wait till morning" (*TM*, Bk. 3, IV). Language has complete control over the poet, "afraid of the words even now threaten to overwhelm me i am carried away" (*TM*, Bk. 3, V). Such feminine stance of passivity and receptivity mark both poetic and mystical experiences of altered consciousness. For example, James connects the phenomena of "prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance" based on this suspension of one's will: "the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power" (*The Varieties of Religious Experience* 415). Through such frequent confessions of surrendering to the agency of language, Nichol reminds us that the process of composition is an experimental journey into the unknown. It is not conceived and then executed. It is not explained. It is discovered in the process of writing and is revealed in the process of reading – as the writer goes through it, so does the reader. They both surrender to the mystery of language itself. Burnham notes this interrelation of roles: "What is in store for us when we read Book 5 of *The*

Martyrology? Nothing less than a revolution, a new way of reading and writing that allows for a re-reading of the poem's own genesis" (204). Nichol himself admits that his writing process is a mystical unfolding, not polluted by any preconceived concepts or theories:

But the nature of the work has been such that I did not begin with a conclusion. Therefore I cannot superimpose a theory of writing on what happens when I write, I can only deduce from what happens when I try certain things. [...] Because I have paid attention to the "how" of my writing, I believe that what I discover the reader discovers in exactly the same way I discover it without my ever having to say to the reader "here's a discovery." (qtd. in McCaffery, "In Tens/tion" 81-82)

Instead of forcefully applying to language the powers of analysis, understanding, interpretation, dissecting the fullness of meaning into denotations and connotations, the writer lets go of the willful impulse to control the flow and joins the inherent flow of emergent form: "i know only your story comes to me in sections / i have no control" (Nichol, *TM*, Bk. 2, "Sons and Divinations"). In exchange for suspending his desire to control, the reader will be shown by the text how to experience the meaning through opening of his perception – a "widening of perceptual frames," as Miki called it (15). Readers have to join Nichol himself in being "guided by directions coming from the poem itself" (15). So, both the writer and the reader have to suspend their will and listen for the otherness to reveal itself through a spontaneous rhythmic eruption of form.

Instead of receiving a clear, transparent meaning carefully prepackaged by the writer, the reader is invited to surrender his need for clarity and certainty, abandon caution and dive into the opacity of the text. McCaffery speaks about the effect of such a literary gesture:

Presenting language as an opacity to direct experience and balanced somewhere between a signification and a phenomenology, a fixed structure and an indeterminate sign field, they [poets] de-facilitate all transit to the surplus-value of a referent and produce reality by not reproducing the Real. (“Diminished Reference” 24)

The reader is invited to share the meaning-making process with the writer: “*The Martyrology* has never offered itself to passive consumers, and as it has progressed, it has demanded more and more that its readers accept its formal invitation to play it as it says” (Barbour 73). The reader becomes the “modern scriptor” (Barthes), his role melding with that of the writer. It is a co-authorship of sorts in a sense of getting lost together in the primacy of the language. The text of *The Martyrology* exists on its own and displaces the author as a source of meaning: “The text of Chain 7, however, is only possible, or seems to be, in the absence of a communicable author. Thus it destroys the status of the author as holder/source of meaning” (Burnham 208). This becomes especially evident in “Book 5” where the reader is forced to take up the role of the co-author of the text. There is no direction to follow. No maps. Each chain can be read separately. No hierarchy or logical sequence. The text is open... asking the reader to open up in response. There is no central route. No path. One can follow one’s own direction, make turns and take digressions. “In Book 5 there are no more free rides. The reader/hitch-hiker takes part and shares the author’s primary, front-seat role” (Munton 220). This undermines both our cultural practice of writing and of reading. Language and reader become as central to the literary experience as is the writer:

Book V was structured on the idea of the chain – chain of thot, chain of images, chain of events – so that in the writing when a branching of thot occurred i would try to follow all the chains that opened up. Hence, in the text, what may appear like footnote numbers

actually represent reading choices. As a reader you can continue thru the chain of ideas you're already following, or you can choose, at different points, to diverge & follow the chain of ideas the various numbered options represent. ... This means, of course, that no two readers will necessarily have the same experience of Book V, tho they will walk away with a similar sum. The Gordian knot that Book V seems to become is also the untying of the first four books. (Nichol, *The Alphabet Game* 110)

In many ways, this approach of choosing to follow a chain of thought or choosing to freely change direction and turn around and follow another thought or get lost in among the paths altogether challenges the whole western way of being: "didn't know what to do / lost in the absence of being where everyone assumed me not to be" (Nichol, *TM*, Bk. 1, "The Sorrows"). It undermines the guiding principles of utilitarian efficiency, drive, setting and achieving goals, efficiency, bias toward linearity, not trusting the spontaneous unfolding of life, not trusting the present moment in which direction will be given and felt, not trusting ourselves to know, not trusting the grace of the universe.

What is even more important, Nichol does not tell us about his experience. His focus on the primacy of the embodied experience of language over the logical understanding of the text is becoming more clear: "I am not reporting to readers *my* vision, but rather presenting to them a way of seeing, giving them the actual experience that I had so that they can experience it for themselves, have their own vision, their own experience of *ekstasis*"⁸ (qtd. in "In Tens/tion" 87-88). He gives us a chance to relearn how to allow the experience of vulnerability, and to surrender to the vulnerability of experiencing. He allows us to experience a more primal "dream-like" nature of thought, where multiple streams of thoughts, multiple impulses, multiple

⁸ "*Ekstasis*: (properly: distraction or disturbance of mind caused by shock), bewilderment, amazement; a trance" (Strong's).

impressions and perceptions are all perceived by the mind and the body at the same time, creating a rich primordial chaos and confusion.

This is reminiscent of the experience of both Kristeva's semiotic *chora* and also Eliade's primordial chaos one descends into during the experience of the dissolution in the sacred primal totality, which he calls primordial waters. I wonder if, perhaps, Nichol's approach to writing allows us to imagine extending Kristeva's theory of the poetic process, which she reduces to the realm of the immanent, beyond that realm and open a possibility of conceiving that the psychological transformations of consciousness that, according to her description, take place in the subject during the poetic process are intimations of actual existential transformations.

In his own way, Nichol is inviting us to surrender to the primordial vortex of energy and trust the language to carry us through, moment by moment. He is searching for faith. He is asking the reader to have faith as well. There is no promised outcome. We are to trust in the poetic process, and we are to trust the mystical nature of the language:

But if writing is a reading is a writing is a reading, how then can the poem ever resolve itself with itself or to itself? Won't the writer simply get caught in a whirlwind of language signifying nothing? Belief is the key, or a trust in the poetic process – 'only the words you trust to take you thru' (Bk. 2, "Friends as Footnotes") – as a means of sustaining the life-confirming dynamic between the finitude of the self and the otherness in the world. (Miki 13)

In this meeting place of co-authorship, in this mystical exploration of language together, not only the reader becomes the writer – the writer becomes the reader. In an interview with McCaffery, Nichol explains the ever-evolving nature of the work and a different, more feminine

conception of authorship it requires – the writer is open to the text and listens to it instead of forcing his will onto it:

My thinking about it [*TM*] is still evolving. In that sense I probably treat the text more as a reader than a writer, i.e., when the text closes it continues to evolve in the mind of the reader tho it is over for the writer. This text has not closed. I continue to read it and write it and it continues to revolve & evolve. (Nichol, qtd. in McCaffery “In Tens/tion” 91)

The interconnectedness of the roles of the reader and the writer takes on more and more layers as the text progresses. This relationship has a dynamic quality to it, where its life and energy are supplied by the language itself, but direction is not. Miki calls *TM* a “dizzying text to read,” which, “in the inwardness of its texture acquires an even more labyrinthine density. ... While Nichol writes by reading the writing ‘as it goes,’ so too do readers struggle to comprehend the reading ‘as it goes’” (29).

This struggling through the text’s opacity prevents the reader from ignoring the textual surface. As readers, we are used to disrespecting the text and treating it simply as a door to reality. We kick it open with a foot, and the door obediently flies open as we proceed through the “door” of the text to our final destination – the referential reality. And the only function of the “door” is to lead into this realm of reality. But what if it shuts back into our face? Or it does not open at all, and the foot that kicked it gets broken? The shock value of a broken foot at least forces us to notice and acknowledge the presence and the very materiality of the “door” that is text, and maybe even reconsider its existence and purpose. Materiality of language is at the core of *écriture féminine* as it questions the connection between the signifier and the signified as the

only potential birthplace of meaning. The signifier itself carries a poetic meaning in its very form. Form becomes meaning.

Suddenly, language is not a door to reality, not even a window. It is a wall between two realities – the writer's and the reader's. It is a material surface. In a way, it is a mirrored surface – double-mirrored. Inscribed on one side and inscribed on the other side as well. Each time it is read, it is inscribed with a new reflection of each new reader, and each reader will have a different experience of reading and will take away a different meaning. And the wall of text is moving like water, like a powerful waterfall of language one can enter while writing and while reading. Without consciously choosing the path, the reader surrenders to the moment's presence and all the emerging associations, clashes and surprising chance discoveries. In this regard, reading Nichol comes close to recreating his writing process.

Nichol's work is often an example of raw unprocessed thought expressed freely with utter disregard to formal rules of grammar, syntax or punctuation. Such experimental literary form presents a degree of difficulty for readers and often results in apparent inaccessibility of the text. His writing requires from his readers a commitment to a certain level of discomfort. It also requires courage to enter into a special psychic and emotional state his works often induce. Thus, ambiguity is seen as the intended goal of poetry:

the muse is western (greek)
the japanese saw poetry as everyman's
like that or breathing
ambiguity was precisely what they wanted
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Nichol's reader is invited to meet the writer in the uncertainty of poetic consciousness, and, in this way, to take more of a feminine stance of surrendering mastery in relation to reading saturated by otherness. The reader is invited to let go of his/her many assumptions about himself, the text and the relationship with the writer. Thus, a radical poetic practice undermines many of the cultural expectations and invites a certain openness to a radical alterity it reveals:

i do not know anymore i have grown so tired of knowing now i am full of longing &
nothing fills me now i am full of longing & nothing moves me i lie on my bed
longing i lie on my bed & let my fingers move oh heaven is there surely heaven is
there in that lifting surely i could rise & enter that world knowing heaven was there
nothing is sure (*Journal* 12)

Like most of Nichol's texts, *Journal* invites the reader's active participation in the reading experience of meaning-making, a re-tracing of the composition process of sorts. In the interview with McCaffery, Nichol speaks of the necessity for the reader of *The Martyrology* to take on more responsibilities than a regular text would require, "I think that given the length of the work, *The Martyrology* ceases to be a reading experience, at least in the way we have come to think of it. Its very duration means that you must [...] inhabit it in some sense" ("In Tens/tion" 91). A reader is denied the comfort of passively consuming the text, and, instead, is required to "inhabit" the text, which means to be open to it, to be present, awake and capable of entering the uncertainty and the irreducibility of the literary experience.

Nichol's formal experiments with syntax and punctuation add to the opacity of the text by interrupting and frustrating the reading habit and our expectations, making us reread, repeat, search again. The words and letters are jumping, cascading, dancing, collapsing into each other –

they do everything on the page except what one expects them to do based on her past reading experiences and habits. The reader might feel the frustration because his assumptions about the “normal” reading practice interfere with the very process of reading and are therefore revealed in the form of confusion or irritation.

The essence of experimental writing is connecting to the reading practice: “the unifying feature of experimental writing is ... the obstruction of normal reading” (DeKoven, *A Different Language* 5). Experimental writing, she says, is “an alternative language, which requires a different kind of reading and which opposes itself to the dominant patriarchal culture in definable ways” (5). Thus, the main feature of experimental writing that separates it from the more conventional forms is its resistance to easy consumption or to uniform meaning. DeKoven says the readers of such innovative experimental pieces “cannot interpret any of them to form coherent, single, whole, closed, ordered, finite, sensible meanings, even several such meanings, without radically altering the nature and effect of the writing as it is read” (5). We are invited to be open to new forms of meaning, which spontaneously erupt from a chance encounter of language elements with each other:

sense out of nonsense
N on sense
(which is me)
i spell out changes
realign essentials
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

In his search for new forms of language, the poet realigns the old essential meanings by taking them to their limit. Writing and reading poetry involves going through uncertainty,

abolishing the comfort of logic, turning to nonsense if only to make new sense and create new meaning by relying on the senses.

Nichol's *Journal* is an outstanding example of unprocessed thought – a kind of meditation or a stream of consciousness with not too many formal markers like punctuation to help the reader. It seems to begin over and over again – and always from the present moment⁹. It literally becomes, to borrow Nichol's words, "the piling up of such beginnings" (*Journal* 2). A reader may sometimes experience a sense of swimming – sometimes even drowning – in the ocean of raw emotion, where real has nothing to do with the outside referentiality, where the conscious is overcome with the unconscious, and verbal is taken over by non-verbal elements, like musicality and rhythm. Some researchers called this "poetics of immersion" ([Miriam] Nichols) or "an attempt to submerge the reader" (David 24). In one of the interviews, Nichol himself noted that his goal in this work was a "submersion process." He confesses that in writing *Journal*, his aspiration was to be "able to transcribe, if you like, or translate, states of consciousness. And to simply have that so that the reading experience would be the experience as much as you can get it of a state of consciousness" ("Interview" 318).

This altered state of consciousness takes us back to the beginning – a psychological beginning of our life as a separate subject, but also one step closer to an intimation of our ontological beginning, hidden deep in our subconscious mind. Thus, our subconscious is the gateway between the two worlds and, according to James, has the power to "intermediate" between two orders. His hypothesis is that "whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the "more" with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the

⁹ Writing in the "continuous present" time and beginning over and over in the present moment are prominent features in the writing style of Gertrude Stein, whose work Nichol admired.

subconscious continuation of our conscious life” (*The Varieties of Religious Experience* 556-57). Thus, the subconscious is found at the heart of both poetic and mystical experiences.

In *Journal*, specifically, through the speaker’s relationship to his mother, the real source of his life, the text shows the futile striving to return to and to merge again with the source of life:

external reality just gets subsumed into internal reality... then it just gets consumed into the confusion, until finally he just has to shove it all aside and in a way just go back to his own beginning, which, in that case, is his relationship to his mother. And it’s almost like he starts over at that point. (Interview 319)

The primacy of the internal reality is revealed. The “real” and “objective” external reality disappears, and another more threatening internal reality takes over, with its confusion that is akin to the primordial chaos. We are drawn, as if by magic, to the primordial source of life. In fact, just as the main character, we are constantly trying to return to the repressed feminine beginning, but to no avail, still, the futile gesture persists and we start again and again. Thus, the text of *Journal* points to the pain of longing to return to our origin – in one sense, the origin is the feminine maternal *chora*, but in another sense, it is also the primordial mythological origin.

Going in circles and beginning again over and over, diving into a different state of consciousness that accompanies the creative process and stands in sharp contrast to clarity socialized thought and language strive for. Poetic consciousness is similar to trance, delirium, or dreaming: “a calling after the fogs that cloud my mind” (*Journal* 7-8). The reader is following the writer on the same journey into the essence of language. We surrender our need to name, fix

or control things. We surrender to the “fever” of sensations and the “spell of language” eagerly accepting confusion as a productive state of mind that requires trust:

as it had been those days i did not know your name
lay in fever under what is over
the spell of language on me in confusion
i could not say

these words these words
shriek out the window
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Auguries”)

The author is under the “spell of language,” affected by the “fever” and the “confusion” that resist precise articulation. By entering the text, the reader also surrenders to the same magic spell that changes our perception of ordinary reality taking us to a different realm of otherness.

The experience of reading *Journal* is indeed comparable to entering a different reality, like entering a strange confusing dream that neither explains, nor needs any explanation – the reader is carried by language into a different state of consciousness: “every morning i feel so anxious every morning there is a fear i am tense or unable to begin i think of words they dont make sense i write them down then cross them out i begin again” (64). And just like in a dream, there are repetitions with slight variations, cyclical movement with no exit; it is a constant cycle of beginnings, endings, and new beginnings. The sacred cosmogonic cycle of regeneration and rebirth, the ongoing renewal of time that offers access to the sacred eternal time, central to all the sacred rituals, is recognizable in many of Nichol’s texts, thus giving us a reason to compare Nichol’s texts to sacred vehicles of passage from one reality to the other.

The timeline of the *Journal* reflects a similar pattern of a spiraling motion always going back to the beginning and starting again. What is it spiraling? The mind of the writer? His memory? His perception? Are we in a future fantasy? In past memory? Where are we taken as readers? Perhaps, Nichol points to a constant and ongoing renewal of time, where each moment is unique, discrete and is disconnected from the seemingly preceding moment of time. Each moment reveals its own unique “perceptual flux” (James). We are taken into the ever-changing and fluid whirlpool of the writer’s senses and consciousness: “The centre of Barrie’s longer text pieces is usually quite fluid, and intercepted by changes in the writer’s consciousness. The writer’s consciousness is the effulgent centre of each piece” (Donnell 243). We are in a vortex of poetic language that points beyond itself. We are taken by the text and brought dangerously close to the edge of language and the edge of the mind.

Syntax and punctuation are used by Nichol to create a powerful stylistic effect of altering the reader’s state of consciousness. The text of *Journal* offers no marked places to stop, pause, or take a breath. Naively trying to follow the text and trusting that somewhere ahead there will be a formally marked end of a sentence, phrase, or a syntagm – but there are none for eighty pages – a reader might feel exasperated or even experience a lack of oxygen, which would also add to the overall effect of the altered state of consciousness during the reading. Nichol uses these formal devices to engage the semiotic dimension of language, where body and thought not only interact to create meaning, they are still fused together. And in this fusion, they are able to reveal the true nature of the embodied rhythmic, fluid meaning accompanied by a feeling of continuous flow of oncoming thoughts and perceptions, a new wave in each moment.

Similarly, the syntax on *The Martyrology* leaves the reader searching for the end of the sentence only to find it exploding into a multitude of possible sentences, words running out in

different directions to connect with the next and the previous sentences, leaving the reader to deal with the aftermath of the big bang of the alphabet, expanding, expanding, expanding in all different directions, like a sphere, creating new rich universes out of letters, words, spaces between the two and resisting our desire to fit them into complete, clear and neatly structured sentences:

even in my ignorance i know
you are
 i am
 me
 em.
 ma
(*TM*, Bk. 5, “Chain 2”)

The stanza points to some primordial knowledge of beingness and to our inherent ability to recognize it. This knowledge that cannot be lost – it can only be covered up by our “ignorance,” but can also be recovered. The last four lines of the text actually perform a reversal of time and a return to the beginning by reversing the words and letters: “am / me / em. / ma.” Such instances of text’s temporality interfering with linear temporality are abundant in Nichol’s writing and support the thesis about his writing giving us access to the sacred, eternal, cyclical time, accessed through the sacred rituals Eliade describes, accessible through the power of the present moment.

Nichol’s reader is disoriented, but at the same time initiated into a deeper mystery of the world of poetic language, where meanings open up in all directions simultaneously, like a visual collage, an unwinding spiral or an expanding sphere. The story line in Nichol’s texts under analysis, as in many others, begins and then begins again and again without ending first. Breaks

in narrative are frequent and correspond to new chains of thought, starting and ending before being fully developed. I think, rather than sense, no(n) sense is pursued, as yet another route toward achieving a certain state of consciousness. As the textual reality expands in all directions, like a sphere, so does the reader's consciousness and his ability to perceive. In one of his unpublished notebooks Nichol writes about the unusual structure of *The Martyrology*, "the structure of this book is spherical and has little to do with linear considerations. book two will be another sphere and other books will probably follow" ([TM]: *Misc. Title Pages and Intros for Early Versions* (1964-1970) n.p.). This non-narrative structure of the text can be read as Nichol's comment on the non-linear nature of time and has implications for revealing the nature of thought process.

New conception of temporality

The unexpected temporality of Nichol's texts is striking. Our everyday perception of time as progressing in a linear fashion and events unfolding in a chronological sequence breaks, utterly shatters against the temporality inscribed in Nichol's texts – all times past and future collapse into the ultimate reality of the present moment:

begin again then

the road

begin again

the log's an art

begin again }
begin again
begin again

↖
that song

it is a cycle i have chanted

a season in its turn

a statement of position

(*TM*, Bk. 5, Chain 2)

Everything happens in the present. Present is the only reality. Each breath, each line reflects a fresh perception of this very moment, with no past or future to be found in the present. Each moment, we begin again and anew. Instead of continuity, we get a succession of discrete snapshots of the continuous present that reveals the ultimate reality of the present moment, which contains everything and yet is always new and unique. In this succession of discrete “dissimilar” instances, as James put it, “novelty seems to violate continuity” (*Some Problems of Philosophy* 153).

Each moment is our entry into the only time that *is* and is simultaneously beyond time – the present now, the “specious present” (James), the “continuous present” (Stein), or “the piling up of such beginnings” (Nichol, *Journal* 2). This instant is not a link in the chain of instants laid out on a straight line from the past into the future – but this instant becomes the only real manifestation of time:

'for other waters are
continually flowing on'

& other songs

emptying out

spring into stream into river into lake into
ocean

'n ocean 'n

ocean

'n ocean 'n

ocean

'n ocean 'n

ocean

(*TM*, Bk. 4, “Inchoate Road,” II)

The text exhibits both a continuity of the perceptual flux and the accompanying mental processes that are “continually flowing on’,” and at the same time, the discontinuity of unique snapshots of the writer’s internal world of perceptions and mental processes in each present moment. Visually, in each line, the word *ocean* appears in a new physical place, thus its form enters into a new relationship with time: visually, each moment, the ocean is perceived anew as reflected in the different visual and rhythmic placement. It is not the same perception, it is a new “dissimilar” ocean. Actually, the visual arrangement is reminiscent of the waves lapping on the shore, some waves are visually louder, “’n ocean 'n,” and some are more quiet, “ocean.” A visual rhythm is created with attention of the reader drawn to each individual instant and the fresh perceptions it offers.

Writing transforms time by writing this instant in all its fullness, all its perceptual richness, its potentiality, its uncontainability and its incomprehensibility:

the everlasting coming of concrete novelty into being is so obvious that the rationalizing intellect, bent ever on explaining what is by what was, and having no logical principle but identity to explain by, treats the perceptual flux as a phenomenal illusion, resulting from the unceasing re-combination in new forms of mixture, of unalterable elements coeval with the world. (James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* 149)

The perceptual flux, it is so rich, distinct, unique, and completely new that it challenges our thinking faculty, but enriches the perceptual one: “we do, in fact, experience perceptual novelties all the while. Our perceptual experience overlaps the conceptual reason: the *that* transcends the *why*” (James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* 141). We are brought into here and now, where being reveals itself in its wondrous and mysterious form that our cognitive faculties cannot grasp:

not so much that but this

not so much then but now

not so much beginnings but beginning

again's a gain

(*TM*, Bk. 4, “Inchoate Road,” II)

The last line “again’s a gain” reveals the importance of starting again each moment. Beginnings are not added together, the plural form of the word is rejected to reveal the singularity of each beginning. The “this” is all we have in the “now”; the “that” and the “then” are discarded as the present moment devours the past and forces us to pay attention to the emerging “this” that is coming into being right “now.”

Conclusion

this evening the this seems too present

- bpNichol (*TM*, Bk. 3, II).

Radical poetic writing pushes the reading experience into the realm of otherness. What emerges through this powerful redefining of writing and reading cultural practices is not only

new cultural forms of meaning creation, but new ethical implications for communication, which include the irreducibility of the other, the embodied relationship between two speaking subjects, the impossibility of naming or categorizing with the eye on completion and utility. Instead, we are presented with Otherness, confusion, fusion, and openness of an embodied experience of language. Not knowing, opening to the mystery, letting go of prejudice as well as of the illusion of mastery and knowledge. The invisible epistemological paradigm hidden in the cultural meaning-making processes is exposed and challenged by such radical poetic practice.

Nichol's texts invite the readers to open their mind and heart to chance and to change, to witness and participate in the spontaneous emergence of meaning, proliferation of meanings, the endless play of signifiers, the heterogeneity of language forms. Barbour even calls such radical "openness to change" Nichol's "method of composition," and at the same time, a "political statement" (225). A reader is forced once again to relinquish the illusion of control and mastery of language. Instead, he comes to the realization of the mystery of language, which can be seen as a reflection of the mystery of being – language itself is revealed to be a sacred mystery. Poetic practice teaches us about surrender to the wonder of the otherness, to the sensations and dizzying perceptions without a restrictive or a thetic move to fix things into place and label them so one can feel safe in the world and avoid the anxiety of the presence of the sacred, the terror of uncertainty and death.

As readers, we are thrown into the text that disrupts our ordinary consciousness and forces us to redefine our relationship to thought and thought processes, to our body, our identity and offers a chance to enter the new perceptual order marked by otherness. We are in a new textual environment, where language functions on the level of generating "probes" to make us aware of the invisible order we are a part of. Thus, the power of radical poetic language becomes

more clear – to awaken us to the invisible forces forming an invisible web of logic that operate in language.

Poetic writing produces poetic reading, which has a strong effect on the reader. It undermines the habitual reading practices and their accompanying meaning-making processes. Poetic thinking exhibits a feminine nature by being open to a more feminine mode of meaning-making – the semiotic realm. It is open to the other side of language – the musical, rhythmical aspect that incorporates voice, breath, beat, rhythm and pushes ordinary meaning over the edge of non-meaning.

Poetic language complicates the process of reading by attacking the “cultural hegemony of sense, order, linearity, unitary coherence” and relies instead on the principle of “indeterminacy and amorphousness,” “multiplicity and contradictoriness,” “‘pluridimensionality’ or polysemy” (DeKoven 7). Radical poetic practice thrives on more feminine principles of fluidity and openness, as well as affirmation of multiplicity and polyphony:

the precision of openness
is not a vagueness
it is an accumulation
cumulous

yes

oceanic
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

We learn from Nichol that we are the unknown and the unknowable. So, restriction and closure become unbearable. We are once again searching for openness. The radical openness of poetic thinking is what Nichol sees as being of great value:

i want the absolute precision
of fluid definition
the saints learned
long ago
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Fluidity of definitions and meanings is paramount to Nichol's practice, so is the device of paradox – the precision of fluidity in this case – that prevents the mind from forming rational conclusions. Nichol's writing is deeply feminine in the way it exhibits profound openness to otherness and even a more uncanny double openness to openness itself. It is generative and prevents closure of form. Nichol explains that his poetic practice “demands forms and gestures in writing, then, which generate a perpetual openness and/or disrupt the structures in language and poetry that produce closure” (qtd. in Butling 238). What gets exposed through this radical openness is the habitual cultural gesture of reducing human beings to utilitarian roles and functions and fitting them into an unnaturally small frame or a grid. Reducing language and meaning to certain and stable and rigid definitions that are closed for questioning or renegotiation:

being becomes
counting the ways
you trapped yourself
(*Unnumbered NTBK (1963-1968?)* n. pag.)

Being blindly trapped in our own mental conceptions is juxtaposed to the power of being to show us the ways we did it to ourselves and to liberate us from the closure of the mental traps. The survival of any culture often depends on its openness to the possibility of new meanings. Faced with the opacity of the poetic text, the reader is forced to face the endless proliferation of meaning, thus, the open-endedness of the text requires an open-mindedness and open-heartedness of the reader as well. Nichol is “always throwing the reader a curve. Being open himself, Nichol expects his readers to be open as well” (Barbour 218). By surrendering his own will to the alterity of the poetic language, Nichol invites his readers to experience a sort of a mystical surrender. To the senses, to the experience. To the confusion. To the otherness. And to language itself. Maybe this feminine principle of openness is exactly what our culture needs right now as an alternative to the close-mindedness of our many inherited cultural traditions. After all, if we are open to each other, we are open to the possibility of dialogue, community, and love.

The Martyrology and *Journal*, among Nichol’s other works, both show a commitment to formal experiments with the embodied material dimension of language that Kristeva termed *the semiotic*. Thus, these texts become examples of experimental anti-patriarchal literary experience par excellence, and their reading requires from the reader a change in consciousness. Miki calls the text of *The Martyrology* “a text of the transitional as a state of mind where words released from their bondage to reference, are dismembered in the field of action of the page. Here, as readers, we participate in a rite of passage” (Miki 25). Thus, Nichol’s texts perform the ritual descent into the semiotic dimension of language, which we earlier connected with the descent into the primordial chaos during the sacred rituals, by becoming vehicles of such passage into the semiotic and the sacred. The reader is invited to experience the author’s transformation of

consciousness encoded in language. This, however, requires abandoning the safety and comfort of rationality as it issues a pass to a different reality. Reading requires entering an alternative state as well. A reader is immersed and can get lost in the reading, and later when she emerges and is brought back to the surface, she knows that a transformation of consciousness took place even though she is unsure how it happened.

Reading Nichol's texts is unlike following a path, it is more akin to entering a stream – one has to dive into language head first. A dissolution in primordial waters. Thus, reading Nichol's texts, we are entering *agua sacra* – language itself becomes sacred water, like in a ritual of baptism, sacred water, in which a significant transformation of consciousness takes place.

Chapter 9. Writing to Change the Economy of Thought

Nichol's work engages with the sacred on two levels – thematic and performative. As has been shown in previous chapters, the search for the sacred permeates *The Martyrology* thematically. It has also been proposed that on the performative level, Nichol's poetic writing becomes an ethical practice of connecting with the sacred, not unlike a sacred ritual that invokes a powerful transformation of consciousness. Writing becomes the sacred activity itself. Another connection between Nichol's poetry and the sacred makes itself known through a clear alignment of Nichol's texts with the economy of the sacred Bataille proposed to call the "general economy."

In his revolutionary book, *The Accursed Share*, Bataille proposed to differentiate between the general economy, aligned with the sacred mode of being, and the restrictive economy

associated with the profane mode. The distinction is made based on how the excess of energy, or the “accursed share,” the surplus, is utilized by society. In the case of the dominant restrictive (profane) economy, such utilitarian principles as accumulation, hoarding, investment, and consumption rule our experience of energy exchange with others. In contrast, general (sacred) economy operates by relying on the notion of expending the inevitable excess energy without any utilitarian meaning in a gesture of pure expenditure, loss, waste, sacrifice, or gift. The only purpose is to expend the excess of energy for the pleasure of releasing the tension caused by the build-up of excess energy and thus to participate in a greater circulation and exchange of energy.

This division into general and restrictive economies of thought, made on the basis of how excess energy is utilized, is akin to Freud’s discernment between unbound and bound psychic energies, as well as Kristeva’s distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic modalities of language. Unbound energies are directly connected to the drives, and are used by the psychic apparatus to relieve any psychic energy build-up and the resulting tension in order to ensure the pure pleasure of release and the re-instated free flow of energy. Thus, they directly align with the semiotic modality of language. Bound energies, just as the symbolic, participate in the function of controlling or regulating the energy by binding it and fixing the flow in a thetic cut.

Radical experimental writing connects to the general economy of the sacred by aligning with its principles of excess non-utilitarian expenditure, as well as with the semiotic dimension of language that relies on the free circulation of the unbound energies.

Through an overproduction of meaning, an excess or surplus of meaning is created and expended without any utilitarian purpose, just for the pure pleasure of libidinal energy discharge. Poetic language becomes “erotic in its excess: the unassimilable excess of meaning, or of

arrogance, accumulation, hierarchy, calculation, etc. One is “accumulating poems” like “points on a scale” in an effort to move up the hierarchy “towards the ultimate chair or throne.” Thus, the arrogant “one who writes poetry as part of a power play” participates in is external and visible game of the restrictive economy.

Nichol is inviting us instead to turn our attention inward and to listen deeply to the invisible inner reality: “we never hear the moment when the words stop or / the silence begins.” This inner experience is not static, but dynamic as the silence is not simply there – it “begins,” suggesting a process, a flow. This is akin to a meditation on the invisible and inaudible and ineffable world, whose presence is known by listening to the alternating rhythm of stillness and energy, tension and release, revealed in each moment.

As a result, language is liberated from fulfilling its adopted artificial functions – to transfer information and to point to a referent in the external world. Poetry becomes a “breathing” in the now moment; it belongs to the “referenceless world,” thus liberating language from its binding connection to the referent:

all poetry a function of history
breathing now
referenceless world
i do take refuge in
surrounded by memory
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Clouds”)

By taking meaning from the level of reference to the level of embodied presence in the moment, radical experimental poetry has the power to expose the “two major fetishisms operating in language: grammar and the referent” (McCaffery, “Language Writing” 150). Instead

of fulfilling its common function of symbolic transfer of information within the bounds of communicative act, language in its poetic incarnation communicates the power of raw libidinal energy, thus threatening existing mechanisms of meaning production characteristic of the dominant restrictive economy.

When language is liberated from these artificial restrictions, the newly available energy is used to produce meaning outside of the dominant utilitarian mode – meaning on the level of drive and desire. Language becomes its own song and play: “the soul sings its own song / plays its own game” (*TM*, Gifts: Book(s) &, “Scriptures: 3rd Sequence,” ‘Monotones,’ XXVIII). It is a game of creating a libidinal energetic discharge that bypasses the limitations of grammar and representation, and takes us back to the pre-symbolic mode of signifying.

Nichol often uses the formal visual elements of language, placed carefully in the space of the page to articulate the semiotic:

we are ana	[	mated
		mal
		grammatical

(*TM*, Gifts: Book(s) &, “Scriptures: 3rd Sequence,” ‘Monotones,’ XXVIII)

The sound play and the visual, formal word play reveals the principles of dynamic vitality present in both, poetic language and of our being: “we are ana-mated”. Also, the biological “we are ana-mal” is interestingly positioned on top of the symbolic “grammatical,” thus suggesting a hierarchy and Nichol’s privileging of the semiotic that is closer to the biological. Proliferation of meaning excess is extraordinarily rich and does not stop there. Jumping from the horizontal “we are ana” to the top of the vertical axis and reading down, we

can read “we are ana-mated mal-grammatical,” which is also a powerful juxtaposition of aliveness and vitality to the grammatical order, which is disrupted by the semiotic “mal-grammaticality” of the poem. The poem communicates beyond the literal meaning, on the level of form, which aligns it more with the semiotic flow of energies, that moves “as intensities along formless, non-productive paths. (McCaffery, “Language Writing”155).

This animated semiotic force is deeply implicated in the poetic process of meaning-making as the poet is acutely sensitive to the presence of this force. Drives, desires, impulses, inner rhythms and pulsations all form a threat to the symbolic order of meaning, whose function is that of containing and regulating the free flow of energy. By being a channel for this movement of intensities, a poet reveals the presence of powerful semiotic energies (drives) trapped inside each one of us by liberating and freely expending them. In this act of poetic practice, they can be recognized, acknowledged and released. In return, the drives release the energy “trapped inside linguistic structures” (McCaffery, “Language Writing” 153) and liberate the poem by invisibly infiltrating the symbolic order. They “seep through and among texts, jamming codes and pulverizing language chains” (153). These drives remain invisible, and are therefore threatening the writing subject and the masculine symbolic order of language:

Libidinal circuits, however, are intractable, intensely permeative and impossible to locate as specific, operational factors; they derive from the pre-linguistic (infantile) drives of both the writing and reading subjects. It is at this pivotal point, where language is simultaneously composed and dissolved, made and unmade, consumed and regurgitated, that language connects with the unconscious and its drives. (153)

Both the reader and the writer find themselves in the semiotic dimension of language that is more aligned with the unconscious and facilitates expenditure of the created excess energy.

Language is uncontained threatening pulsating vitality, where all restrictions are cast away:

language

where the grid is

no longer apparent

(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Thus, poetic writing unsettles and destabilizes the existing restrictive order that strives for sense, certainty and completion, classification and categorization, totalizing grids with clearly defined boundaries that give one a peaceful illusion of neat all-embracing classification and completion. Instead we are invited to experience a new, unbound form of language, which is alive in the present moment and is moving like a free flow of energy – rhythmically, spontaneously and freely, attuned to the body and restricted only by the limits of our mind:

i am nameless father

we are free to move as we please

in a land where boundaries are a frame of mind

(*TM*, Bk. 3, V)

Nichol makes a bold claim for the unknown and what is even more unsettling, a claim for the unknowable. We are “nameless” and cannot be contained. His language reflects that by resisting any movement toward containment or closure. Our boundaries are our own mental constructions. Poetic language can liberate us from our own concepts and their powerful albeit imaginary boundaries: “language rises / over the edge of mind” (*TM*, Gifts: Book(s) &, “Scriptures: 3rd Sequence,” ‘Monotones,’ XXVIII). Thus, writing that relies on the libidinal

economy takes us to the boundary of rational understanding, to the end of conceptualizing and objectifying.

Instead, in Nichol's writing, we are faced with the concept of poem as exorcism or gift:

First of all the poem is a product of an emotional drive – it may be exorcism or gift – but the drive is what produces the poem.

if it is exorcism then it calls into play attitudes towards exhibiting – that is whether or not the poem can be revealed. (your drunk poem is an exorcism which placed in the body of your work suddenly gives the impression of another whole side not revealed before)

if it is gift then of course all our attitudes towards giving are involved. I believe most poems to be gifts. What I spoke of as “the other” – the persons for whom the gift is meant. ... I think it is almost impossible for a non gift-oriented poet to conceive what you & I are attempting to reach (*Unnumbered NTBK* (1963-1968?) n. pag.)

Both the exorcism and the gift rely on reaching, revealing and releasing of the inner dimension of being. Nichol's composition process is aligned with the process of turning the attention inward and turning one's self inside out in a gesture of emptying, cleansing, expending oneself of the self. He credits emotional drives, which serve as transmitters of body-mind energies, with producing the poem. Nichol offers attunement to the inner processes and energies, along with the release and expenditure of the latter as the guiding principle of composition. His writing gives, gives away, gifts, expends, sacrifices, dissolves and gets dissolved. In doing this, it

stands in opposition to the dominant restrictive economy of thought that relies on concepts of accumulation, and hierarchy.

Nichol is interested in the possibilities generated in the free play of signifiers, in being open to desire and impulse, being available to the moment when play happens with no restrictions on the form language might take: “From a writer’s point of view that question of form(s) is paramount if one is to be open to the moment when the writing comes, if one is to have at one’s finger tips the possibility of moving fluidly within the options that any impulse to write can open” (Nichol, qtd. in Butling 237). While narrative writing is governed by the need to know the story line in advance, poetic writing is driven by tension and the search for its release, “always tensions building in a poem to pass thru” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Clouds”) and an unexplainable impulse to write. Nichol openly replaces the knowledge of “how this poem would go” by “my urge to write you what lines I can” (*TM*, “Introduction”). It is the flow of libidinal energy that is directing the act of writing encouraging – enacting an eruption of forces beyond the subject’s control. The illusion of control and mastery is once again replaced by an invitation to acknowledge the flow of intelligent cosmic and libidinal energy to which the writer attunes himself, “living now as energy / flows from my fingers into these poems” (Bk. 2, “Friends as Footnotes”).

Morphology and syntax, as ways of restricting, organizing and accumulating elements of language into fixed static structures are abandoned (or expanded?). Nichol’s texts are peppered by examples of strategically broken rules of grammar, syntax, and morphology. Sentences, lines and stanzas exchange their form from being complete structures of thought for open structures that end with an explicit choice, “faces frightened or insane or” (*TM*, Bk. 3, III). Words, phrases, sentences, and lines are freely made up, un-made and re-made:

is the all

ist heal-

ling

lang

u age

's h

on

our

hour

(*TM*, Bk. 4)

A visual arrangement of letters ensures that both the literal and the literary meanings are entangled and intertwined in a subtle dance that explodes the meaning exponentially, thus, producing excess and rearranging the page as a visual field in search of new forms of reading, writing and meaning making:

i want the world

absolute & present

all its elements

el

em

en

t's

(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Language is gradually stripped down of its conceptual artificial mask and exposed in its most elemental form. The poem first abandons clear complete sentence structures, and then moves past even such basic forms as words as they are broken into even more basic elements –

the alphabet – “el / em / en / t’s.” In this raw form, the artifice of language rules and their violence are revealed:

artifice
holding over
the tight phrases & cursed verse

SCREAMING

(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Book of Common Prayer”)

Together, punctuation or its absence, linebreaks and broken syntax, capitalization, fonts, blank spaces and page layout in general transform the physical page into a field of energy and perception, communicating meaning excess through preverbal or trans-verbal elements. For example, the word “SCREAMING” typed in all capitals and taking up the entire line with spaces before and after the line, literally “SCREAMS” from the page and jumps out at the reader juxtaposed to the neatly organized left-aligned lines telling us about the “artifice” of “tight phrases.”

Nichol is inventing new morphology along with new mythology by making words into saints only to obliterate both of them later by blasting them on the page – a shower of letters descending in the space of the page, or maybe ascending? He is breaking words into letters to make the reader aware of the spontaneous eruption of meaning emerging as a sound play, chance, surprise. In other words, he is letting language speak to us primarily on the level of the signifier, like it did when we were experiencing it as children, inventing language games that allowed us to experience the magical power of language and the utter arbitrariness of the signifier-signified connection:

Tellingly, children often play the game of repeating a word or a name until it becomes entirely a disembodied set of sounds. The function of this game is to reveal the wonder of the signifier, the wonder of language: language is a great power, which normally effaces itself as mere representation, tool, mediation of direct experience. (DeKoven 110)

In a similar way, Nichol's reader is encouraged to experience the pleasure and tension of sounds and their combinations. For example, by reading one of the final stanzas of "Friends as Footnotes," the reader is forced to repeat the "d" sound again and again and letting it resonate in the body, intensifying the tension and prompting the release of energy. In this specific example, Nichol creates an experience of building intensity by repeating the word "dead" twenty-nine times in twenty-eight lines. Having two strong voiced "d" sounds in its sound pattern, the word insists on itself, in a hammer-like rhythm, stamping itself into our consciousness, it insists on its own literal and phonetic meaning serving a purpose of energetic build-up and release as well as beating the fear of death out of our unconscious and onto the page. But after so many repetitions, the word "dead" can also put the reader into a light trance, while itself becoming an autonomous set of sounds taking on its own sovereign meaning, a self-referential signifier, if you will:

oh god you are dead you are dead dead dead
christ you are dead you are dead dead dead
what can i do who shall i be i can't see you any more
no direction sign or longing
only the space behind my eyes screaming
you are dead you are dead you are dead dead dead
no joy to feel tho i free you gladly
no chain of words to bind you to me
how can i live who cannot be without you
knowing you are dead you are dead you are dead dead dead

dead you are dead
no longer to live or walk in comfort
only the skies empty my tears
hell i could fill the space with moaning
oh you are gone & i am left
lonely father
i am lonely father
father i am lonely
knowing they are dead
they are dead dead dead
they are dead
they are dead
the are dead dead dead
& i'm lonely father
i am lonely father
father i am lonely
lonely father
i am
(*TM*, Bk. 2, "Friends as Footnotes")

An obvious visceral contrast becomes clear in reading aloud through this mad insisting dialogue of two alliterations – it is the contrast between the harsh and abrupt “d” of “dead” and “death” and the soft “l” sound of “lonely,” “longing,” “live,” “left,” “fill,” “hell,” etc. The hard voiced dental “d” sound is also a “stop” kind of consonant because when we pronounce it, the air is completely blocked, stopped abruptly right behind the gum ridge of the speaker (reader) before being released. Not unlike death that stops life abruptly and releases one from it. The sound not only points to death, but performs it, imagines and imitates it – it evokes death as a final stop of air in the moment of pronunciation. The specter of death is knocking rhythmically from inside the poem on the door of our psyche. In contrast, the “l” sound is a continuant consonant, which

means during the moment of enunciation, the air stream is simply constricted but not blocked and continues to fl-l-l-low through one's mouth and lips. So, the sound makes vivid a certain duration and an unbearable continuation in suffering the "hell" of "loneliness," of "living," of being "left" and in being trapped in this "space i could fill with moaning." Again the feeling is not merely described but lived through the magic power of signifier. Thus, the semiotic reaches our psyche directly and unexpectedly beyond the printed page.

The above analysis of Nichol's texts showed that poetic process of composition relies on the concepts of excess, gift, expenditure, sacrifice, waste, desire, drive, energy build-up, tension, sensations, pulsations, "pre-linguistic drives," release, catharsis, and discharge. His practice clearly exemplifies how poetic language moves away from the principles prescribed by the restrictive economy of the profane to participate in the general economy of the sacred, which, being aligned with the primary processes and the semiotic, foregrounds other forms of experience, perception and exchange.

Chapter 10. Writing to Reveal the Nature of the Poetic Process

Some writers write to question the very process and mechanisms of writing. A special state of mind – a poetic consciousness – is their object of investigation, and their hypotheses are radical! In the tradition of William James, Henri Bergson, and Gertrude Stein, Nichol's goal is to give all of his attention to the pure experience of the transient moment itself. He writes to notice both subtle and major transformations of consciousness and encode them into the poetic text so as to directly affect the reader's consciousness.

Poetic writing proposes a form of alignment with a different order by embodying its logic. In poetic language, meaning is not reduced to information. Meaning is an embodied experience of pleasure, of excess, of jouissance, love, all of which resist closure and stasis. The innovative formal aspect of Nichol's language challenges our culturally conditioned habits

pertaining to meaning making and thought process. One cannot imagine where the sentence is going... or how it will end... or when it will end... or whether it will ever end... So, one simply *has* to remain alert in the present moment to the endless spontaneous configurations of emergent meanings that resist any convention or closure and could not have been predicted:

too many rymes or
 coincidents the placid flow of th
 ink ing
 in k
 in g (in be
 tween) h i j in the tree n
 its blue
 winter day

 th
 in
 on
 un
 pretentious
 conscious
 force is
 the im age
 the hero has left the stage
 (TM, Bk. 5, "Chain 2")

Through the visual and the sound form of the poem, we get a glimpse into the actual poetic process, specifically, into the intense tension that Kristeva describes between the semiotic flow of language and the symbolic moments of enunciation, that are necessarily removed from that, which they are striving to articulate.

The text embodies the creative process itself, its very form reveals a flow of “thots” (Nichol) lapping rhythmically on the shore of consciousness, overlapping, merging, creating ever-new forms. A visual rhythmic cascade of syllables created by the poem reveals the poet’s striving to capture a continuous flow of thinking constituted by the presence of “unpretentious / conscious / force is” and the impossibility of such gesture as the flow gets interrupted in the moments of thetic cuts.

Ideas and concepts take us away from such richness, fullness and confusion of raw perceptual experience abiding in the present moment. Nichol is returning us back to the moment and allows the multiplicity of “too many rymes” to be present coincidentally in the “placid flow of thinking.” Several lines of thoughts are allowed to simultaneously occur in the same space of the poem and at the same time – the present moment. In this semiotic flow, thoughts come together and fall apart in a continuing dance. Nothing is stable or fixed. A dynamic ever-changing, ever-becoming presence is honoured, and polyphony of various streams of thought is welcome. R. Bruce Elder speaks about the necessity of welcoming polyphony as a principle allowing “multiplicity,” “contradiction,” and the “full diversity of the manifold of experience” (“The Cinema We Need” 268). Even though Elder speaks about the search for new cinematic forms, the principles he describes directly relate to the poetic forms of language found in Nichol:

Like narratives, ideas are formed only after the fact, serve only to represent what is already past. We must therefore find a form that is capable of orienting us toward the present, a form not based on ideas.... Such a form would not depend on separating out one aspect of experience from all the others, nor on any pre- or post-conception. ... It will present, simply and directly, the manifold of forces and relations that come into play in the coming-into-presence of an event (267-8)

Nichol gives himself over completely to exploring the poetic process and reveals the multiplicity of thought forms and language forms emerging in the moment, trying to capture in words how writing is written. He strives to reveal the internal process of the poet's engagement in the creative process. This process is a commitment to the truth of the present moment and relies on heightened attention, instead of intention, thus allowing whatever is coming into being to emerge on its own terms. Thus, each of Nichol's poems wants to reveal its own truth, or to "reveal the process of its own emergence into being," which, Elder emphasizes, stems from an important task of an artist "to reveal the process by which events come into presentness" ("The Cinema We Need" 268).

By emerging spontaneously from that internal place where rhythm speaks through the body about a different rhythm inherent in the invisible cosmic order of things, the semiotic modality of language allows us to feel that attunement to a different kind of thinking where body and thought are still one. Rhythm is a fundamental element of such thinking as it connects us with the universe, inner rhythms of the body to the sacred rhythms of the cosmos.

In the construction of narrative prose, the writer follows a line of thought to its completion. When creating a poetic text, the writer follows a completely different logic. With the help of breathlines, heartbeats, sounds or silences, with the help of syntax and punctuation, with the help of letters scattered on the page like snowflakes, with the help of unexpected line breaks and lines that go on forever without any semblance of breaks, Nichol creates a magical world of rhythm to take us to a place within us that recognizes rhythm as an echo of some more primal form of creative thinking:

"What are the creative processes in a poem?...

Rhythm. Rhythm. rhythm. rhythm. is in all poetry”

(Nichol, *Unnumbered NTBK (1963-1968)*, “On rhythm”)

While reading the *Journal* and *TM*, one cannot help but surrender to the lulling rhythm of the text, in which lines are visually broken into little phrases, with blank spaces between them signaling silence and duration, not unlike musical notes and musical phrases of different duration that are visually arranged without any formal markers of an ending or a beginning. Nichol’s particular use of syntax and punctuation in *Journal* creates for the reader a feeling of swaying or of being rocked in one’s mother’s arms.

Because of this clear rhythmic movement, the text itself can be likened to a pendulum that is used for inducing a hypnotic trance – the reader is invited to enter a psychic zone reminiscent of a light trance. Poetic text becomes a field of perception whose units are not words and sentences, but rhythms and breathlines, symbols and blank spaces between them, syntax and punctuation driving the reader’s eye around the page and off the edge:

ah saint reat. Let us begin with mornings. You braid your syllables into words and your words into sentences. Tenses of meaning I become lost in. you are verb and noun and I am lost in the mystery of you. Syntax is the ax you destroy me with. The cutting edges of your breath sever my links with the past. Leave me the spaces to breath in. (*TM*, Bk. 7, “Scrapures: 6th Sequence”)

These silences and blank spaces, lines broken into words and words shattered into a visual shower of letters participate in creating another form of meaning – a rhythmical one. In fact, for Nichol, they may be the more crucial elements, “truth is living thru those intervals between the sighs” (*TM*, Bk. 2, “Book of Common Prayer”). In one of his unpublished journals,

Nichol considers silences, spaces and pauses to be powerful spaces of transformation, space for movements and exits. He writes, “Spaces, pauses, and other non-verbal elements are not mute – they have powerful messages. The pauses and the non-verbal statements – “uhm” & its counterparts – are the cries for help – are the spaces where the mind moves seeking exits from the negative areas it lives and breathes in” (*Journal: Sept. 1968: I vol. n. pag.*).

One of their functions is they create internal spaces in the reader. In the same journal, as he was working on a text titled *The Undiscovered Country*, he writes in a note to himself analysing the function of space:

THE MESSAGE OF SPACE IS ABSENCE & the idea of the
undiscovered country is presence, overwhelming presence – presence of the spirit, of the
other, of our dreams & myths, presence of absence, physical meaning of the other
move away from space into a longer
breath line, a sustained thickness where the space is internal (*Journal: Sept. 1968: I vol.*
n. pag.)

Thus, the poetic text becomes a physical space for the invisible forms of Otherness – “presence of the spirit, of the other, of our dreams & myths, presence of absence” – to reveal itself by manifesting into poetic forms of language. But first it gathers in an internal space, characterized by “a sustained thickness.” Nichol’s texts are born from that interior space, and that it where they point the reader. The attention goes inward, focusing on the invisible process of internal transformations of consciousness:

what matters it the nights are sleepless
i lie awake with poems hymns

these rhythms
insistent as the brain is
with images
a pounding in the chest of
words
the imposition of the earth
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

This stanza reveals once again the thought process underlying poetic composition. The poet is attacked by “these rhythms / insistent as the brain is,” images, words that insist on themselves as “a pounding in the chest,” which is also rhythmic and connected to the body. The whole body-mind system is affected as the insomnia sets in, and the poems and hymns take over consciousness, chasing sleep away. This wave-like rhythmical nature of the thought process disclosed in Nichol’s poem is reminiscent of the psychosomatic process of *negativity* Kristeva describes as inherent in the poetic process:

the term “drive” denotes waves of attack against stases, which are themselves constituted by the repetition of these charges; together, charges and stases lead to no identity (not even that of the “body proper”) that could be seen as a result of their functioning. This is to say that the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him. (*Revolution* 28)

Thus, we can conclude that both the body and mind participate in the process of poetic creation, they act as one, and, paradoxically, the unity and the stability of the writing subject is threatened under an incessant attack of the continuous flow of thoughts, rhythms, feelings, and words “pounding in the chest” like waves beating on the shore.

What stands out as similar in both Nichol's and Kristeva's descriptions of the poetic practice, is the violent nature of such process in relationship to the writing subject. The writing subject is put *in process/on trial* by the very process of poetic practice that relies on "pre-Oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother" (*Revolution* 27). The writing subject is under attack of the oncoming waves of drives that put his very being into question, returning him to the time when he was not one, but one with his (m)other.

This is how the poetic text reveals the otherness of the psychosomatic semiotic modality of signifying that intrudes into the objective clarity of the symbolic signification. The crucial point here is that otherness is inherent in the semiotic as "'drives' are always already ambiguous, simultaneously assimilating and destructive" (27). In this process, the rhythmical and melodic qualities of language that do not participate in the symbolic signification, are made visible and obtain the power of signification within the framework of a poetic text. These semiotic expressions of language, being more connected to the embodied experience, transport first the writer and then the reader into the sea of pre-linguistic drives and pulsions first experienced in the intra-uterine communication with the mother. We are transferred back to the time when we could truly hear language before apprehending its symbolic meaning.

Thus, the embodied feminine semiotic dimension of language is recovered in poetic practice for both the writer and the reader: "poetry is a way of breathing" (Nichol, *Early Draft of TM Bk III, with Revisions, n.d., Incomplete* n. pag.). Poetic language demands us to follow certain breathline logic, which, according to Olson, is different than the logic of formal syntax. This incarnate dimension of the text, holds out an invitation to each reader to listen to a different rhythm inherent in our bodies. Poetic language reveals the presence of body-thoughts, born in the

semiotic dimension, where, according to Kristeva, body and mind are still united in a totality of rhythmic fusion.

A radical poetic text, like Nichol's, can push us back to the semiotic *chora* where body and thought are still one and have their own distinct primary logic of undifferentiated totality permeated by rhythmic pulse. Elder refers to this order of thinking as "more elemental" or "primal" and defines it as "a metaphoric consciousness that does not distinguish subject from object or signifier from signified" (*A Body of Vision* 73). Nichol is able to capture the nature of thought prior to this division into subject and object, signifier and signified, before it takes form in language and becomes neatly organized in a linear fashion with one thought conveniently following another. Instead, we are thrown in the vortex of primordial thinking, where thoughts emerge all at once, in a chaotic form, and both the writer and the reader find themselves overwhelmed, confused, and vulnerable in the face of such maelstrom. An avalanche of libidinal semiotic forces regularly interferes with the literal meaning of words to reveal the uncanny presence of otherness:

Libidinal drives are propelled by an instinctual, non-semantic force and push rhythmically through language. Semantic shifts and devices also allow these drives to situate as violent imprints, or to push through as ruptures, in the linguistic order, unsettling it and its support mechanisms: logical sequence and the unitary writing and reading subject. (McCaffery, "Language Writing" 154)

One is at the mercy of the semiotic *chora*, vulnerable and threatened by its unpredictability and its mysterious power, pushing through as rhythms and pulsations, manifesting through the poet's body-mind. Language can reveal this incredible power by

throwing both the writer and then the reader into the violence and volatility of the feminine semiotic modality, driven by emotional drives, and its power to intrude upon and undermine the masculine symbolic modality of signifying. Body and mind are brought together through the power of rhythm:

this association of the rhythmicity of the process by which events come to presentness in experience with the physicality and rhythmicity of bodily processes means that the rhythmic form of a work of art can, by uniting the pulse of the body with patterns inherent in emergent events (event phenomena), unite the mind and the body. (Elder, “The Cinema We Need” 269)

A poetic form of language, possessing such “rhythmic form” is able to take us to an internal psychic place where a thought emerges as a “total” and inclusive internal event bringing the semiotic and the symbolic together. Nichol says, “I would the poem were an extension of inner rhythm... simplicity of style with rhythm controlled by inner pulsations” (*Unnumbered NTBK*, “April 8 – 1964” entry n.p.). Thus, the writing subject has a hard task of balancing between the logical and biological, the instinctual and the rational, striving to articulate his inner rhythm in the “simplicity of style.”

The poet’s mystical task is to connect through his internal rhythm to the sacred rhythms of the cosmic order. In surrendering an artificial posture of control, a poet can sense, uncover and reveal an inherent harmony and an inherent alignment in all things. Through aligning his own rhythm with the rhythm of the universe, a poet can discover the existing higher order of things instead of imposing an artificial one:

syntax of alignment i want to see

apparent in every bush & tree
placement of the sea & land
a plan
not in the sense of plot
pre-conceived
but there
readable
if i am able to
see man
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Through giving importance to the notion of “syntax of alignment,” Nichol’s poetic practice allows us to reimagine the meaning of the word “composition,” which is traditionally translated from Latin “compositionem” as “a putting together” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*), usually referring to the arrangement of sentences into a whole piece of writing. From Nichol’s poetics, composition can literally be understood as “a putting together” of two positions (com = together, position = position): the poet’s position comes into a sort of alignment or attunement with the existing cosmic order revealed in the poetic text through the continuous flow of language:

not in the sense of plot
pre-conceived

Nothing is pre-conceived or planned by the poet, but some hidden perfect order of Otherness erupts into the present moment through rhythm and form if a poet is able to “read” the revelation of that order by attuning to it:

but there
readable

if i am able to
see

“if i am able to / see” points to the ability of the poet to sense and align his whole being with the rhythmical presence of the sacred order of otherness. The power of such alignment is immense – “when the mind is tuned aright,” James tells us, can poems reveal to us the sacred order of things, like they once did when we were younger and could still sense the mystical power of language:

[Poems were] irrational doorways [...] through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them. The words have now become more polished surfaces for us; but lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting, yet ever eluding our pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility. (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* 417)

Rhythm plays a special role in this attunement of the poet’s body-mind to the cosmic order. Elder accords primacy to “thinking-through-rhythm” as through its power, “we become aware of Be-ing” and in our visceral response to it, “something ... participates in a pulse of something that is far larger than ourselves” (“The Foreignness of the Intimate” 462). Thus, by attuning our consciousness and our body to our own rhythm and by staying open to rhythm of the universe, we leave space for *the wholly Other* to reveal Itself.

When a poet writes, he develops this relationship with himself and with language by intuiting an inherent rhythm of each moment. Sounds and rhythms intrinsic in the music of

language itself are able to reach us on the level of being, through the pure power of the signifier without the necessary signified. Language becomes *jouissance*:

we reacquire the presymbolic order of language [...] in moments of vertigo, as return to the pure state itself, in which words simply have no lexical meaning. [...] this writing uses the obliteration of meaning to enhance its primary effect: the “mysterious actions of the closed, internal rhythms of language, the echoing reflections of sound” of Welsh’s charm-melos, and the intense, primal sensation of presymbolic language. (DeKoven111)

Charm-melos redefines and reinvents the process of signification by relying on what is reminiscent of the semiotic order, a “heightening or concentration of the natural, internal sound patterns of speech-melos” (108). This new signification with concepts of power and magic – one can experience once again the presence and the power of a different order revealed in poetic language, just like one could sense the presence and the power of sacred forces channeled during sacred rituals. Poetic language relies on the mystery of charm-melos with its primal power, used both in the primitive cultures where it originates and in the subsequent uses to which it has been put: “The language of the charms is a language of power, and that power comes primarily not from lexical meanings, archaic or colloquial, but from other meanings hidden deep in the sounds and rhythms” (DeKoven 108). Thus, it is the pre-symbolic power of poetic language to transcend the restrictions of the symbolic order that give it the magic power to connect us to the primordial realms of the sacred.

This order is breaking through, manifesting through language in the form of rhythms and body-thoughts. When a poem writes itself, the poet listens:

i am following a line of thot
of ink to

its conclusion

(*TM*, Bk. 4)

The poet is simply “following a line of thot,” he is being led by “thot” and by “ink,” which suggests that he is being led by the very process of writing. This brief description, however, emphasizes the dynamic quality of the “thot” process. We are moving away from the thought as a static object and dive into the continuous flow of the semiotic waves. We are joining with the poet through aligning our breathing rhythms. As readers, we are invited to repeat his breathline, which determines for how long we hold our breath underwater (in the text), and when it is time to take a deep breath, as well as when to lose one’s breath by following a long breathline to the point of exhaustion. We channel the writer by inhabiting his breath, and, in following his breathlines, we embody his rhythm. Nichol writes, “& the lines become as long as the tongue can / carry without breathing in” (*TM*, Bk. 4). Thus, we can conclude once again that the poetic process takes the poet to a place of fusion, where mind and body are one, giving us a gift of the embodied experience of language.

If we read the text aloud, we will inevitably and inadvertently repeat the breathing pattern of the writer and naturally, through experiencing the sensual rhythmical experience of joint breathing, we will synchronize our heartbeat with his, thus sharing an erotic experience of joint breath and heartbeat – a simultaneous literary ecstasy of sorts.

In such embodied practice as Nichol’s, that relies on the unity of body and mind, even poetry itself is revealed as only a concept, an abstract idea:

here there is a peace the mind can breathe in
nothing but the tangles in my tongue
let the sounds sweep in around me

in a heaven with no need of poetry
(*TM*, Bk. 2, “Clouds”)

Poetry is discarded in the name of the embodied breathed sound that is more primal, raw, non-conceptual, and therefore more powerful. So powerful, in fact, that the concept of poetry becomes unnecessary. The poet is centered in what seems to be an internal space of stillness, “a heaven,” “a peace the mind can breathe in.” In these lines, poetic practice is also revealed to be a kind of embodied meditative practice, which cultivates awareness of the internal space, internal state and internal events – an internal attunement of the body-mind complex:

...rhythm always discloses itself at once both as something beyond us, to which we give ourselves, and as something deep within ourselves. Thinking-through-rhythm thus reveals the mutuality of self and Other. Thinking-through-rhythm can engage us in a prayer by which we tune ourselves to an alien, foreign pulse, to the pulse of an Other, the pulse of something wholly beyond us, and we woo It, while in response, It draws us ever more closely into its embrace. (Elder, “The Foreignness of the Intimate” 463)

The thought process of the poet is attuned to or aligned with the rhythmic presence of the otherness of the semiotic flow, which a poet tries to capture in words. Poetic language reflects the constant tension between the heterogeneous continuous nature of the semiotic order and the attempts of the symbolic to fix and articulate this flow. The rhythmical movement of the poem reveals the crucial importance of the processes of attunement and alignment, inherent in poetic process, in building the relationship between and the order of Otherness.

Rhythm is our natural fundamental connection to life. Also to temporality. To our heart, to the source, to the mystery. Benveniste pointed out the unifying function of rhythm – it

connects man and nature, since it is found in both and is natural to both (279). One of the ways we first experienced language first was through rhythm. By listening to the lullabies as a baby, one learns that rhythmical means musical and soothing, it means magical, and most importantly, it means love. And of course, rhythm also means life. As soon as the heartbeat is gone, life is gone. Thus, poetic language invites us to go back to the very first meaning of our life in language as in signifying a connection between a mother and her baby through rhythm, love and sound. The love is in the sound of the mother's voice, in her tone and in her melody.

Our original entry into the experience of language is highly feminine in its semiotic incarnation – we hear lullabies, echolalia, cooing, humming and feel a rocking movement in the mother's arms. Unbound language is pure rhythm and musicality. No other meaning or division into words. When we first experience language, we experience it through a rhythmic attunement as love. Thus the original meaning of language is love, but later, this meaning is sacrificed for the "logic of the mind":

‘you are dead saints’
given back into the drift of print
of speech
 born anew among the letters
a different tension’
 different reach
of logic
 of the mind's playing out of
reason
 a rhyme
till God's
re sonned
on the tongue

the groan that must accompany your birth lord

l or d

unless the el's read 'one'

one ord er

absolute & true

which is the two tone order of the pun

(*TM*, Bk. 4)

Nichol calls us to accept a position of ultimate humility, so we can exchange our misguided logic for the logic of God, for the “one ord er / absolute & true.” This divine order is communicated directly through the live pulsing sound, which resonates with and is naturally recognized in our attuned hearts and bodies. Our technological age makes the notions of connection or attunement to a higher order seem obsolete. In this context, natural cosmic and body rhythms seem to be of no value. Poetry reminds us of the power of rhythm to connect us to the sacred order.

Sacred rituals often involve the use of rhythm – for example, drumming, dancing, shaking, etc. – to symbolically connect one to the cosmic rhythm. Similarly, in poetic writing, the use of rhythm is essential. Both practices aim to establish a connection of the body with the sacred through joining a cosmic universal pulse. Poetic language is also a kind of rhythmical chant whose meaning is connection or reconnection

Conclusions

Our culture is marked by an epidemic of isolation, depression and anxiety. It is based on denial of vitality, interconnectedness and otherness. It rejects mystery and promotes mastery. We operate from a dangerously restrictive understanding of human nature and the nature of language. Language that is filled with primal vitality is suspect. Eros is uncontrollable, and therefore dangerous. It threatens madness or revolt and puts into question the conditions of absolute surveillance, absolute power and absolute control. Our culture seems to be set on imagining, engineering and manufacturing clean civilized well-groomed bionic beings without a name, a heart, or a soul.

Perhaps, in our secularized age, artists and poets took on a spiritual work of recovering our lost or severed connections with the sacred and with each other. By analyzing Nichol's poetic practice, it was discovered that poetic practice can take on a number of functions crucial

for healing our wounded culture. To summarize, it can help us revive the feminine principle, reconnect us to the realm of the sacred, transform the subject, redefine the literary practice of writing and reading, and ultimately offer a new economy of thinking and being in the world and, through language, with each other:

art is to bring together
join
'lost art of' art –
we are crazy in our isolation
as i am
torn always
(Nichol, *TM*, Bk. 4)

In their art, poets and artists consistently pose epistemological questions about the nature of knowledge, rediscovering such potent but repressed forms as knowledge as revelation, insight, intuition, thus exposing the hidden underlying logic at the heart of our civilization. This is exemplified in the writings of Nichol and other avant-garde artists and poets. Through their work, they expose the hidden cultural mechanisms of meaning-production and reveal how by being unaware, we silently perpetuate invisible existing models. They show us what our culture is repressing and hiding and warn us about the danger of our blind spots, exposing the existing economy of thought by revealing the deeply embedded thinking patterns and principles driving our collective consciousness. These are the principles of efficiency, profit, pushing, striving, attacking, probing, analyzing, strategizing, productivity, accumulating, hoarding, etc.

In contrast, poets like Nichol offer a different set of values and principles to guide our being in the world and with each other. The latter are more aligned with sacred modes of being and thinking. Their vision of the world reflects a particular kind of consciousness – a poetic one.

It is radically different from existing frameworks. It is relational, feminine, and cosmic. It is connected to the rhythm of the universe. In one of his interviews, Nichol said, “The history of knowledge should teach us that there’s more that we don’t know than do know. And I don’t want the work to participate in the historical lie of mastery” (McCaffery, “In Tens/tion” 80). Poetic consciousness offers new relationships to the universe – being humbled by awe and wonder in the presence of mystery, instead of perpetuating the illusions of mastery that our culture has adopted. Poetic consciousness manifests in the form of perceiving the invisible, uncovering the primal vitality, opening to change, perceiving the connections and oneness instead of illusions of separation, isolation, ego, control, or domination. It insists that life is a mystery.

But our culture is fighting hard to preserve an illusion of mastery. What is essential to this preservation is the belief in the subject’s cognitive ability to discern and analyse, take apart and study the discrete elements of any object, classifying, categorizing, labelling, as he is invested into the illusion of the domination over the universe. Fear drives us, not love. The road to change lies through poetic consciousness, which is already a combination of faith and creative action, reverence before nature and the other, before the mystery of it all.

By forcing us to forgo the everyday ideational content of language, poetic practice focuses instead on the possibility of engaging deeper levels of self and other – for example, it gives an opportunity “to act out” the unconscious tensions and fears through the play of a signifier and reaching the reader on the same level. It has the power to reveal feelings and desires, drives and impulses that ordinary language cannot. The main difference is that ordinary language is based on everyday consciousness, while poetic language is marked by a closer relationship to the realm of the unconscious. It has the ability to connect us to both pleasure and to fear, to the places inside our psyche we cannot reach otherwise – the shadow part of our

personality and our culture. It connects us to the ambivalence of the sacred and offers us a possibility of reimagining the concept of human being in relation to the themes of life, death, rebirth, pleasure, trauma, and healing. It is the symbolic destruction of the ego that often marks great works of poetry. In this way, poetry is similar to a mystical experience because the ego is cast away by a poet as well as by a mystic.

Connection to the feminine

When we first experienced language, it had only one meaning – love. Hearing a mother’s voice meant love, safety, care, joy and connection. Her voice also meant her physical presence as she was there to fulfill our every need and desire. She was our first relationship and our first love. Our relationship with language is still haunted by that original connection to the maternal love. Thus, the tension between the pull of the semiotic *chora* calling us back to the beginning and the impossibility of the return. Life starts with the feminine and the maternal, which is later repressed and abjected because it also presents a threat to the autonomy of the subject. Before the birth of consciousness as we know it, life starts with the fusion with (m)other. Her heartbeat is our first gift, our first lifeline, then one heartbeat is split into two, and soon the memory of the joint beginning is abjected. Some of the most haunting lines from *Journal* read, “caught up in you caught up in being part of you the heart is broken mommy broken in two & yes its painful mommy yes I miss you & no i can never have you really not the way i wanted you” (70).

In our unconscious striving for the original connection, the original bond to the mother and her love, haunted by the ecstasy of the original fusion, we can perhaps add a new layer to understanding the meaning of “religion,” which is “to reconnect.” Can it be that we are still

mourning the original separation, the cut, the expulsion from the mother's womb that was our first guarantee of well-being and nourishment? We are now thrust out, alone and suffocating in our separation, but the memory of the original bond and totality, being part of the (m)other is calling to us forever from the deepest recesses of our being. We are striving to bring love back into our language and our lives.

Connection to the sacred

Life also starts and ends in the realm of the sacred. Life is a mysterious gift from the other realm, which often remains unacknowledged as we learn to act as if we have always been here and will always continue to be. Life has been given, granted, we have been “made” by a power without a name – an absolute alterity:

you have made me
granted me friends
given me reasons for singing their praises
as i do
 & in praising name them
as i cannot name you
(*TM*, Bk. 3, IV)

In these few lines, Nichol shows us a different attitude toward or a perception of the universe. The granting of life is recognized and acknowledged with humility. It is a gift that cannot be returned. We are living by grace and we cannot even name that which grants it as it comes from a different realm beyond our understanding:

as two nights ago i lay awake

trying to grasp the concept 'infinite'
a feeling of vertigo
i am so much less than everything
the fact of the all
encompassing me
(*TM*, Bk. 4)

The grand illusion of our mind's capacity to grasp everything and to achieve mastery over the universe falls apart in the face of the sacred. Nichol's poetry shows us how to cultivate a sense of mystery and awe. Thus, he offers us a gift of a radical shift in our cultural stance. A choice between arrogance and humility. *The Martyrology* exposes the impotence of ordinary language in certain culturally and existentially crucial places in life.

Recognizing alterity, be it of that within or that of *the wholly Other*, can be traumatic. Poetic writing is a practice that opens up a space to welcome the uncanny alterity, to recognize it without reconciling or absorbing it. Throughout her work, Kristeva posits an exigency for a new ethics and praises three specific discourses for creating a possibility of such new ethics that has room for otherness – those of maternity, poetry and psychoanalysis. In this regard, Nichol's poetic practice can be seen as a combination of all three. The writer and the reader are engaging the psychic processes on the unconscious level, accessing the feminine and the sacred through the raw energy of primal rhythms and sounds inherent in the language itself. Poetic practice allows us, even if momentarily, to relive and to renegotiate the moment of entry into the language and thus, to renegotiate our symbolic, relational and social cultural contracts. Also, it allows us to experience, often completely bypassing the mind's rational faculties, the missing or repressed parts of language, of our psyche, our subjectivity, and our culture, thus making it possible to heal those parts.

Phenomenologically, this practice founds a new space and time for dealing with the trauma of life and the fear of death, and asks those questions that are uncomfortable and unsettle the profane framework. These are the questions without answers. They generate uncertainty and fear. And there is no rational way to deal with this fear. In fact, it is more than fear – it is the holy terror of the *mysterium tremendum*:

how can i make my way to you father
your name dead

.....
i seek the one name by which to call you
(*TM*, Bk. 3, VIII)

To discover that, which is not nameable, not understandable, beyond cognition, surrounding us but invisible, cannot be comprehended or dissected, cannot even be looked at, just glimpsed, yet, is something and not nothing, is a rather horrifying experience. Poetry helps us deal with the trauma of life and its underlying mystery and alterity of death. Sacred rituals were performed to affirm life in the presence of death as ritual death revealed the gift of life. Similarly, poetry's primary task is also to affirm life in the face of death:

His script, the poet knows, forms a part of a vital coinage that facilitates the economy of the unraveling show that living is. It also succeeds, within the threatening void, in supplying the surplus value of meaning through the production of linguistic constructs whose primary task, in fiction or reality, is to find, and affirm, life – and to address, positively, life's most negative component, death. (Barretto-Rivera 104)

Great art often grapples with the question of death. Both *The Martyrology* and *Journal* are meditations on life and death and their interconnectedness. Death is the inevitable end of this

immanent order. Thus it is already inherent in life and our everyday consciousness. But it is also a part of the sacred order, the *wholly Other*, the great unknown, the limit of life and of language. Just as life is relentlessly haunted by the presence of death – a great force of negativity that threatens this order with the imminent presence of the *wholly Other*, Nichol's writing is haunted by the alterity and negativity already embedded in language.

Poetic language takes us to the experience of the holy terror once again. Poetic practice is radical because it destabilizes and disturbs the boundaries of the subject. Being a more feminine incarnation of language, it is capable of such openness that it can welcome alterity into itself without incorporating it. Perpetual sacred ritual of sacrificing one's self and one's world in order to receive a new self and a new world of meaning – perpetual renewal and regeneration of both. A perpetual metamorphosis. Nichol's writing reveals this transformative potential of language: "Language appears as a place and event of transformation throughout" (Barbour 26). Language itself is transformed and becomes a "mystical instructor" – words become saints and are revered as such, "Language becomes spiritualized, a mystical instructor without reference to physical reality" (Harvey, qtd. in Barbour 13).

New ethics

Through its transformative power, poetic practice takes the writer and the reader to new broader phenomenological, ethical, and cultural possibilities, which are normally closed off by the dominant logic of our culture. Poetic practice allows these other marginalized forms of experience to reveal new epistemological possibilities associated with the altered state of consciousness. In this state of being, the purpose of language changes. There is no information to

be rendered. It gives our mind a rest from the ordinary operations of naming, labeling, describing, explaining, examining, analyzing, narrating, categorizing, or classifying.

Instead, poetic language takes us to the wondrous world of raw experience, raw sensations and raw perceptions. It is a generous expenditure of energy in joy, with no utilitarian purpose in mind. It teaches us the principles of openness, surrender, interconnectedness, play and humility. Primal, before language, before thinking, primordial, elemental. Pure openness to the constant flux of the universe with its inherent mystery and alterity. It is being celebrating beingness itself. It becomes an ethical practice of accessing and engaging the sacred. Thus, poetic writing offers a new ethics of the subject.

In this way, it presents an alternative to violence in accessing the sacred without sacrificing or scapegoating the other. It is an ethical path for a radical renewal of self. A return to the primal, where primal does not mean primitive. Primal means connected, synesthetic and whole. Without the dangerous repression and the inevitable sudden outbursts of the sacred energy from the depths of our being.

Poetic consciousness restructures our engagement with our ego, with the other, with language and with meaning in general. To what purpose? What transformations does it allow? What appears to be stable and solid disintegrates, morphs, moves and slips away. By restructuring our consciousness, poetic language affects our relationship with meaning and our understanding of our self. Thus, it allows us to discover another mode of communication based on recognizing the irreducible alterity in our own psyche, in the other, and in *the wholly Other*.

Poetic practice redefines the meaning of experience. Another kind of meaning is found on the border of consciousness where language ends, “words stop,” and “silence begins” (Nichol,

TM, Bk. 3, II), where messages fail and an unexplainable communion takes place, where unconscious arises, and where Being relaxes into its own mystery without explanation. Poetic texts pose questions that cannot be answered. They take us to the edge of meaning and into an altered state of consciousness, where meaning is readily abandoned and exchanged for the loss of meaning or understanding. Yet an unexplainable insight is felt and gained, but cannot be described. It can only be sensed within a subjective experience. These special states of consciousness, when the mind is attuned to the mystery of the universe have a noetic quality as well. James calls them “states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain” (*The Varieties of Religious Experience* 414-15). And precisely because these intimations remain ineffable, it is our body that will reveal to us the truth and the authenticity of the experience as “language, like art, like all that humans do and make, is authentic only when it has visceral effects” (Elder, *A Body of Vision* 187). Thus, the semiotic is more reliable when it comes to the revelatory potential of language.

Poetic practice offers a communion, a radical opening to the sacred as a totality of being. This new kind of communication that shatters the seemingly stable subject is precisely what Bataille proposes by passionately investigating those places in culture where the subject comes to face his own death. For Bataille, communication and the sacred are inherently linked. In a radical gesture of communication, a subject transgresses or abandons her individual boundaries to merge with the sacred totality.

To face the essence of the sacred requires a different mode of being and perceiving. To face the reality of the sacred is to renounce the habitual subject-object duality and to take a risk at experiencing anew. Facing the sacred is not the same as looking *at* it. It is not the same as

looking *at* anything. More importantly, the act of facing the sacred eliminates the almighty autonomous subject observing an object from a safe distance. Rather, in her new perception, the subject is overwhelmed by the presence of the sacred, almost crushed under it, in it, swimming in the midst of it, drowning in it, taken over and carried by it, merging and dissolving in it. It requires a continuous staying open and trusting, renouncing one's boundaries and facing what lies beyond.

By relying on the same fundamental model of death and rebirth of the subject, poetic practice replicates the structure and mechanisms of the sacred rituals and allows the subject to open himself to the realm of absolute being.

Rebirth

By allowing the radical alterity to be present and spoken, poetic practice makes us face our own horror of death, so we can go through this fear in the gesture of surrendering and move toward a spiritual rebirth that has been a central goal of all sacred rituals in most spiritual traditions. It is not only a re-birth of our self-concept, but a radical rebirth of all meaning: “despite death and despair, we have the choice of rebirth, a new “birth” of meaning and purpose that are not structured in vain self-satisfaction but in a humble letting go of obsession with the self” (Richmond, “Death and the Seduction of Despair” par. 6). Psychological understanding of this symbolic transformation is very helpful, but is far from sufficient. The journey towards rebirth requires more of a mystical sensibility:

True rebirth demands something more than psychology and more than myth. It demands “death”: death of all self-importance, death of all we “think” we are, death of all pride in

our illusory identities. It is the death described so well through the ages by religious mystics such as Saint John of the Cross. It is the death of all attempts to seduce your despair.

From this death comes spiritual healing, the end to all the frantic defenses against your vulnerability and the beginning of the acceptance of vulnerability itself as the very strength of true love. It's a rebirth into honest humility, the only path that leads to meaningful life, mental health, and genuine religion. (Richmond, "Rebirth" par. 9-10)

The spiritual healing is a blessing that comes after the subject sacrifices his own self-concepts and all meaning and remains empty and open before the radical alterity presenting itself to him through grace, in the presentness of the moment. Utmost humility and vulnerability become the corner stone of spiritual strength, leading through a symbolic death to a symbolic rebirth.

Just like a sacred ritual, poetic practice can be a powerful medium for transformation, allowing us to approach otherwise inaccessible dimensions of life and culture – the feminine, the sacred, the unconscious, the invisible, and the uncanny. It allows and accepts the alterity of cultural and a personal other. By venturing into the unexplored and neglected realms of otherness, it discovers new forms of knowledge. Radical forms of poetic writing can invoke the sacred in the experience of the writing subject and induce a similar state in the reader as well. By being the other of ordinary language, poetic language teaches us how to bring the awareness of the feminine and the sacred back into culture.

We sacrificed our internal world because we bought ideas of progress and efficiency. But in pursuing these ideas, we are becoming more machine-like and less human. The idea of

economic and technological progress took over our lives leaving us no more time to just be – only to charge ahead and get more, accumulate more and become less of a human being. Our bodies are our anchor, but we do not even feel entitled to take the time to breathe. Or maybe we forgot how. In the culture conquered by technology, which is, in essence, a closed system, only body offers the possibility of openness. Contemporary society is suffering the loss of meaning because the most basic needs of our soul for love and connection have been abandoned. We deal with empty flat lifeless surfaces that have no depth or connection to the realm of the sacred. We are suffering from our own arrogance in the form of a God complex. Radical experimental poets like Nichol show us new ethical ways to reconnect with the mystery of the sacred, with the feminine, with alterity, with body and soul, affect and language, and with each other. They also remind us that the original meaning of language is love.

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